



Grains *of* Sand

Press Kit



Grains of Sand

Documentary 85 min.

Languages English/German

Filming Locations San Francisco; Mill Valley, USA;
Hamburg; Berlin; Brandenburg, Germany; UK

Production year 2025

Production Company Bugle Films

Subtitles Available English; German;
ClosedCaption (Eng); bi-lingual (English & German)

World Premiere Thessaloniki International Documentary Festival 2025



Filmmakers
Collaborative SF

CONTACT

Sarah Gross
Bugle Films
Fischerhüttenstr. 120
14163 Berlin, Germany
+49 170 2459 534

contact@buglefilms.com
buglefilms.com
youtube.com/@buglefilms
instagram.com/bugle_films

grainsofsandthefilm.com



Filmed over eight years, *Grains of Sand* accompanies the filmmaker's mother and mother-in-law, artists and close friends, as they enter their ninth decade. Through conversation, memories and artwork, along with reflections by the filmmaker herself, they create together this positive, different kind of “coming-of-age” story.



View the trailer: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E7S8h7r5qqA>



STORY SUMMARY

Margot and Barbara, close friends and artists, and the director's mother & mother-in-law, meet for a work retreat in a stone farmhouse in the German countryside. They are both on the cusp of their ninth decade. As they begin to work on the large stones they have brought to sculpt, they embark on a conversation about creativity and aging, exploring what it means for them to arrive at this stage of their lives. Their wrinkled hands become dusty as they scrape and chisel the stones.

Margot was born in England and now lives in San Francisco with her husband of over 60 years. In her studio she reflects on the struggle it took for her to maintain her painting practice as she navigated expectations as a wife and mother. She visits the gravesite she and her husband have chosen outside the city. On green sloping hills of the burial grounds, Margot imagines how it will be to live alone if Peter dies first.

In her studio in Hamburg, mother-in-law Barbara explains how after her divorce she didn't have much money. She found a way to support herself with a part time job so that she would have time to paint every day. She hopes she can continue painting until her very last gasp. Barbara shares an apartment with her second husband, and observes how their relationship is changing now that they are approaching 80.

The farmhouse becomes a yearly ritual where the women share their pasts, discuss their artistic processes, and reflect on their changing roles as artists, women, and mothers. Margot and Barbara aren't looking back on their lives. They are living them.





PROGRAM NOTE

Through her camera lens, the filmmaker captures the friendship between her mother and mother-in-law as they traverse the ninth decade of their lives. Once a year, they meet and reverently devote themselves to an annual gathering in which they shed the “mother and grandmother” labels and nurture their identity as women artists, molded within the framework of their own lives. Year after year, each one develops her sculpture through a collaborative activity that remains perpetually incomplete—finding much more substance in the process than in the final piece. Even if the artworks are deconstructed to their raw materials, akin

to grains of sand, the significance of their shared experience will surpass the outcome. After all, the journey they embark on – accepting this new, more vulnerable image of themselves – is more meaningful than the destination, the abrupt end of their shared time. This bittersweet, unpretentious documentary intricately delves into notions such as youth, decay, purpose, and identity, subtly encouraging us to reflect on the meaning of life, and the role of a companion, in the midst of navigating the inherently human desire/fear of completion.

—*Nikoletta Tsatsou, Programmer, Thessaloniki International Documentary Film Festival*





DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

Grains of Sand offers a counter-narrative to the marginalization and invisibility of older people in our society, particularly women, by affirming the importance and relevance of their work and life experiences. The film unpacks formative moments in their biographies, reflects on how they grappled with traditional societal expectations of women, and creates space for issues of aging usually ignored by society – such as fear of death, illness, and body pain.

We see the beauty and privilege of reaching such an age, too, as the poetic, steady camera of DoP Mies Rogmans captures the grace and strength of these women – their joy and determination from decades of living, etched beautifully into their faces and their magnificently wrinkled, dust-covered hands sculpting the stones.

Grains of Sand is a truly European story: Margot, the filmmaker's mother, is Scottish and grew up in England; Barbara, the filmmaker's mother-in-law, is German and grew up in what is now Poland. The two friends grew up in countries at war with one another – formative childhood experiences which now unite them and give them

a shared perspective on the world. They belong to the last remaining generation who can personally talk about the impact of WWII on their lives even today.

Just as the underlying layers in a painting inform the finished picture, so do our memories and past experiences play a shaping role in our present moment. *Grains of Sand* works with this metaphor, building visual layers through grainy super 8 films, archival footage and photographs and interweaving them with present day scenes and interviews, in vibrant 4K cinematography.

The filmmaker's close, personal relationship with the protagonists provides a layer of intimacy and reflection. Poetic black and white Super 8 imagery – mist rising off the lake, or sunlight pouring through flowers – creates a narrative space for voice overs, which reflect upon the main questions of the film and push the story further.

Grains of Sand is a testament to the power of art and friendship and a personal exploration of what it means to age and continue becoming oneself. In the true sense of the phrase, it is a story of two women's coming-of-age at 80.



DIRECTOR'S CONNECTION TO THE STORY

I have a life-long, deeply intimate connection to the story and to the protagonists: my mother, Margot, and mother-in-law, Barbara. This familial bond grants me unparalleled access to broaching topics from their lives in interviews, filming with them in work and private situations, as well as a rich resource of prior filmed material, family archival footage, and access to photos and artworks.

My unique position as both a family member and filmmaker enables me to capture their memories, reflections, and formative moments with sensitivity and authenticity. I am privy to their private stories, allowing for a deep exploration of their experiences that extends beyond the surface level. Because my personal life is so intertwined with their own, my role as a filmmaker and narrator is also deeply embedded in the unfolding story – which provides an emotional grounding for the viewer.





ORIGINAL MUSICAL SCORE COMPOSED AND PERFORMED BY WORLD MUSICIAN MOMO DJENDER

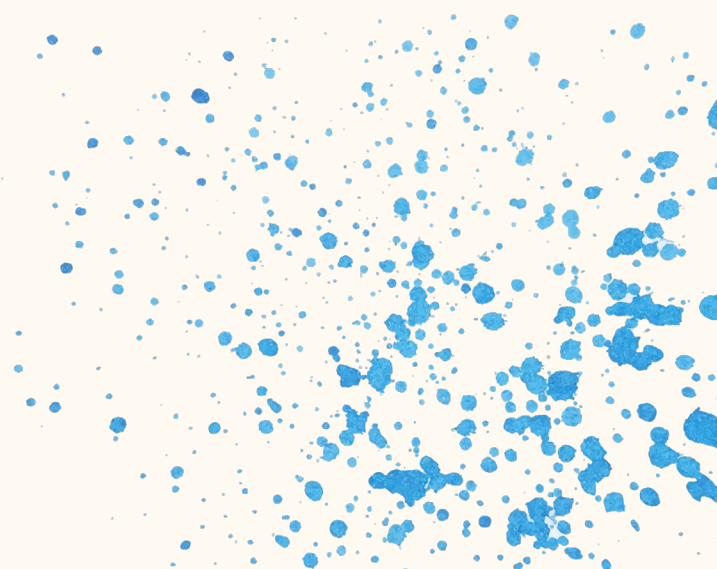
In *Grains of Sand*, music helps translate the act of remembering into the auditory realm. Visual fragments, sound design and music work together to create the feeling of remembering an important but distant event.

Momo Djender and I have a long-running collaborative history. This is our fifth film project together. Momo has a wide musical palette, drawing on his collection of instruments from all over the world to create melodies which can portray the spirited inner lives of our octogenarian protagonists in their daily lives.

Momo's studio is his playground – a whole wall of stringed instruments – ukulele, dut, cello, guitars, etc – drums of all sizes – recorders, flutes, bells, rattles, arcane instruments I've never seen – he pulls them out and plays them all, beautifully. We go to him once we have first scenes and sequence structures. We cook together, talk, and watch our sequences multiple times.

We try out musical instruments and moods. Once we have some musical elements we are happy with, we take them back to the editing room and this informs our continued work. And so on, iteratively.

The musical score combines with sound design to enhance the poetic atmosphere while underscoring the energy and strength of these two women at work on a painting, collage or stone.



CHANGING THE SCRIPT ON AGING

What we see (or don't see) on screens has a profound effect on shaping the treatment of older people in real life.

AGEISM IS REAL AND PREVALENT

The WHO Global Report on Ageism from 2021 reports that 77% of older adults experience ageism.

Ageism is widespread in the media. Representations on television and social media and in print are crucial because they influence our everyday perceptions and interactions, including how we relate to older people, and they shape how we each see ourselves growing old.

GENDER AND AGEING

Research on the combined impact of sexism and ageism in older age has concluded that older women bear the brunt of multiple forms of discrimination. Women are often in a situation of double jeopardy in which patriarchal norms and a preoccupation with youth result in a faster deterioration of older women's status compared with that of men. "Producing data and disaggregating it by relevant levels such as by sex, age and other key characteristics, is essential to understanding the multiple social and economic roles of older women and their varied needs"

MEDIA IMPACT ON OUR PERCEPTIONS

Older people are vastly underrepresented in the media. The WHO Global Report on Ageism (2021) quotes studies which show that of the few older characters shown on television in the United States, most of them had minor roles and were often portrayed for comic effect, drawing on stereotypes of physical, cognitive and sexual ineffectiveness. A second study, an analysis of prime time television series in Germany, found that only 8.5% of main characters were older adults.

We need to change our media representation to combat social erasing and the silencing of older women.

— UN Advocacy Brief, April 2022

Older women are even less likely to be represented in the media than men are, as has been reported from around the world. An analysis of 2000 Hollywood films found that women are given less dialogue the older they get: 38% of dialogue was spoken by women aged 22–31 years and 20% by those aged 42–65 years. In contrast, male actors get more lines as they age, up until age 65.

The Geena Davis Institute Global Report on the representation of older women in media (2024) informs us that in their film survey, women over 50 represented 5% of all characters and 0% of leading characters. Older women characters were also four times as likely as their aging male counterparts to be shown as senile, frumpy or feeble and seven times as likely to be shown as homebound.

The Global Report on Ageism (March 2021) was developed for the campaign by WHO, the Office of the High Commissioner of Human Rights, the United Nations (UN) Department of Economic and Social Affairs and the United Nations Population Fund.

(Studies quoted from Zebrowitz LA, Montepare JM. "Too young, too old": stigmatizing adolescents and elders. In: Heatherton TF, Kleck RE, Hebl MR, Hull JG, editors. The social psychology of stigma. New York: Guilford Press; 2000:334–73; Kessler EM, Rakoczy K, Staudinger UM. The portrayal of older people in prime time television series: the match with gerontological evidence. Ageing Soc. 2004;24(4):531–52)

"Frail, Frumpy, and Forgotten" Geena Davis Institute Global Report on representation of women ages 50+ in the media, 2024. (A report analyzing over 1200 characters in top 10 grossing films from 2019 in Germany, France, UK and the USA)



GRAINS OF SAND DOCUMENTARY WORKSHOP

Grains of Sand is available as part of a workshop designed to transport the reflective, poetic qualities of the film into our own lives, and conceived for aging audiences and their caregivers.

In post-screening discussion, viewers unpack their emotional and personal take-aways from the film. Our conversation allows questions and reflections to emerge about our lives and aging.

The workshop continues with a short collage project – no prior experience required – which brings the community together, engages our creative and visual perception and furthers the conversation, working with metaphors from the film. The workshop is led by film director, Sarah Gross, and museum docent, Suzanne Reich.

For more information, or to discuss bringing the workshop to your community, please contact: info@buglefilms.com.



WHAT AUDIENCES ARE SAYING

Audiences of all ages are connecting to *Grains of Sand* on a deep level.

Their comments:

"It is beautiful and gives room to sadness."

"It felt very intimate and real, and I think it's important to tell this kind of story."

"I learned about ageing from a totally new perspective."

"I am 21 and friends with several older artists, so this film felt very familiar and personal to me. I think that anyone who is creative will be able to connect with this film."

"Sarah Anne Gross's cinema tells stories that are not captured on camera but are touched, felt, and lived together. *Grains of Sand* is one of the calmest but most profound steps of this journey for now."

Evrin Kepenek, bianet.org, Turkey

"What a beautiful film! When I say beautiful I mean it in different ways. The film is beautiful to look at – both outside in nature, indoors or just on their faces. And the content about two elderly women, their friendship and work as artists is also beautiful in a deeper sense."

Annika Gustafsson, film critic, Sweden



THESSALONIKI
INTERNATIONAL
DOCUMENTARY FESTIVAL
OFFICIAL SELECTION
2025

TiDF27



BEST DOCUMENTARY
FILM AWARD 2025



CREDITS

Directed and produced by Sarah Gross

Cinematography Mies Rogmans

Edited by Nicole Fischer

Music composed and performed by Momo Djender

Co-Producer Athena Kalkopoulou

Sound Designer Mathias Wendt & Sarah Gross

Colorist Matthias Behrens

Poster, Graphics and Credits Designer Michael Read

Trailer Edit Vinzent Kutsche

Fiscal Sponsor Filmmakers' Collaborative, San Francisco



SARAH GROSS

Director/Producer

Sarah Gross is a politically engaged filmmaker, writer, and mother of three young adults. Her prior works have been shown in festivals around the world and broadcast on PBS/World Channel nationally and other public and private broadcasters internationally. Having grown up in a multi-racial family in the U.S., Sarah Gross has a deep personal connection to stories of racism, identity and belonging. She has citizenship in the USA, UK and in Germany.



BUGLE FILMS

Bugle Films is a small production company in Berlin, Germany. With professional networks in Europe, USA and South Africa, and usually working with international co-production partners, past films include documentary features *Brown Bread* and *A Growing Thing* and the mini documentary series *Connection*.

www.buglefilms.com

KEY CREATIVE PERSONNEL



NICOLE FISCHER

Editor

Nicole Fischer is an experienced editor who brings excellent technical skills in pacing and dramaturgy while practicing an explorative, intuitive approach to film-making. With over twenty years experience in documentary and fiction editing, she co-edited the documentary *Garage People*, which premiered at the Berlin Film Festival 2020 and won the Heiner Carow award, as well as *Code der Angst* and *Connection*, episodes 1-4, 2022.

Nicole began editing before we had finished filming *Grains of Sand*. She developed the structure of the film which allows for intuitive dips into memories and past events while keeping the viewer grounded in the chronological “now” of interviews, punctuated by the refrains of yearly retreats in the farmhouse. Nicole has a Story Concept credit, because in addition to developing the narrative structure she helped conceive the voice-over texts and arc for the personal narrator in the film.



MIES ROGMANS

Director of Photography

Mies Rogmans is Professor for cinematography, Amsterdam National Film School, and has served as DoP for fiction and documentary films for 25 years. She captures the beauty of our protagonists’ wrinkles and movements, bringing a loving watchfulness to the women and delivering calm and poetic imagery that permits the women to be what they are: old, strong, fragile, beautiful.

KEY CREATIVE PERSONNEL



MOMO DJENDER

Composer

Momo Djender was born and raised in Algier. His ancestors are Kabyle People, a north African Berber tribe. His music unites soul, pop and jazz music with sounds from his home country. Momo is a gifted musician and composer who has scored many films, including 5 film projects in collaboration with Sarah Gross. He is a beloved musical TV personality in his home country Algeria. He played guitar and vocals on world tour with Sting for a year, and continues to perform on stage throughout Europe.



ATHENA KALKOPOULOU

Co-producer

Athena Kalkopoulou is a creative producer/consultant with over 20 years of experience in funding and outreach in the US and Europe. From June 2020 till June 2023 she was the Director of Promotion at the Greek Film Centre. She was a co-producer at *A Growing Thing* (dir. Sarah Gross, 2019), which broadcast on PBS and Deutsche Welle. She has collaborated with the Sundance Institute, SXSW and the San Francisco International Film Festival.



CHRISTY MCGILL

Consulting Producer

Christy McGill is a film producer, writer, story consultant, and distribution advisor. Her producing credits include the award-winning feature documentaries *PASANG: In the Shadow of Everest*, *Ai Weiwei: Yours Truly*, *Serenade for Haiti*, and *Ghost Bird*. She has consulted on a wide variety of films, advising during pre-production, story development, post-production, release preparation and distribution strategies. Christy is a graduate of Brown University where she also helps teach a documentary producing class.

LIH JANOWITZ

Dramaturgical Consultant

Lih Janowitz has worked as dramaturgical consultant on feature documentaries across Europe. Her films have won prizes and been shown in festivals around the world. She is a long-time collaborator with Sarah Gross.

GINA LEIBRECHT

Dramaturgical and VO Consultant

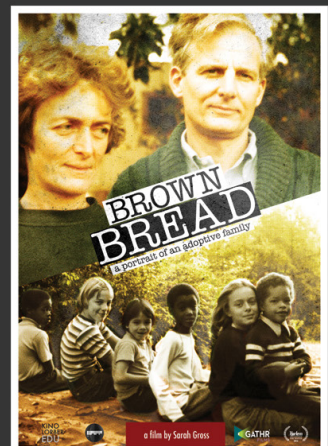
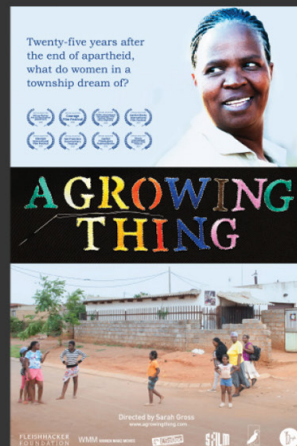
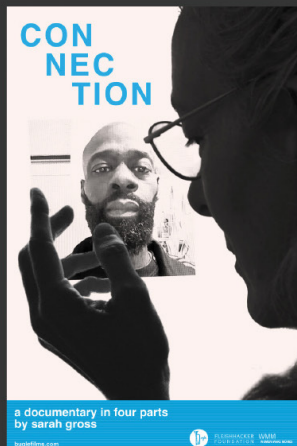
Gina is a filmmaker and editor, known for works such as *Ai Weiwei, Yours Truly*; *How to Smell a Rose - A Visit with Ricky Leacock*; *All in this Tea*.

KEVIN WHITE

Mentor and Fiscal Sponsor

Director of Filmmakers'
Collaborative, San Francisco

SARAH GROSS FILMOGRAPHY



2025

Grains of Sand

Director, Producer

Feature documentary, 85 min.

World premiere, Thessaloniki International Documentary Festival, March 2025

Nominated as work in progress for Munich Dok Fest Composition Award, May 2024.

Invited to take part as work in progress in Dok Incubator / dok.connect, June 2024.

2023

Bourj Stories

Director/Producer

Short documentary film, 15 min.

Part of an ongoing hybrid documentary project with refugee youth in Beirut, Lebanon.

International Festivals (ongoing)

Connection

Director/Producer

Documentary 4-part miniseries, 193 min.

International Festivals (ongoing)

2018

A Growing Thing

Director, Producer

Documentary 90/52/45

International Festivals

Broadcast by PBS/World Channel in N. America, Rest of World by DeutscheWelle, Educational Distr. (N. America) Collective Eye, Portland OR; (Rest of World) Feel Sales, Spain

2017: Participated in Leipzig Dok Preview, works-in-progress industry pitch

2015: Participated in IDFAcademy film preview and development

2014: Participated in ESoDoc Development Program (MEDIA funded)

2015

Trash, Feature fiction screenplay

2014

Brown Bread

Director, Producer

Documentary. 87 Min. International festivals

Educational Distribution: Kino Lorber

Grains of Sand



CONTACT

Sarah Gross
Bugle Films
Fischerhüttenstr. 120
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