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1989 TO THE PRESENT

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Knit Dissent

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Craft Kills

Crocheted military helmet liners and sewn gas masks: Increasingly, these handworked objects embody many aspects of social art practice today. Though the return to textiles has been duly noted in contemporary criticism as stretching the bounds of what the “proper” objects of art might be, the current popularity of knit, crocheted, or woven materials is also often derided as yet another market trend. Skepticism runs rampant: What is this return to craft, really? A true grassroots campaign? Or just another hipster hobby? This uncertainty speaks to the fundamental ambivalence of claims about political art—if we agree that form and materials matter, and matter politically, then we must also interrogate how these processes are recruited across a spectrum of ideologies.

Take the following example: In 2002, British artist Freddie Robins knitted a gray yarn life-size figure that is pierced, Saint-Sebastian style, by numerous knitting needles that also scatter in a ring on the floor at its feet. Stitched onto the narrow chest of this strange bodily surrogate, which hovers just slightly in the air, are the words *CRAFT KILLS*. What does it mean to utilize a knitting needle as a dangerous tool, and to envision craft as a process that might harm, injure, or wound? Or does it point out, ironically, the seeming opposite—that is, the absolute harmlessness of craft? The phrase works on both fronts; made in response to a very specific historical moment (the escalation of fear after the events of September 11, 2001), it captures a certain mordant humor. Robins’ piece comments on the fact that, due to heightened anxieties about national safety in the months after 9/11, knitting and crochet needles were banned on airplanes because of their potential to be utilized as weapons. This outright prohibition has since been lifted, but the U.S. Transportation and Security Administration still recommends that travelers do not bring long metal needles in carry-on luggage.

The threat that craft might actually kill, however, is far from the historical understanding of textile techniques such as sewing, knitting, or crocheting, which are often trivialized and denigrated. Think of the ubiquitous hobby macramé home projects from the 1970s that in the popular imagination are

loosely associated with an embarrassing mainstreaming of hippie culture, divorced from the sometimes radical environmentalism that was intrinsic to handmade, countercultural lifestyles. In fact, such “hobbyist” methods of crafting have long been castigated as domestic, quiescent, conservative, and trivial, particularly because they have traditionally been gendered female. As Simone de Beauvoir wrote in 1949, “with the needle or the crochet hook, woman sadly weaves the very nothingness of her days.”¹ By contrast, Robins’ work reflects a competing, contemporary trend that understands craft as an ideological weapon bestowed with fresh urgency and relevance. Craft has played a significant role in the formation of national identities, especially in times of political turmoil or war, as well as in resistant actions and protest cultures. This article examines how these links are made explicit in much contemporary craft-based art, in particular by feminist artists working at the intersection of art, antiwar activism, and craft.

Craft is often defined as that which is utilitarian, that has a specific function or use value—this distinction, arguably, separates it from art. But within craft theory and contemporary art, the art versus craft divide is slowly eroding, even as there persist classed distinctions between “high craft” meant for institutional display (Rosemarie Trockel or Louise Bourgeois, for instance) and “low craft.” Recent important books by Glenn Adamson and Elissa Auther address the studio craft versus art divide, as well as the false binary between highly trained skilled professional craft workers and amateur efforts.² But if the realm of amateur craft sometimes falls outside the scope of discussions on contemporary art, art history is a vital place to theorize the current rhetoric that links handmaking and activism or to understand craft as a form of politics. Indeed, looking to this longer history of protest craft art shows that Robins was not the first feminist artist to connect craft to threat, and to do so with a sly sense of humor. In the mid-1970s, the Oregon Women’s Political Caucus invented a mock organization, a “Ladies Sewing Circle and Terrorist Society,” and turned it into a well-known feminist logo, emblazoned with a deceptively innocent flower motif and a crypto-Celtic-meets-art nouveau font. For about a decade, one could send away to Springfield, Oregon for T-shirts and mugs with this design, sold through small print classified ads in the back of *Ms.* magazine and *Mother Jones*. The joke here stems from the presumed absurdity that a sewing circle might be fostering collective domestic unrest in the time of the Vietnam War.³ Both Robins’ high craft object and the popular T-shirt allude to female handmaking as a form of dissent in a time of global conflict.

The connection between craft and war is rooted deep within US culture—and knitting in particular has been a patriotic rallying point from the revolutionary war on. Women were exhorted to knit to support military efforts as soldiers sent letters complaining of frozen toes and asking their wives to send socks and mittens.⁴ During the Civil War, the image of women diligently knitting for soldiers on the front lines folded into a larger campaign of working to unite for the war effort in both the North and the South. The idea that knitting is a way for women to occupy their time and sublimate their feelings of loss or trauma, as well as a useful activity that directly supports the war cause, has recurred in every US wartime. In the First World War, the Red Cross distributed over a million pamphlets and held instructional sessions throughout the country to teach young girls to knit. Yarn companies unsurprisingly embraced the declared “national knitting phenomenon” as a way to sell more of their product, advertising their goods with slogans like “Uncle Sam wants you to knit.”

The Second World War witnessed a similar knitting frenzy as women organized to knit military supplies. However, as historian Anne Macdonald recounts, in a time of widespread industrial production and availability, there was far less need for homemade objects, and “many women knit because women had *always* knit in wartime.”⁵ In other words, it had become more a symbolic, nostalgic custom and ritual than an actual material necessity. Knitting was taken up again in the late 1960s, again to symbolically if not literally support the troops, and celebrated as a way for women to “do their part.” But during the Vietnam War, crafting was also an indelible part of a growing environmental movement that fed other alternative cultures and oppositional politics. Thus handmaking was increasingly recruited for *antiwar* causes, such as Bread and Puppet’s street demonstrations, which centered on handmade tapestries, large-scale crafted cloth and wood puppets, and protestors in handsewn costumes. Bread and Puppet, which was founded by Peter Schumann in 1963, was a fixture in peace marches at the Pentagon and other places, and crafting what they termed “cheap art” was a vital part of their practice.⁶ And in the 1980s, when Reagan and Thatcher were stoking Cold War fears, British women protestors for nuclear disarmament formed the Greenham Common Peace Camp and occupied land adjacent to a US airbase. With their homemade textiles, banners, and hand-knit improvised shelters, the Greenham Common women “literally wove themselves into the site of their protest.”⁷

Contemporary War/Craft

Many contemporary artists are using craft to comment on the current wars waged in Iraq and Afghanistan; these include works like Los Angeles artist Lisa Anne Auerbach's hand-knit *Body Count Mittens*. This series, begun in 2005, uses the act of knitting as a way to mark time, as well as a method of visibly registering the growing number of US casualties in the war in Iraq. As she begins each mitten, she inscribes it with the official body count on that day. During the time it takes her to finish one hand, the number of dead inevitably increases, so she notes the new body count as she moves on to the other hand. Auerbach has posted the pattern for the gloves on her website, and she encourages knitters to make them in public, while waiting for the bus, or at a restaurant, hoping to spawn conversations and debate about these grim (and not widely publicized) statistics. Auerbach's work reaches out to the online community of hobby crafters as she encourages them to think about the legacies of women knitting during war.

In Sabrina Gschwandtner's *Wartime Knitting Circle*, an interactive installation at the Museum of Arts and Design's exhibition *Radical Lace and Subversive Knitting* (2007), the artist set up round tables and provided yarn, knitting needles, and instructions for various projects (including Auerbach's body count mittens). She invited members of the public to come in and knit with her while talking about the war. The space was demarcated by large knit banners—"photo blankets"—featuring images of previous wartime knitting activities, and she has movingly described how a museum worker (the traveling exhibitions coordinator) who had a relative deployed in Iraq learned to knit during the course of the show.

Another artist exploring the history of craft and war is Allison Smith, whose 2010 series *Needle Work* was based on her extensive research regarding European and American cloth gas masks used in the First World War to guard against chemical warfare; she photographed these masks and remakes them by hand. First seeing an early mask from 1918, Smith writes, "I was struck by the recurring thought—someone made this—and I tried to imagine what that would be like. I began to think of these fabric masks as evidence of an as yet unwritten history of needlework."⁸ Rather than protective, these gas masks seems fragile and insufficient, and Smith's haunting project points to the ways in which bodies and textiles are sewn together in symbiotic relationship that relates to protection as well as to masquerade.

These diverse practices attest to the potency and resonance of crafting during wartime for current feminist artists, but, sometimes, such work becomes predictable. For instance, both US-based Shirley Klinghoffer and Danish artist Marianne Joergensen have conceived of large-scale knit military "cozies"—Klinghoffer's *Love Armor Project* (2008) covered a Humvee on loan from the New Mexico National Guard with a cloth made by over seventy volunteers during a series of "love ins." Similarly, Joergensen swaddled a tank with a knit and crocheted pink patchwork "tank blanket." These two closely related projects, which are formally and conceptually very similar—though the artists were unaware of each others' work—veer into the territory of the precious or naive, as they express a wish that the knitted garment covering a tank renders it useless or smothers its deadly potential. It is thus an ongoing problematic within the realm of contemporary craft to think through how divergent practices utilize handmaking differently rather than to elide their distinctions. For there are actions and objects, like Smith's, that rewrite the whole history of handmaking in relation to gender and war, and then there are others, like Klinghoffer and Joergensen, that fall into clichéd versions of pacifying female domestic work.

Indeed, some of the most potent craft critiques are coming not from US or European artists, but from Middle Eastern women who use handmaking methods to question stereotypes and the language of terror, such as Lebanese-born, Palestinian artist Mona Hatoum, who has woven a scarf out of human hair—*Keffieh* (1993–9)—in order to upend assumptions about Islamic codes of decorum and female visibility. In her 2005 installation *The Reign of Terror*, Egyptian Ghada Amer, who makes extensive use of embroidery in many of her projects, comments on the fact that while the words peace and safety exist in Arabic, the term "terror" is not indexed in Arabic dictionaries.

Just as in the historical context, though, crafting in the framework of recent wars appears at both the "high" and "low" ends of the spectrum, from more fine-arts oriented work like Hatoum and Amer's, to amateur hobbyist; likewise it also spans a political spread, from avowedly leftist to something ideologically more ambiguous. For instance, the anonymous Afghan war rugs that have proliferated since the 1979 Soviet invasion have become a controversial embodiment of the politics of craft.⁹ In these rugs, textile makers refer to war in various ways, from incorporating simplified tanks, guns, and planes into almost abstract patterns, to creating elaborate, realistic depictions of the attacks on the World Trade Center. It is not always clear who makes these rugs, and for what purpose—an exhibition at the Textile Museum of Canada in 2008–9 focused more on questions of

dating and genre than intention.¹⁰ Interestingly, such rugs have found a niche for online customers around the world, not least the United States, which leads to speculation that some of them are being produced strategically and self-consciously for the US market.

The Afghan war rugs open onto many questions, including the commodification of dissent, the ever-increasing traffic in mementoes of disaster, the tangibility of memorialization, and the relation between textile design, tradition, religious ritual, and global catastrophe. They also emphasize why so much political craft is textiles-based. For while other kinds of handmaking methods (such as pottery or glassblowing) can have political registers, the bulk of war-themed craft focuses on fabric. In part, this is because sewing, quilting, weaving, and knitting are specialized forms of making and communicating. As the editors of the anthology *The Object of Labor: Art, Cloth, and Cultural Production* write: “The physical and intimate qualities of fabric allow it to embody memory and sensation and become a quintessential metaphor for the human condition.”¹¹

Beyond the fact that we constantly *use* cloth, textile making is also distinct from mediums such as metalsmithing in that it is *portable*—what has been called lapwork—and can be made in a range of fluid circumstances. Much of this work is small-scale and requires no extensive equipment (unlike a pottery wheel); hence it is often performed in public to create new forms of social space, from early feminist quilting bees to contemporary activist groups like the British knitting club Cast-Off, which has held major “knitting for peace” events in the London Underground. Knitting’s flexible transportability has allowed it to be pressed into service in the New York activist group Granny Peace Brigade, who take their needles to the streets with signs around their necks declaring, “I am knitting stump socks for amputees.” Conjuring the whole history of female wartime knitting, these women publicly knit garments for injured Iraq war veterans, using handicraft to express political anger as well as to transform that anger into useful objects.

Labor, Politics, Gender

Beyond art-historical investigations about handmaking and war, the groundswell of craft in the past decade has been accompanied by strident political claims as websites, blogs, and conferences extol the “radical” and “revolutionary” potential of handmaking—to name just two examples, a

2006 conference at the Pasadena Art Center was entitled “Radical Craft;” and a 2008 symposium at the Melbourne Craft Centre proclaimed “The Revolution is Handmade.” Trade books with titles like *Subversive Cross Stitch* and *Subversive Seamster* proliferate.¹² These books could be echoing the influential feminist literature about the gendered hierarchy in the crafts, namely Rozsika Parker’s 1984 *The Subversive Stitch: Embroidery and the Making of the Feminine*. Parker’s gender- and class-based analysis, together with a deep history of embroidery technique and the labor formations it engendered, provide a model for thinking through how craft methods have been deployed, re-appropriated, and politicized over time.¹³ But Parker’s precedent goes unacknowledged within these books, which are more hipster how-to guides complete with irreverent patterns and practical tips for sewing your own gauchos.

Other texts from the past few years, such as Betsy Christiansen’s *Knitting for Peace: Making the World a Better Place One Stitch at a Time*, are eager to extend the positive feminist legacy of handiwork, and assert that knitting might in itself be method of direct protest.¹⁴ In 2004, Betsy Greer coined the term “craftivism,” joining *craft* and *activism* to suggest that handmaking (especially the domestic “female” crafts) have become—or are even implicitly—a form of resistance in an era of global mass production.¹⁵

Here one convention has easily been replaced by another—if craft was formerly the territory of kitsch, the low, the regressive, and the decorative, it has recently become an easy, all-too-uncontested shorthand for alternative politics. Some of this rhetoric ties into a longstanding desire to link craft to left politics (i.e. constructivist textiles in post-revolutionary Russia, William Morris’s socialist workshop where textile design was at the core of his utopian theories of work, or John Ruskin’s writings on the nobility of the hand). But today’s understanding of the do-it-yourself imperative is evermore fueled by the dominance of machine-made factory work within the transnational sweatshop era. Craft has been aligned with an anti-consumerist ethos, as in the online campaign *buyhandmade.org* that asked participants to commit to not buying at big-box or chain stores. Launched for the holiday season in 2007, it was signed by over 50,000 people; however, note that the slogan urges you to *buy* handmade gifts, not to make them yourself.

This is one of the most conflicting aspects of “craftivism,” which is that so much of the purported handmade revolution is really about shopping. For some, setting up booths at fairs or selling their work on the craft commerce website Etsy has become the way to pay rent, and it is increasingly hard to

reconcile the tension between what could be a grassroots, micro-economy of local production with the aggressive neoliberal entrepreneurialism advocated by books like *Craft, Inc.* or *The Handmade Marketplace*, which outline strategies of self-marketing and self-promotion.¹⁶ Yet an article in 2009 outlined how difficult it is to make a decent living wage selling work on Etsy, given the effort, time, and materials these crafts demand.¹⁷

In addition, the “buy handmade” pledge overlooks one significant paradox: ostensibly machine-made consumer goods are also in large part made by hand. London journalist Eric Clark’s book *The Real Toy Story*, which reveals unjust labor conditions in the toy industry, illustrates how much significant bodily work and handiwork go into factory production in China, cranking out objects for overseas markets.¹⁸ In the over 8,000 factories in the Pearl River Delta region of China, where eighty percent of the toys bought in the United States are made, women work sixteen-hour days under toxic conditions for about ten cents an hour. Thousands of women workers in bright pink coats sew pants legs onto action figures: This is the reality of contemporary craft as it is persistently feminized and undervalued.¹⁹

The knitting needles that half-jokingly stab Robins’ torso indicate a fundamental ambivalence about just what the political value of craft today might be. Craft is itself neither inherently conservative nor progressive—along with the contemporary “revolutionary” knitting circles, there are also right-wing knitted “yellow ribbon” drives that extend the nationalism of early knitting-during-wartime campaigns. Yet perhaps craft matters in part because it gives us purchase on a pointed, potentially messy, necessarily intricate and in-process activism, as it leaves room for the dropped stitch, the slight irregularity, the imperfection that reveals the personal investment and care in making. In other words, craft may not kill, but it is not dead, either.

Notes

- 1 Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* [1949], trans. Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevallier (New York: Knopf Doubleday, 2010), p. 634.
- 2 Glenn Adamson, *Thinking Through Craft* (London: Berg, 2007); Elissa Auther, *String, Felt, Thread: The Hierarchy of Art and Craft in American Art* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010).
- 3 Karen Beckman has discussed the ongoing elision between feminism and terrorism; “Terrorism, Feminism, Sisters, and Twins Building Relations in the Wake of the World Trade Center Attacks,” *Grey Room* 7 (Spring 2002), pp. 24–39.
- 4 Anne Macdonald, *No Idle Hands: The Social History of American Knitting* (Boston: Ballantine Books, 1988).
- 5 *Ibid.*, p. 295.
- 6 See George Dennison and Peter Schumann, *An Existing Better World: Notes on the Bread and Puppet Theater* (Brooklyn, NY: Autonomedia, 2000).
- 7 Victoria Mitchell, ed., *Selvedges: Janis Jefferies, Writings and Artworks since 1980* (Norwich: Norwich Gallery, 2000), p. 39.
- 8 Allison Smith, *Needle Work* (St. Louis: Kemper Museum of Art, 2010), p. 39.
- 9 For one polemical look at Afghan war rugs, see Enrico Mascelloni, *War Rugs: The Nightmare of Modernism* (Milan: Skira, 2009).
- 10 *Battleground: War Rugs from Afghanistan*, curated by Max Allen, Textile Museum of Canada, Toronto, April 2008–January 2009.
- 11 Joan Livingston and John Ploof, eds., *The Object of Labor: Art, Cloth, and Cultural Production* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007), p. vii.
- 12 Julie Jackson, *Subversive Cross Stitch* (New York: Chronicle Books, 2006); Melissa Alvarado et al., *Subversive Seamster* (New York: Taunton Press, 2007).
- 13 Rozsika Parker, *The Subversive Stitch: Embroidery and the Making of the Feminine* (London: Women’s Press, 1984).
- 14 Betsy Christiansen, *Knitting for Peace: Making the World a Better Place One Stitch at a Time* (New York: STC Craft, 2006).
- 15 Betsy Greer, *Knitting for Good: A Guide to Creating Personal, Social, and Political Change, Stitch by Stitch* (Boston: Trumpeter Press, 2008). See also Greer, “Craftivist History,” in Maria Elena Buszek, ed. *Extra/Ordinary: Craft and Contemporary Art* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011).
- 16 Meg Mateo Ilasco, *Craft, Inc.: Turn Your Creative Hobby into a Business* (New York: Chronicle Books, 2007); Kari Chapin, *The Handmade Marketplace: How to Sell your Crafts Locally, Globally, and Online* (New York: Storey Publishing, 2010).
- 17 Alex Williams, “That Hobby Looks Like A Lot of Work,” *New York Times* (December 17, 2009), E1.
- 18 Eric Clarke, *The Real Toy Story* (New York: Free Press, 2007); see also Leslie T. Chang, *Factory Girls: From Village to City in a Changing China* (New York: Spiegel and Grau, 2008).
- 19 Jane Lou Collins, *Threads: Gender, Labor, and Power in the Global Apparel Industry* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003.)