

Hercules, when you touch the basket of wool does not  
your mighty hand cringe?

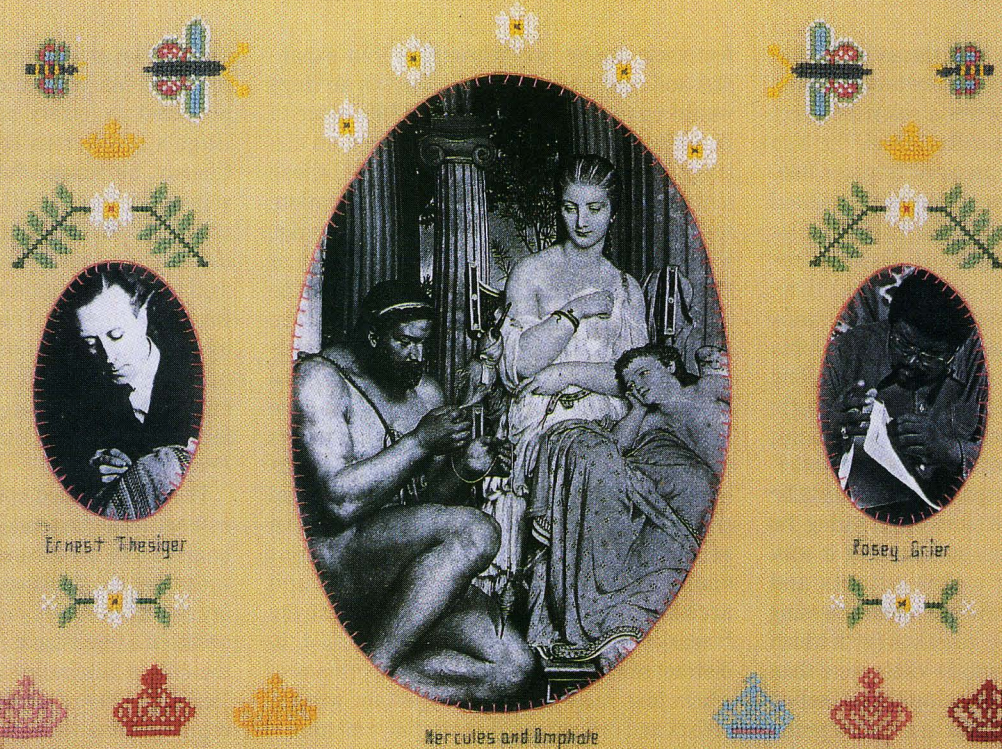
Ovid [43 B.C. - 17 A.D.], *Heroides*

Nothing is more terrifying to me than to see  
Ernest Thesiger sitting under the lamplight  
doing his embroidery.

Beverley Nichols, in *The Sketch*, London, 1929

It seems that needlepoint is as old as time.... Try it  
once, you'll keep on coming back for more!

Rosey Grier, *Rosey Grier's Needlepoint for Men*, 1973



Elaine Reichek: Sampler (Hercules), 1997, 22 by 17 1/2 inches. Collection Melva Bucksbaum.



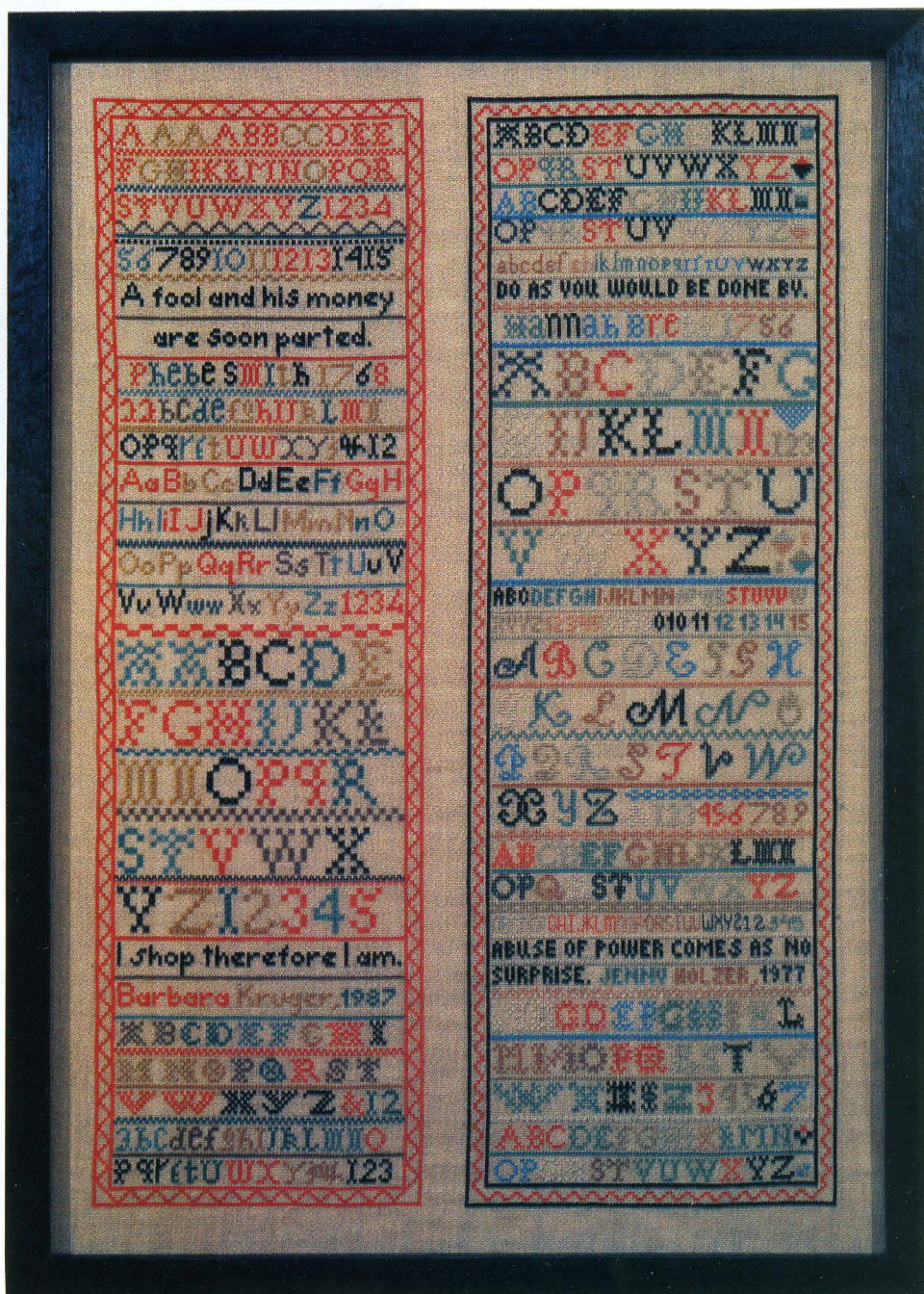
# Elaine Reichek's Rewoven Histories

*In two current exhibitions, Elaine Reichek—armed with needle, thread and videotape—wittily debunks Western gender biases. She finds abundant ammunition in myth, literature, popular culture and, closest to home, art history.*

**BY BILL ARNING**

It is perhaps best to approach Elaine Reichek's work as an innovative, revisionist curatorial project, in which familiar histories are retold and translated into new mediums. In the process the emphasis naturally shifts, and previously unquestioned hierarchies are upended. The tale she weaves is familiar but strange in its new form and, as stories go, it's a doozy. Reichek retells much of the history of our material culture, including both high art and domestic crafts. She does not aggressively attack the gendered prioritizing of the male-coded history of high art over female-associated craft as an evil that we in an era of enlightened sensibilities must depose. Rather she unemphatically recounts history without that ubiquitous hierarchy, and lets us see what is to be gained by considering her alternative version.

Her medium of choice is the sampler, the form of needlework in which young women once gained expertise to prove their worthiness as wives. It is remarkable that this quaint form, whose charm and irresistibly persuasive beauty Reichek employs to her own ends, connects with our standard textbook art history at multiple intersections. The medium-specific qualities of needlework prefigure numerous high points and milestones of the march toward and through modernity. In fact, with thrilling boldness, Reichek makes the case that aspects of the diverse visual strategies of Barbara Kruger, Jenny Holzer, Chuck Close, Jasper Johns, Andy Warhol and even a megaphenomenon like the World Wide Web can be traced to these delicate stitches. Her far-reaching project considers the metaphorical deployments of embroidery, weaving, crocheting, petit point and knitting in literature, with quotations from Ovid, Dickens,



Sampler (Kruger/Holzer), 1998, 30½ by 21¼ inches.  
All works this article, embroidery on linen.  
Collection Melva Bucksbaum. Photos, unless  
otherwise noted, courtesy the artist.





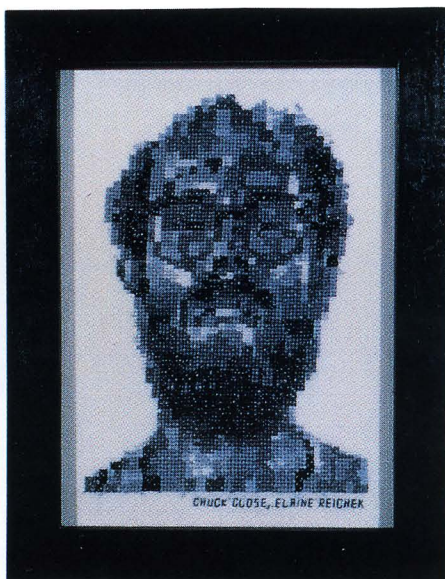
*Sampler (Starting Over), 1996, 8 1/2 by 67 1/2 inches. Collection Melva Bucksbaum.*

Melville and Hawthorne, as well as the movies, with snippets from popular and art films.

These assertions are not as far-fetched as they at first seem. The epigrammatic language employed by Holzer and Kruger derives in part, via a hybridizing tangent through advertising, from the sweet, sentimental sayings embroidered onto pillows, such as Reichek's title for her own 1996-99 series "When This You See . . ." (the viewer is left to fill in the omitted words, "remember me"). If we recall Holzer's and Kruger's language as being always too forceful to sit comfortably within a sampler, that memory is false. In *Sampler (Kruger/Holzer)*, 1998, Reichek has sandwiched their iconic phrases of the '80s—"Abuse of power comes as no surprise," "I shop therefore I am"—between standard sampler alphabets and less enigmatic, traditional phrases such as "Do as you would be done by" and "A fool and his money are soon parted."

Likewise Reichek conjures, through embroidered miniatures of their signature works, Close's and Warhol's amalgam of reproductive mediums and traditional painting. We are urged to reexamine Close's grid and Warhol's repetitions through her craft-based lens, goaded to see that it was the process of making images with accumulated Xs of thread that sowed the seed for modern modes of reproduction. We can understand each repeated stitched mark as a low-tech pixel, a handmade benday dot or a physical counterpart to the grain of a photographic emulsion.

For her Warhol appropriation, *Sampler (Andy Warhol)*, 1997, Reichek uses his somewhat obscure 1983 painting of tangled yarn as her source, and the games of "looks like" and "functions as" become amusingly complex. Warhol, as has been widely noted, wanted to be taken as a serious artist, which meant for him—an artist just a few years younger than the Abstract-Expressionist gods—that he had to make abstractions. He could not, however, allow himself the degree of simple belief



*Above left, Sampler (Chuck Close), based on Close's 1983 paper-pulp self-portrait, 11 by 8 1/2 inches; right, Sampler (Jasper Johns), based on Johns's 1958 painting White Numbers, 12 1/2 by 11 inches. Both works 1997.*



required to make an unsourced image. For paintings such as *Yarn* and the shadow and Easter egg paintings, Warhol found or made photographic images that mimicked or could pass for Ab-Ex statements while retaining a necessary literalness. As a reference to classic Jackson Pollock drip paintings, *Yarn* is a deliciously fickle image, evincing both profound belief and healthy agnosticism towards the fundamental precepts of abstraction.

When Reichek seized upon Warhol's *Yarn* and embroidered the image at a much reduced scale, she doubled his indirect appropriation of Pollock. We understand her rejoinder, her contribution to the Pollock/Warhol dialogue, as questioning the value of Warhol's transformation of a photograph of yarn back into the realm of painting, for the tangled yarn is already clearly Pollockian. Warhol's choice of yarn, all fuzzy feminine domesticity, was clear-

ly a queering of Pollock. Reichek's embroidery translation regenders both butch Pollock and femme Warhol, her needle piercing the deified personas of these two art-gods with the same stitch.

In *Sampler (World Wide Web)*, 1998, Reichek replicates a primitive Apple computer screen. It is filled with words associated with her medium: "Spin spin-off spin a yarn spin a web web of deceit/net wove weave a spell . . . embroider the truth embroider a fantasy." It is as if the free-associative poem had been created by a possessed Web search engine trying to find every possible direction in which to seek associations—which also describes Reichek's own working process. In her art, the directness or centrality of each connection is not as crucial as its mere possibility. We are not meant to understand each of her associations as essential to an investigation of her sources. Rather



I wound my schemes on my distaff  
I would weave that mighty web by day  
But then by night, by torchlight  
I undid what I had done

—Penelope, *The Odyssey*



we learn from Reichek's promiscuous wanderings throughout cultural history that when we interrogate these objects, masterworks or otherwise, for their unnoticed links to craft history, there are often fascinating connections to be brought to the surface.

**F**or *Sampler (Jasper Johns)*, 1997, Reichek embroidered Johns's *White Numbers* onto linen at a diminutive scale. In the process, she foregrounded embroidery's inherent properties. Pulling the white floss back and forth through the support to cover the ground evokes the choppy literalness of Johns's virtuoso encaustic mark-making. Similarly, when she embroidered Chuck Close's 1983 paper-pulp self-portrait another stitching process eerily mimicked the painter's technique. It is not that we are meant to assume that Close or Johns was directly inspired by needlework, but rather that this similarity was always there yet overlooked. We gain a new category of qualities to consider in such familiar images. Unfortunately we have no needlepoint equivalent to the word "painterly" to describe this category. "Needleworklike" is clumsy but probably preferable to an ungainly neologism like "embroiderly."

Although the hybridizing of high art with aspects of decorative art in itself is not as radical an act today as when Reichek began to use craft-based materials almost 20 years ago, the history of that peculiarly Western rift and the unfinished process of mending that gap fuel Reichek's current samplers. *Sampler (Starting Over)*, 1996, may be the key to understanding this aspect of her work. She embroidered a quote from the *Odyssey* in which Penelope describes her nightly unweaving of the work she has done during the day: "I wound my schemes on my distaff/

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I would weave that mighty web by day/ But then by night, by torchlight/ I undid what I had done." Reichek pairs this with a quote from her tutor, Ad Reinhardt: "Starting over at the beginning, always the same/ perfection of beginnings, eternal return/ Creation, destruction, eternal repetition/ Made—unmade—remade."

The quotes are sandwiched in the center between embroideries of three of Reinhardt's black paintings on the left and, on the right, images of women weaving copied from a Greek vase. When stitched, Reinhardt's gridded shades of black looks less like an ominous cruciform and more like simple plaid. The resulting long and thin work is symmetrically divided by gender. The composition manifests the male/female and high/low rifts, while the juxtapositions imply that such distinctions were always at best superfluous and unfounded.

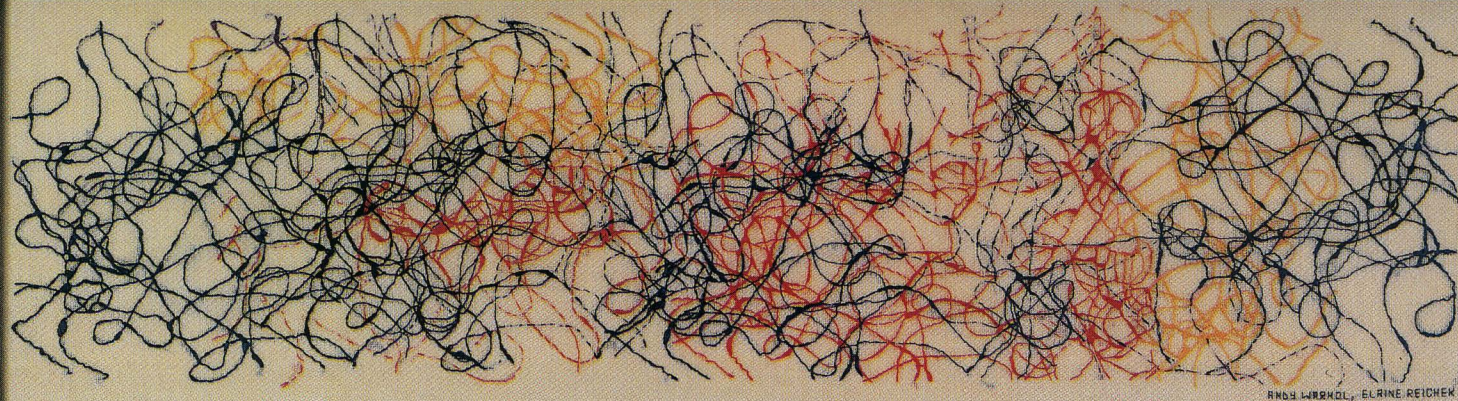
Yve-Alain Bois has discussed Reinhardt's complicated and contradictory attitude towards the decorative arts. The painter derived many of his most radical compositional devices from fabric and carpet designs yet resisted anything that would threaten his art's inviolable remove from the world. The similarities between covering a canvas with pigment and weaving a rug became apparent after artists like Reinhardt stripped away the cover of Ab-Ex heroics. The revolutionary mode of considering an art practice to be merely labor of a particular sort is still an



Stills from Reichek's 1998 video *When This You See*, showing Audrey Hepburn in *Breakfast at Tiffany's* (above) and Michelle Pfeiffer in *Batman Returns* (below). Photos courtesy Paramount Pictures and Warner Brothers respectively.







Sampler (Andy Warhol), 1997, 10 1/4 by 30 3/4 inches; based on Warhol's 1983 painting *Yarn*.

**Warhol's painting *Yarn* was clearly a queering of Pollock. Reichek's embroidery translation of it regenders both butch Pollock and femme Warhol, her needle piercing two gods with the same stitch.**

unsettled and hotly debated topic today, which gives Reichek's piece a special currency in the late '90s.

Reichek does not limit herself to the sphere of visual art. The image of the "woman with a needle" is deployed for metaphorical and symbolic purposes throughout Western literature. Reichek counts among her sources references to Arachne, the mythological champion weaver who, after a vicious contest with Athena, was mercifully turned into a spider, allowing her forever to continue weaving. There are also the Three Fates spinning, pulling and cutting the thread of life, as well as Dickens's Madame Defarge recording the dead at the guillotine ("Knitting, knitting, counting dropping heads").

Reichek includes in the "When This You See . . ." project one sampler that deals with the anomalous area of "men who sew." She embroiders images and quotes which refer to the sewing abilities of Hercules and an obscure English actor from the '20s. But it is really with the former football player and '70s television celebrity Rosey Grier that Reichek hits upon the icon for every male needlepointer. In a nation that was uncomfortably and concurrently dealing with feminism, black power and gay rights, Grier—a black, androgynously nicknamed athlete who took great pride and pleasure in his expertise in a feminine craft—was a source of general fascination. The quote

that Reichek uses is from Grier's 1973 book *Needlepoint for Men*: "It seems that needlepoint is as old as time. . . . Try it once and you'll keep coming back for more."

That the feminine is seen as addictive is easy to over-analyze as a marker of the dominant culture's anxiety, but Grier was nonetheless a memorable phenomenon. But as this piece is the only one of the series devoted to men's needlework, it is the exception that proves Reichek's rule. For far more often it is the image of the woman knitting that is dropped into literature and film to deliver a subtextual message. Unpacking the various and sometimes contradictory symbolic values of such messages is crucial to her project.

As a hobby, needlepoint, even when performed in the presence of others, remains private. One often enters an interior trancelike mode in order to perform and enjoy it, and outsiders are left wondering what exactly the needlepointer is thinking during her labors. In the five-part work *Sampler (The Brontës)*, 1997, Reichek quotes from Charlotte Brontë's *Shirley* (1848): "She was sitting in the alcove—her task of work on her knee, her fingers assiduously plying the needle, her eyes following and regulating their movements, her brain worked restlessly. She did sew, she plied her needle, continuously, ceaselessly, but her brain worked faster than her fingers." A quote from Colette in *Sampler (Dispositional Hypnoid States)*, 1996, is even more direct: "I don't much like my daughter sewing. She is silent and she—why not write down the word that frightens me—she is thinking."

For her video, also called *When this you see . . .*, Reichek appropriated segments from nine films. We see various actresses, including Marlene Dietrich, Greta Garbo and Audrey Hepburn, sewing, embroidering, crocheting and making lace as certain

pivotal events in the films' plots occur. In every case but one we are meant to understand that the movement of the hands with thread implies thought, serves as a corporealized indication that we must consider the possible existence of a subtext that may or may not have much to do with the words the stitcher is uttering. (The exception here is Michelle Pfeiffer sewing her fetish clothes in order to become Batman's nemesis Cat Woman. In this case the sewing is the action; there is no subtext.)

After each segment the artist freezes the action and overlays a cautiously interpretive word: seduction, devotion, obsession, revenge, betrayal, contempt, fabrication, retaliation and revolution. With the possible exceptions of contempt and devotion, which can remain unexpressed, all the words indicate a subtle or not so subtle seizing of power. Reichek's sources are not revealed until the closing credits, and one plays a silent game of "name that film" in an attempt to recall what the larger narratives must be. Her research was diverse, including a classic Danish film from 1943, *Day of Wrath*, the art-house favorite *Heavenly Creatures* and mainstream Hollywood's *Breakfast at Tiffany's*.

We are meant to understand that during the time-consuming practice of pulling the thread, the creator can write coded meanings into the fibers. In *Heavenly Creatures* one enamored teenage girl coos to the other that if the knitting she labors on is a future gift, then "it's for you." Her caretaker looks disturbed, sensing that a dangerous love letter has been passed right before her eyes, but without access to its meaning she cannot intervene. The needlework in the clip from *Days of Wrath* is a tool of seduction, and a signal that the characters have made a plan which will, like the sampler, be carried out bit by bit. In the clip from *The Heiress*, Olivia de Havilland announces, "I will make sure that he never comes again" as the camera closes in on her



fingers pushing the needle through the final Z of her sampler alphabet. As she orders the door bolted on her gold-digging paramour, played by Montgomery Clift, we see her snip the thread. Clift's fate is sealed, a reference back to the über-source, the Three Fates, spinning, pulling and cutting. Reichek freezes the frame and overlays the word "revenge."

The final fascinating clip is a minute of Buñuel's *That Obscure Object of Desire*. A man and woman silently watch a young woman make lace. The erotics of the motion of the needle pushing in and out is made clear as the watching woman grows angry and jealous, then walks away, while the entranced man remains. When he finally chases his companion down the street, we see a violent explosion. Reichek captions the frame with the word "revolution." In this context it is clear that the woman's fingers moving the needle, an only slightly coded reference to masturbation, will lead to sedition and a reversal of the dominant order.

Reichek began showing work in nontraditional mediums in 1978 (around the time that feminist and Pattern and Decoration artists were rejecting painting for reasons of their own). In those days, taking up the needle as a conceptual practice was a truly radical act, while today younger artists such as Charles LeDray, Matthew Benedict, Erik Hanson and Kara Walker have adopted complexly coded craft-based forms because they were needed for certain aspects of their projects. Reichek is a pioneer in this field, and it seems fitting that she is now receiving attention for a body of work that rewrites contemporary history with the needle, rather than the paintbrush or the welding torch.

The very title of this body of work, "When this you see . . .," links material culture to the struggle for immortality. The samplers that served as Reichek's inspiration, so we assume, were not authored by women who thought that over a century later their works would be hung in museums, considered care-



Sampler (Moby Dick), 1997, 17½ by 13½ inches.  
Collection Melva Bucksbaum.

fully and traded for large sums of money, but it might be folly to assume that they had no ambitions beyond the family for their creations. The impulse toward making something with great care, framing it, looking at it with pride and pleasure can be the same for a sampler as a painting. In Reichek's case the "me" in "remember me" refers first to herself and her work, but it also includes all the anony-

mous others whose creations have not been considered art works proper. □

*An installation of Elaine Reichek's samplers is on view as part of the Projects series at the Museum of Modern Art [Feb. 4-Mar. 30]. Her video When this you see . . . is being shown concurrently at Nicole Klagsbrun Gallery in New York [Feb. 12-Mar. 27].*

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