

COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

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ART, ACTIVISM & RECUPERATION

What are the power relations between art, activists and cultural institutions? Who ultimately benefits from these relationships? What critical role can art and/or activism really have in a situation where any form of critique is automatically recuperated and neutralised by the mainstream? Under such conditions, what are effective strategies of opposition? What is to be done (with art)?

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Concept Store is a biannual journal published by Arnolfini, focusing on critical issues of contemporary art and their relationship to wider cultural, social and political contexts. While Concept Store reflects upon ideas explored within Arnolfini's artistic programme as well as future research projects, it is intended to be a critical platform in its own right, operating as a discursive space for commissioned texts, artists' contributions, interviews and other experimental forms. It aims to challenge the conventions of the exhibition catalogue and the interrelations of artistic production, critical writing and cultural theory. The journal also continues Arnolfini's engagement with contemporary design practice, with each issue guest designed by a different practitioner.

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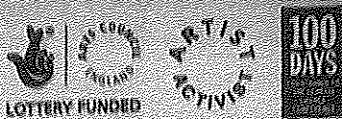
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Curated by PLATFORM
www.platformlondon.org



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CRAFTIVISM

12 December 2009 – 14 February 2010
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An Arnolfini/Relational project, curated by Zoe Shearman with Geoff Cox and Anne Coxon
www.craftivism.net, www.relational.org.uk



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Seminar:

Who's Recuperating Who?

26 November 2009

Gustav Metzger, Ursula Biemann, Peter Fend, Janna Graham/ Ultra-Red, Brian Holmes, Esther Leslie, PLATFORM and Tom Trevor. Moderated by Geoff Cox and Nav Haq

ACTIVIST
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ELE CARPENTER

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

Many are sceptical 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 decentralised 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 1960s 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 publication *The Subversive Stitch: Embroidery and the Making of the Feminine* was inspired by the exhibition of the same name curated by Pennina Barnett, and the AIDS Memorial Quilt gained global media coverage.¹ But it took the 1990s 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),² organises public knitting in locations such as the Circle Line.³ 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 coordinated the collective production of a pink knitted cover for a M.24 Chaffee tank exhibited in *Time* at Kunsthallen Nikolaj, 2006.⁴

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 localised 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 aesthetics 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, www.ravelry.com) has been made possible through the social connectivity of the web and its 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 women's 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 and socio-environmental fears, and can be trapped

in the impotency of neo-liberal political normalism where capitalism is seen as natural, and therefore the only way of organising labour and value.⁵ 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 thousands 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 fervour is a passion for domestic making epitomised by the fashion for knitted cakes.⁶ 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-glamorise 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 cupcake is nearly synonymous with chocolate as the answer to 'what women really want?' further commercialising women's 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 Kidston. 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'.⁸

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.⁹ 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 of chocolate" to enable them to write *Yarn Bombing*.¹⁰

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,¹¹ and AWE Aldermarston Women's knitting actions.¹² 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.

The 'pink wool' phenomena in contemporary knitting culture was used to maximum effect in Jørgensen's *Pink M.24 Chaffee*. 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 too 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 the 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.¹³

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.¹⁴ However, as the *Craftivism* exhibition demonstrates, the issues of openness, economy, ecology and reverse engineering are consistent across all kinds of creativity including electronics, engineering, poetry and baking.¹⁵ The hybrid tech-craft culture is also evolving through Maker Faires which include all kinds of programming, electronics and knitting, providing opportunities for cross fertilisation of ideas and practices, experimenting with wearable technologies and increasingly including women's tech groups.¹⁶

However, the commercialisation 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',¹⁷ but we urgently need a more critical vocabulary for unravelling the relentless media support of war and its 'heroic' deaths, and an intellectual feminist critique of engendered militarism.¹⁸ 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 peer2peer learning of technical processes both in hardware and software.¹⁹

The popularity of DIY 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 has led to the mass production of non-ironic artificially distressed new products (think pre-scuffed shoes, distressed furniture and jeans).²⁰ 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, 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, political and aesthetic arguments for creative practice that engage in cultural shifts and transformations for a political project. In part 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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