

Activist Tendencies in Craft Arnolfini Journal

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Is Craftivism really activist? And what are the woolly threads that unravel the argument?

Many are skeptical of the political claims of the DIY and craft movement, but the search for an authentic object can be misplaced in a contemporary networked and decentralized field of production. At the same time critical enquiry has to negotiate the hazards of knitted cakes!

Notions of craft and activism are continually readdressed through visual art such as David Medalla's 1960's collectively darned *Stitch in Time*, and Germaine Koh's extended *Knitwork* performance started in 1992. These works raise issues of collective production, experiential and durational performance, valuing the production process as a meditation on making and a focus for dialogue. Artists often turn to folk or craft culture for both metaphorical and tactile exploration of social and hand-made production, situating art practice within the everyday.

Each generation has its radical crafters. In the 1980s the *Subversive Stitch* (Parker, 1984) was inspired by the exhibition of the same name curated by Pennina Barnett, and the Aids Memorial Quilt gained global media coverage. But it took the 90s generation for the DIY and Craft movements to be aligned with socially engaged art, and the 2000s for craft to be thoroughly subsumed within popular culture. The Calgary Revolutionary Knitting Circle (est 2000) carries out Knit-In's and Peace-Knit's as public protest within the peace and anti-capitalist movements. In a more gentle reclamation of public space for creative action, London's Cast Off Knitting Club (est 2000), organises public knitting in locations such as the Circle Line (Jane Campbell, 2004). But the most iconic symbol of activist craft is a protest against Denmark's involvement in the Gulf War by Danish artist Marianna Jørgensen. She co-ordinated the collective production of a pink knitted cover for a *Pink M.24 Chaffee* tank exhibited in the exhibition 'Time' at Nicolaj Kunsthalle, 2006 (Moore & Prain, 2009, p205).

In these practices the social, performative and critical discourse around the work is central to its production and dissemination. Here craft is not simply a luddite desire for the localized handmade, but a social process of collective empowerment, action, expression and negotiation. In the Craftivism exhibition at Arnolfini (2010) art-activist craft practice is increasingly performative and interventionist, although its efficacy is subdued by the aesthetic of the gallery context, where works become a symbolic model of themselves, more akin to a design proposal, rather than transformative of a social or political space.

At the same time the massive resurgence in contemporary craft online (stitch 'n' bitch, ravelry.com) has been made possible through the social connectivity of the web and it's use by communities of interest and practice. Here the stitches aren't perfect, the patterns are circulating, the politics evolving, but the correlation between craft and free libre open source culture is not always apparent.

Will knitting spark revolution? Or are Molotov cocktails the answer?

This often-gendered polemic offers military violence as an effective political tool, whilst undermining non-violence as woolly activism. It's important to take on this challenge within a cultural as well as a political framework for political change, identifying the misnomers, and revisiting the activist history of womens' Non Violent Direct Action.

Firstly the complex and multiple approaches to craftivism are as diverse as approaches to art and activism. Individual commitment to follow through political ideals waxes and wanes with the economy, socio-environmental fears, and can be trapped in the impotency of neo-liberal political normalism (Fisher, 2009) where capitalism is seen as the natural, and therefore the only way of organizing labour and value. But whilst it might seem trite to claim to be saving the world by sewing a button on your shirt, it becomes a political act when 1000s of shirts are thrown into landfill simply because they are missing the very same button. Making and mending by both men and women is an expression of material and environmental care and often a necessity, regularly perceived as too specialist and time consuming. Even DIY culture reveres the creation of new products over repair of the old.

But mixed up in the revolutionary fervor is a passion for domestic making epitomised by the fashion for knitted cakes (Penny, 2008). Rather than a call for social reform, nostalgic creativity mimicking 1950s feminine ideals seems to intentionally confuse attempts at criticality. Instead of acknowledging the feminist politics of knitting to reclaim public space, knitted cakes attempt to re-value domestic skills and re-glamourise motherhood, snapped up by the 'yummy mummy' phenomena of older mothers with disposable incomes. In other words, knitted cakes symbolise capitalist recuperation of feminist critique. The cup cake is nearly synonymous with chocolate as the answer to 'what women really want?' (Power, 2009, p30) further commercialising womens' desires as bodily sustenance and nurture without nutrition or subjective choice. Unlike the 1950s post-war advertising of labour saving devices enticing women back into the home, the knitted cupcake is a uniquely female celebration of domestic space and work. But the nostalgia for wartime 'make and mend' where women were often in charge of a household economy in the old-fashioned sense, has been translated into a contemporary shopping extravaganza consuming brands such as Nigella Lawson and Cath Kitson. As Charlotte Raven writes in her article *Strike a Pose: How the 'new feminism' went wrong: From pole-dancing lessons to baking cupcakes, modern woman thinks she can do it all:*

“The Madonna-ised woman views femininity as a tool for getting what she wants, whatever that might be. In this moment it is more or less compulsory for intelligent women to reveal a passion for baking cupcakes. The domestic goddess is a pose, not a reversion to old-style femininity. Now that 'attitude' is out, and

old-fashioned feminine virtues are ‘in’, so Madonna-ised woman is ready to reveal that cake-making is her number one ‘guilty pleasure’.” (Raven, 2010).

Craftivism sells itself short when it attempts to identify itself with the frivolous and non-essential activities of baking cakes, knitting cakes, and eating chocolate. Moore and Prain’s book ‘Yarn Bombing’ (2009) adopts military terminology to give a ‘cool’ edge to knitted interventions in public space. This flirting with opposite materials, network models, and gender stereotypes, lacks self critique of its use of language. It’s no coincidence that Moore and Prain acknowledge the “never-ending supply chocolate” to enable them to write ‘Yarn Bombing’ (Moore & Prain, 2009, p11).

Knitted cakes are also an irritatingly joyful distraction from the important history of craft as Non Violent Direct Action (NVDA), from Ghandi’s handspun fabric to the Greenham Common Women’s woven web blockades (Kidron & Poulton, 2006; Fairhall, 2009), and AWE Aldermarston Women’s knitting actions (McDonald, 2007). NVDA is direct form of activism which works at the point of power transaction. The action seeks to prevent an exercise or an abuse of power by disrupting, interrupting or transforming it. NVDA, like much socially engaged art, functions as both gesture and agency. Here the simplest action is carefully planned to take or reveal responsibility for a socio-political convention, explored through collective creativity and individual volition. It is active resistance and transformation.

PROTEST AT AWE

NIS has supported a ‘group of grannies for peace’ who sat knitting at AWE West Gate once a month surrounded by police under the banner, “We are a Witness to your War Crimes”. A spokeswoman said,

“Women knitting while witnessing macabre and sinister happenings were made famous by ‘Les Tricoteuses’, the women who sat by the guillotine knitting while they watched the victims of the French Revolution being beheaded. The victims of nuclear warfare have been seen in Japan, and any use of nuclear weapons by any state or group anywhere in the world would leave a trail of sickness and death from plutonium poisoning which would particularly target children and babies, not just from the parties in conflict but from anywhere downwind.”



Knitting for Peace at the AWE wire juxtaposes the horror of preparing for nuclear war with the normal domesticity of knitting

The 'pink wool' phenomena in contemporary knitting culture was used to maximum effect in Jørgensen's *Pink M.24 Chaffee* tank. Whilst a seemingly fleeting gesture, the image of the pink shrouded tank circulating on the Internet can be understood as part of the effect of the work itself. This symbolic transformation of military hardware into an object of comic irony seeks to disarm the offensive stance of a machine justified by its defensive capability. Whilst the sinister Trojan undertones of disguising a real weapon as soft and fluffy lead us to review the deaths from 'friendly' fire, as well as the women and children who suffer the largest percentage of deaths in most conflicts. Activist craft has many forms of symbolism and disguise. I remember weaving bracken into the fence at Greenham to disguise a hole in the perimeter fence cut by peace-women on their way to dance on the cruise missile silos. The web was a powerful symbol of networked participation at Greenham before Internet was in public use. Meters of patchwork wrapped the airbase whilst others wove webs of wool across the bodies of women lying in the road blockading the gates.

The Greenham women put into practice the concept of conflict transformation rather than conflict resolution, using fabric, metaphor, song and physically obstructing the British-American Nuclear Weapons programme. In 2006 the pink tank is also an effective craftivist gesture transforming the hardware through soft-wear. The tank is a manifestation of military expansionism traded and paraded globally, but its pink outfit proposes an alternative of care, compassion, or conflict transformation. But most importantly the *Pink M.24 Chaffee* enables, or should enable, an alternative critical discourse about global militarism. If the cover prevented the use of a tank in conflict, it would be an effective direct action.

Does Craftivism reinforce gender stereotypes?

Craftivism, when muddled up with the retro feminine fashion for knitted cakes can be seen to reinforce gender stereotypes (Raven, 2010). However, as the Craftivism exhibition, and its partner programme Uncraftivism demonstrates, the issues of openness, economy, ecology and reverse engineering are consistent across all kinds of creativity, including electronics, engineering, poetry and baking (Rackham, 2010). The hybrid tech-craft culture is also evolving through Maker Faire's which include all kinds of programming, electronics and knitting, providing opportunities for cross fertilization of ideas and practices, experimenting with wearable technologies and increasingly including women's tech groups. <http://www.makerfaire.com/newcastle/2010>

However, the commercialization of knitting blurred by those darned cakes confuses the political intention of activist craft. The work is too often promoted as cool, daydreaming, 'stupendous feats' (Moore & Prain, 2009, p205) but we urgently need a more critical vocabulary for unraveling the relentless media support of war and its 'heroic' deaths, and an intellectual feminist critique of engendered militarism (Cockburn, 2007). This invites a rethinking of female relationships to technology beyond a softening of military hardware. In the Open Source Movement, women are creating spaces for peer to peer learning of technical processes both in hardware and software (Aileen Derieg, 2007).

The popularity of DIY (do-it-yourself) is a modern response to the separation of labour and domestic skills, and the legal restrictions on making and mending anything, but specifically electronics. Using the hacker language of reverse-engineering as a learning process – taking apart your jumper or video player to learn how to fix or reuse it - is very different from buying a knitted cupcake complete with strawberry frosting, even if it is locally made. Womens' networks such as MzTek.org in London takes a playfully serious approach to developing spaces for women to learn technical skills, balls of wool and knitting needles are replaced with arduinos and a soldering iron. Here women are learning the craft of electronics, de-black-boxing their Casio along with their wardrobe. The culture of DIY is applied to coding and knowledge production, as well as developing practical skills and resources.

Alongside the cutesy approach to selling craft back to women as a form of artificial liberation, another form of capitalist recuperation is taking place in the world of DIY. The commercial adoption of low-tech, DIY aesthetic by mainstream advertising for globalised mass production (Heath & Potter, 2004) has led to the mass production of non-ironic artificially distressed new products (think pre-scuffed shoes, distressed furniture and jeans). At this point the more reified production of contemporary visual art has the opportunity to reclaim its stake in critiquing visual expression through complex and problematic forms. The Open Source Embroidery project examines the moment at which craft gives up its aspirations to join the fine art market, and engages with contemporary visual art discourse on participation and cultural production and distribution. Instead Open Source Embroidery invests in process, dialogue and social relations that transform the very idea of culture, reclaiming making and thinking from the cultural industries, and situating it at the heart of social and technical communications networks.

There are many cultural and politico-aesthetic arguments for creative practice that engages in cultural shifts and transformations for a political project. Partly these practices keep a window of activity in the encroaching private control of public space, but at their best they equip practitioners with skills, confidence, networks and working methodologies for direct action wherever it might be needed.

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