Crafting the Web
New Media Craft in British and American Contemporary Art

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The words medium, media and mediums are sometimes confused and even interchangeable because they can be used with a Latin plural or not. Interestingly, this terminology brings together the fields of communication and the materiality of art. The visual arts of the end of the twentieth-century have increasingly been described as 'mixed-media', while the plural 'media' has also been used to account for the diversity of supports which today can constitute a work of art: these go from the traditional canvas, to found objects or even the absence of support when the artwork is dematerialized – a conceptual approach which today includes the online practice of net.art. In terms of communication and information, media have also become more numerous and varied since entering the digital age. These have not been developments which have simply run parallel because the visual arts have been interested in reflecting these communicational changes and, by incorporating them as technical supports, have used them as signposts of their own contemporaneity.

Medium Specificity after Modernism

In her 2011 collection of her own essays *Perpetual Inventory*, Rosalind Krauss muses upon her signature theoretical concept, the “post-medium condition,” namely the contemporary abandonment of the modernist emphasis on the medium as the source of artistic significance. She debunks it for being a “monstrous myth.” Krauss sees in the post-medium condition of contemporary art something of a postmodern incoherence. This relinquishment of integrity which conceptual art inaugurated at the end of the sixties spelt, for Krauss, the end of serious art. She devotes much of *Perpetual Inventory*, and most of her activity as a critic, to drawing together the threads of the newly invented or found mediums for art into a coherent aesthetic (not to say formal) enterprise which might be able to prolong the modernist ideal of reflexivity (without the exclusivity). Her stance is therefore not synonymous with a rejection of any post-painting or post-sculpture art, but on the contrary, an embracing of the new mediums...
of art, which does not regard them as contingent. In her crusade against medium-contingency, she writes both about artists who are reinventing the medium – and this can mean painting –, and about artists who use a non-traditional medium reflexively. She alludes here to “strange new apparatuses” often adopted from commercial culture and she often uses the phrase “technical support” rather than medium simply because the second term has become ideologically-laden since the 1980s and construed by some as almost reactionary. The modernist ambition of reflexiveness is something that can be achieved today with artists engaging not simply with the newness of their supports, but also with the conditions and histories of what might still be mediums.

New art seems to have been defined in the last few decades by two main conditions which have to do with mediation: the pulling of the medium away from its discipline of origin in order to integrate it within an undisciplined body of work (video referencing painting, painting as sculpture, etc.), and the infinite replay of art in the media (which is thus recorded, archived, televised, or even advertised). While Greenberg’s modernist theory that every discipline should be firmly entrenched within its area of competence might have been dismissed at the end of the twentieth century, most works produced today assert a surprising element of reflexivity: they address their own materiality and the codes attached to their support. Still, a common trait of recent contemporary works is that, often, the specificity they address is that of other mediums. This is something Thierry de Duve has identified as originating with the readymade and which can be argued concerning many contemporary works: indeed, Damien Hirst’s Pharmacy installation is about the importance of medicine in our lives, but also mostly about painting.

The many post-modernist “technical supports” Krauss is interested in may not be specific, yet they allow for a continuity with modernist ideals by making reflexivity possible outside of traditional mediums (her essays focus mainly on video art). Krauss insists on the fact that ‘good’ work has to refer recursively to its medium, therefore making quite clear that her expertise is that of an art critic intent on making a distinction between good and bad art.

What we wish to demonstrate here is that, by accepting the possibility of a recursiveness of contemporary technical supports (i.e. supports reflecting themselves), one can best approach art which looks at the same time to the specificity of a traditional medium and to non-specific media. This article wishes to inscribe the recent trend in contemporary craft, namely contemporary artists taking up traditional crafts in technological ways, within a larger history of the artistic medium. The trend for online craft and for craftivism has been identified in many recent essays; see for example how Jack Bratich and Heidi Brush describe the merging of the digital and the tactile. What this paper wishes to focus on, is the articulation between contemporary art using craft and the new media. Beyond the humorous novelty of knitting with computers or making online patchworks, what the conflation of craft and new technology demonstrates is that the reflexive possibility of one medium can today work in conjunction with the reflexivity of technological media in a manner which enlightens the contemporary condition of both.
Mediums of the Past, Media of the Present

Krauss herself makes the connection between medium and media by adapting Marshall McLuhan’s 1964 pronouncement “The medium is the message” into “the medium is the memory.” While in the sixties McLuhan had dramatically turned the spotlight on electronic media, Krauss has always wanted to continue to see the medium as a source of meaning as well as a receptacle of history. However, a clear dichotomy between medium and media has been contradicted by recent media trends. The association of medium with memory (the past), as suggested by Krauss, and media with construction and with a technically-advanced production of its own meaning (the future) has been upset by the recent fashion for remixing, recycling and updating.

Simon Reynolds’ 2011 Retromania, Pop Culture’s Addiction to its own past, demonstrates how YouTube’s proliferating labyrinth of collective recollection can be a prime example of a crisis of overdocumentation triggered by digital technology. When cultural data is dematerialized, our capacity to store, sort and access it is vastly increased. The digital compression of text, images and audio means that issues of space and cost no longer deter us from keeping anything and everything that seems remotely interesting. Now user-friendly technology (mobile-phone cameras, scanners, etc.) makes it irresistible to share photographs, songs and mixtapes, excerpts from television, vintage magazines, which then stay online. YouTube has implemented a major shift by making available to us the astronomic expansion of humanity’s resources of memory. The fantasy of total recall is made almost real by the instant access made possible by the web’s cultural databases. Search engines have obliterated the delay of searching through libraries, museums or record shops. Culturally, this means that the past is right there below the surface of the present, its recollection all too easy. Stylistically, the retro fashion in pop music, design and clothing is a testament to this growing presence of the past on the cultural scene of the twenty-first century.

The modernist credo had been that art should push forward towards new territories. Could these territories have become the past? Simon Reynolds sees super-hybridity as an attempt to complete the equation of postmodernism + internet = ? In Frieze’s superhybridity issue, art writer Jennifer Allen goes even further when she argues that the Internet has rendered postmodernism obsolete as an artistic strategy by assimilating its principles, making them ubiquitous and accessible to anyone, making them the fabric of everyday life. For her, a theory has been replaced by a technology that does the same job more effectively, especially when, being able to access vintage formats, it finds its own way of escaping the mainstream.

In his 2004 essay Postproduction Nicolas Bourriaud argues that creativity today is about strategies of mixing and combining products with the DJ as model for artistic practice, erasing the distinction between consuming and producing with the skill of finding original pathways through signs. Overproduction and overinformation create this cultural ecosystem. However, one can wonder if this theoretical justification is not mainly aimed at allaying the anxieties of today's artists concerning the production of something original.

Still, excess reference to the past can today work as an inscription into the present, and as a generational positioning in the context of an absence of completely new forms. For many artists today, the answer to the crisis of originality has been to invest anew in traditional forms which, once they have acquired the status of references, also acquire
new mode of existence. This has recently been the case for drawing and the
traditional skills of craftsmanship, for an exploration of new possibilities in painting,
but also for a new way of approaching craft, which allows for reconsidere
tions of genre, status and ideology. It is more specifically the resurgence of traditional craft within
today’s most advanced artistic practices, which we would like to explore before we can
connect them with the latest media technologies they have come to be associated with.
Indeed, the long gendered history of craft makes it an especially potent medium in
terms of the artistic and political history it references.

Feminist Art History as an Oxymoron

In the foreword to her book *The Subversive Stitch. Embroidery and the Making of the
Feminine*, Rozsika Parker makes the following declaration: “To know the history of
embroidery is to know the history of women.” Such a statement makes immediate
ly clear that embroidery is not simply any kind of medium, whether in art or in craft, but
a gendered one, or more exactly, a supremely and paradigmatically gendered one. *The
Subversive Stitch*, with its clever pun, is a title which appears alongside other seminal
books on feminism and art by Parker, or rather the difficult association of the two
concepts. Indeed, “feminist art history,” according to Griselda Pollock in *Differencing the
Canon, Feminist Desire and the Writing of Art’s Histories*, “is an oxymoron.” In their written
collaboration, *Old Mistresses, Women, Art and Ideology*, Parker and Pollock grant
stitching, embroidering and the patchwork a central place in the history of women’s
art. Working the threads has had a strategic role, which is also a problematic one.
Indeed, feminists have long established that the historical stratification in fine arts was
due to sex inequality, with art the prerogative of men when the production of women
was to be termed craft. Historically, the 16th century was transitional. Before, men were
embroiderers to the king. Pollock and Parker claim that because there was no
Renaissance for women, the handling of the crafts was handed down to them while men
were becoming individual artists and geniuses. Hence the feminine and domestic
associations of embroidery. Besides being objects and apt family heirlooms, quilts more
generally came to be construed as women’s cultural heritage, the products of
specifically feminine rites of passage and an area in which women controlled the
education of their daughters. Over the centuries, this ambiguous medium was an
element either of alienation or of liberation, but mostly, it appeared as an occupation
painstaking enough to keep temptation at bay, or in the words of Rozsika Parker:
“Embroidery also evokes the stereotype of the virgin in opposition to the whore, an
infantilizing representation of women’s sexuality.” The young girls who were taught
the art of embroidery through the creation of samplers were attending a school for
stereotypical femininity: they would learn about patience, submissiveness, service,
obedience and modesty, their samplers usually carrying pious and self-denying verses
and prayers, with the exceptional expressive message or form recorded on some of
them (in which the bored wife or ambitious little girl give free reign to their complaints
about the man’s world they inhabit) And while the verses that many samplers or
embroidered objects bore expressed an ideology of femininity, feminine creativity was
mainly expressed technically rather than through subject matter or even text because
of the general use of patterns.
In Britain, the Victorians seemed to drive in the idea of an obvious association between women and embroidery. When rediscovering mediaeval embroidery, they identified it as a nurturing and natural activity fit for women. J.E. Millais’ Shakespearian Mariana (1851), for example, presents a particularly alluring mediaeval woman kept virtuous by the labour-intensive occupation. It is interesting to see the sewing women as a paradigmatic painterly subject, especially in the 19th century, making women still enough to be painted and turning them into sights rather than active figures. By making the link between women and embroidery seem natural, the Victorians managed to conceal the complex social, political and economic factors that had connected the two since the Middle Ages. Of course, there were exceptions, as with Anna Elizabeth Blunden’s political The Seamstress (The Song of the Shirt) (1854). Still, while the oppression suffered at the hands of greedy capitalist bosses was denounced in poetry and in painting, it was because sewing was considered exclusively a feminine activity, not the contrary. Women’s work was decidedly not understood on a par with men’s work, as Beth Harris explains pointing to the not-so-progressive nature of this campaign waged against the exploitation of seamstresses who had hitherto been exclusively devoted to the care of their families and homes:

In the literature of the period the needle itself often stood for women’s ‘natural’ place in the home, and carried powerful associations of domestic bliss and maternal devotion. Where other female workers were seen to develop masculine characteristics, the seamstress remained a ‘woman.’ It is no wonder then that needlework performed by women for the marketplace, for strangers (not unlike prostitution), became a source of intense anxiety. Ideological notions of motherhood, home, morality and national stability all became dislocated when the needle moved from the home to the garret.

It was only as late as 1894 that Jessie R. Newbery opened a needlework class at Glasgow School of Art and curated an exhibition alongside Charles Rennie Mackintosh in which, by doing away with unoriginal patterns, embroidery was, for once, presented as a genuine art form, produced by women who could therefore be considered genuine artists and free agents. One of the Glasgow Girls, Newbery single-handedly raised the status of creative needlework, and was responsible for creating the embroidered rose motif which came to become an emblem of the Glasgow Style.

At the same time, the Suffragettes turned women’s works into both a political platform and a British tradition, using them in a tactical way: inspired by the banners deployed by the Trades Union movement of the 1840s, they designed and stitched their own within The Suffrage Atelier. Using purple, green and white pieces of fabric, the colors of the British Women’s Suffrage Movement, they were able to refute the masculine or butch stereotypes about them and reassure potential new recruits. Stitching as a tactical and political activity drawing on its specifically feminine associations was to be taken up again by the Women’s Peace Movement protesting around and against the American air base on Greenham Common at the end of the seventies.

And yet it took over half a century to establish the total transformation of women’s work into art. Rozsika Parker comments thus on the dichotomy between art and craft as a gendered issue: “When women paint, it is acknowledged to be art. When women embroider, it is seen not as art, but entirely as the expression of femininity. And, crucially, it is categorized as craft.” This has been explained by feminist art historians who have pointed to the way art practices are inscribed in a visual culture, which replicates the structure of the patriarchal ideology.
In the 1960s and 1970s, with Modernism as the dominant paradigm of an almost exclusively male art world (see Linda Nochlin’s provocatively titled *Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?*, a seminal text which points to a structurally paternalistic history of art), some women artists decided to assume a deliberate continuity with the traditional arts of quilting and sewing. Miriam Schapiro opened the way in the US with her ‘femmages’ (based on the word homage), which were to address both the need to reassess the history of women artists and their difficult position in contemporary art practices. Bits of fabric were to close the gap between studio work and a macho art scene and the reality of home and of womanhood. Naturally, embroidery and stitching were instrumental in the construction of a feminine identity within the home. What American and British women artists did in the 1970s was move stitching outside of the home, of what was accepted as a feminine domestic realm. The first step out was taken by proxy, still enacted by a man, or to be more specific, a postman. “Feministo” was a project initiated in 1974 by Kate Walker and Sally Gollop in which women artists were to exchange artworks by post. Most of these artworks had to do with life inside the house and many were pieces of quilt and embroidery. The collection of these postal artworks eventually became an exhibition called “Portrait of the Artist as a Young Housewife.” After having avoided so-called ‘female techniques’ like sewing, knitting or weaving because they did not want to be categorized as ‘feminine artists,’ women were suddenly embracing household images and crafts.

The most iconic, but also most controversial, fibre-based artwork of the 1970s is Judy Chicago’s *The Dinner Party* (1974-1979), a celebration of female achievement rescued from historical invisibility. On a large triangular table, embroidered runners and vagina-shaped plates were set for thirty-nine famous names such as Virginia Woolf, Georgia O’Keeffe, Sacajawea or Isadora Duncan. The names of nine-hundred-and-ninety-nine less famous women were inscribed onto a heritage floor and banners. The mix of craft skills, domestic femininity and a then omnipresent cunt imagery set in a Last Supper-like religious atmosphere made for a dramatic exhibition of gender politics. However, the paradigm shift of the 1980s in which body-oriented, utopian practices were replaced by poststructuralist feminist art theory and deconstruction meant that, with time, Chicago’s piece was criticized for being too essentialist.

**Reclaiming Craft Today**

If women artists at the turn of the century have inherited these struggles, their identity is no longer defined simply by a shared female experience. Should we be surprised to see women artists today working with embroidery when feminism has become more of a background than a central identity and at a time when it is no longer necessary to ask, in Britain at least, if there are any great women artists? Goldsmiths’ College, today’s hothouse of British creativity and, in the 1980s and 1990s, school to the Young British Artists (YBAs), was the first British school in the sixties to deliver a diploma in embroidery.

One of the most prominent YBAs is Tracey Emin. Her appliquéd blankets engage both in the long tradition of the patchwork quilt as symbol of domestic femininity in Britain and the US and of its more recent use in demonstrations and political statements of women’s rights, the iconoclasm and faux-spontaneity of her texts at odds with the relatively painstaking procedure of sewing together all the pieces of fabric and letters.
In her work, the traditional medium lends momentum to the marginalized experiences of working-class femininity, to the voice of self-styled “Mad Tracey from Margate” (a phrase embroidered into some of her quilts).

20 Just as the patchwork quilt is a symbol of the home, presenting the reality of home and of the self rather than of the studio, Emin’s work seems to focus on the idea of a displacing of the locus of creation: Emin has often chosen to make herself one of the objects of her exhibitions, setting them up in different ingenious ways. “The Shop” (1993), which she set up with Sarah Lucas, presented their handicraft to visitors who could purchase most of the motley items. “The Tracey Emin Museum” (1995-1997) in which she would often spend the night, sometimes sewing and knitting, was a personal bid at artistic stardom—and a successful one at that. For Exorcism of the Last Painting I Ever Made (1997) a gallery was configured in such a way that Emin could be peeped at through a hole in a partition working naked on recreating famous paintings of the history of art (incidentally all by male artists, Edward Munch, Yves Klein, etc.). In many instances, she is all at the same time artist, model and subject-matter of her work. The coincidence between artwork and the locus of the invention of the artwork in My Bed (1999) made for a scandalous show during that year’s Turner Prize. But her practice moves from the collective (the quilting bee which she recreates with assistants or friends when working on her appliquéd blankets) to the intimate, the individual and autobiographical.

21 The first time I was pregnant I started to crochet the baby a shawl (1990-2000), is both a touching and interesting piece, which presents some yarn and two needles under a glass case, but also an accompanying text. The crochet was never created and the medium becomes displaced, it is one that never happened, that was interrupted, just like the pregnancy. Here, the story of the needlework and that behind its interruption are substituted for the needlework itself, allowing for the possibility of dematerialized craft.

22 Along Mad Tracey from Margate, we can also find a description of herself as “International Woman.” The tag stresses a link to her childhood (the hotel run by her mother in Margate was called International Hotel), but it is mostly an identification of herself as a contemporary woman artist, one who travels the world and has become a media personality. In I’ve got it all (2000), Tracey Emin is photographed with her legs outspread, mimicking the attitude of Hannah Wilke in her photograph What Does This Represent? What Do You Represent? (Reinhardt) (1979-1984), a feminist take on Ad Reinhardt’s cartoon about abstract painting. While Wilke posed naked surrounded by toy guns, Emin is dressed in Vivienne Westwood and presses large quantities of bank notes to her crotch. Here, the link to seventies feminist art is one of reference rather than continuity. Rather than speaking form the margins of art, Emin is at the centre, where her art is worth big bucks. And while seventies artists used embroidering and sewing for its traditional and popular associations, Emin projects it into international mass culture. She is a fashion icon who fronts a campaign for Vivienne Westwood and dresses in her clothes for some of her artworks and high profile social events.

23 London-based artist Michelle Charles worked in New York for twenty years before coming back to England. Her 2008 self-titled exhibition at Kettle’s Yard opened with a video of someone’s hands knitting. This was followed by her painted work representing wool knit around a knitting needle, a craft work in progress which is a minute painterly representation. Charles was part of “Purl”, a 2004 exhibition at the Museum of
Domestic Design and Architecture in London which brought together the work of three British and three American artists: Laurie Addis, Charles, Michelle Grabner, Jane Langley, Kathleen Mullaniff and Jennifer Wright. They were asked to respond to the museum’s craft collection with artworks. By recalling the history of gendered practices, the exhibition stressed how medium hierarchies can today be challenged. This is done especially by building bridges between the multimedia character of textile craft and its mathematical structure based on repetition, and its relevance in the computer age of coding.

[Image: Michelle Charles, Knitting - Still from a Film, 2008, used by kind permission of the artist]

[Image: Michelle Charles, Knitting, Series 1, 2001-02, used by kind permission of the artist]
From Artistic Heirloom to Craftivism

Emin and Charles provide demonstrations of the strategies of displacement and of mediation at work in contemporary sewing, knitting, quilt and embroidery. The way these techniques allow for a reinterpretation of traditional loci (the studio vs the home, parochialism vs international stardom) and of traditional medium (spontaneity vs templates, popular vs mass culture) means they can play a role in contemporary debates about women and art, but also about the very materiality and topicality of today’s works. The feminist struggle around the appropriation and celebration of craft seems to have more recently appeared as the template for new political struggles. Many of the practitioners of textile art working today in Britain as well as in the USA live in countries that are dependent on outsourced labour and in which workers are often alienated due to the fact that they do not see the result of their labour. Embroidery can suggest a counterpoint to the workings of a global economy and is thus used militantly by some. This means that many contemporary artists, mostly women, but also some men, make embroidery subversive, but also that in order to introduce radicalism into their practice, they tend to fuse what are today understood as the tools of the activist (the internet, blogs, twitter, etc. new technology in general) with what is seen as a more traditional practice, but one which, along with other materials identified with craft (wood turning, clay, lace) has lately been at the forefront of creativity.

Over the last ten years, craft and new technology have seemed a counterintuitive bedfellows: a return to hand making and tactility should be opposed and appearing as a counterpoint to the impersonal and immaterial digital age. Indeed, the recent craze surrounding knitting and everything handmade might have had to do with the fact that people pick up knitting needles as an escape from the dematerialized productions and interactions offered by computers. In the face of everything fast and technological, they want something real, time-consuming and homemade. And yet, handicraft often brings them back online, because they go searching for instructions or tips, and they discover that there’s an actual online community of blogging crafters, which feeds things back into the digital environment. Today, artists and craftspeople have started to think through this complementarity, this proximity and a possible analogy between the two and how these resemblances have projected craft into 21st century art practice as well as political preoccupations.

Recently, a whole host of exhibitions have centered on the surprisingly subversive, fashionable and up-to-date use being made of craft by contemporary artists. Their titles are telling: “Gender Stitchery” (Carleton College, 2007), “Pricked, Extreme Embroidery” (NY, 2008), “Radical Lace and Subversive Knitting” (Indianapolis, 2007), “Thread as the Line” (Arlington, 2008), “Craftivism” (Green Bay, 2008), “40 Under 40: Craft Futures” (Washington, 2012-2013), all following in the footsteps, ten years down the road, of the seminal “The Subversive Stitch, Women and Textiles Today” (Manchester, 1998, a reference to Roszika Parker’s eponymous book). Embroidery and knitting are considered to be radical new artistic practices first of all because they are crafts. The interest on the part of contemporary visual artists started out for this reason but also because they are gendered ones to boot. Today, an artist like Cal Lane, who is Canadian but who studied in New York, makes lace doilies out of industrial steel using welding machinery as a commentary on their traditional association with femininity. The use of
materials associated with craft as well as their processing: wood, clay, and especially fiber, is seen as a way of reinvigorating art practice.

27 Male embroiderers and knitters also contradict stereotypes. Michael Raedecker integrates it into his painting. Dave Cole turns knitting into an ultra-macho endeavor by including heavy machinery in his performance *The Knitting Machine*, 2005, and comments: “knitting is a trope for work, a metaphor for every kind of production.”

Usually, in these contemporary works, a delicate domesticity is belied by a radical content or by an imposing scale. Making the domestic public, going public with the domestic means opening up doors: art becomes more inclusive (both of women as artists and of men as knitters) and at the same time, society is urged to be more inclusive too.

28 Handicraft functions as a symbol of community and communication, having traditionally been the reason (sometimes the excuse for) gatherings of women around the same activity and a pastime that allowed conversation to take place (something which is alluded to in Liz Collins’s *Knitting Nation*, 2005-2006, which invited participation on the part of the audience). Women’s work could thus be considered the original communication network, although not really a long distance one, even though we could consider that some discussions were continued through space since some patchworks have been known to travel, taken up again by a woman where another one had left it after travelling some distance. By using craft to devise a participatory activity, artists like Liz Collins invent wiki-embroidery. Craft as a social space means the recreation of a local community, the establishing of networks, both a traditional function and truly up-to-date instances of Nicolas Bourriaud’s relational aesthetics.

29 We find in contemporary art the resurgence of a commitment to a collaborative practice. This is the case with Sabrina Gschwandtner’s *Wartime Knitting Circle*, 2007, an allusion to knitting’s historical role as a mobilizing activity, as a way of taking part and even protesting, but in this case in the context of the war in Iraq. Here the traditional association of craft and war, and, above all, of craft and national identity is questioned. Art critic Julia Bryan-Wilson has coined the expression “crisis craft” to describe this movement which emerged in the 1970s and has known new developments during more recent moments of crisis.

30 The relationship between craft and new technology also functions analogically: the complexity of repetitive and extended sequences necessary in knitting and embroidering can be compared to the workings of a computer. For Freddie Robins, whose website allows users to make nonsensical garments with graphic designs based on knitted patterns, computer programming instructions are like knitting instructions because each depends on translating complicated information into a type of esoteric shorthand. Also a false move or a dropped stitch can cause both to unravel.

31 Taking part in the 2008 “Craft Hackers” panel at New York’s New Museum a group of artists discussed the use of crafting techniques to explore high-tech culture and the relationship between needlework and computer programming. Among them were Christy Matson, who uses Jacquard looms to knit landscape images from computer games; Ben Fino-Radin, who embroiders retired computer punch cards (*Personal Computer*, 2007); and Cody Trepte, whose needlepoint sculptures translate the World Wide Web into yarn and plastic, one pixel at a time. Also among them, American artist Cat Mazza, who turns moving images into stills knit in yarn. With her website http://www.microrevolt.org, Mazza uses knitting as resistance to sweatshop labour and allows
a domestic practice to take on the global economy. One of her best-known works is in
the shape of the infamous Nike swoosh: Cat Mazza has used microRevol t.org to solicit
four-by-four-inch knitted squares from contributors around the world for her Nike
Blanket Petition (2007) in protest of sweatshop labour and asking for fair-labour policies
for Nike workers. The interface of the website allowed petitioners to identify their
square online rather than sign a conventional petition. Incidentally, the connection of
the two fields also stresses a parallel with unjust conditions in computer manufacturing
(think the production of the iPhone5 by workers who have come to be dubbed “iSlaves”
by the human rights group Students and Scholars Against Corporate Misbehavior). The
campaign thus defends skills which are sometimes lost because of globalization. She
has also created knitting machines to turn her embroideries into computer animation
programmes, pixels turned into stitches and vice-versa. The two media used relate her
approach to cyberfeminism. Mazza says: “I use Web media to reach audiences beyond
the museum. In fact this connects back to craft, because craft, like the Internet, is also
seen as a democratizing medium, a social network that operates outside the
institution.”

On her site, there is also a free software program called “knitpro” which translates a
still or moving image directly into patterns for knitting, crocheting or needlework so
that handicraft can go digital. The stitches, knit and purl, can here be compared to a
computer’s binary machine code, ones and zeros. Her Logoknit Series, 2003, a series of
knitted garments with stitched corporate logos of sweatshop offenders (Disney, GAP,
Barbie, etc.) is in the same vein. The political activism of craft can thus be feminist of
course, but also a way of addressing globalization, this because handicraft means
making one thing from start to finish and is therefore a form of anti-taylorism. Such
work allows for the recognition of labour and skills in art as well as in industry (where
it is often hidden abroad, imagined to be always machine made when sometimes
children are sewing together our sneakers).

Craft Lab

In his 2011 book Making is Connecting, The Social Meaning of Creativity, From DIY and
Knitting to YouTube and Web 2.0, David Gauntlett analyzes the social dimension of this
participation culture. The book presents the many ways in which creative material is
both showcased and created online in a democratic way, with the cultural impulse
coming from the grassroots. Gauntlett believes the origins of the sharing ethos of the
online craft community can be found in the writings and craft practice of William
Morris. These new online communities include knitting and embroidering, but also
garden guerrilla, or home electronics. People converging online to make things they
want to make, with fulfillment and happiness among the main objectives. Fab Labs, the
emanation of Media Labs, appear as the most evolved technical embodiments of this
participatory culture. They are technical, but their ethics, as well as some of their end
products, mean they could be considered the online future of craft, and therefore also
of art based on craft. Using open-source techniques, their aim is to emancipate objects
from traditional manufacturing and commercial circuits, to help artists, engineers and
hackers learn and share. Fab Labs around the world, in order to be able to use the
name, have to obey the charter drawn up by the Center for Bits and Atoms at MIT
where Neil Gershenfeld came up with the name. Indeed, while Fab Labs allow end-
users to create objects at home, at school or in small-shared laboratories, the charter insists on the fact that whatever new coding they might have come up with, they need to share online.

Lately, Fab Labs have met textile and fashion. The most famous Fab Lab invention is the 3D scanner and printer, a technique which can be used to share patterns and cut out textile designs. Leah Buechley, director of the High-Low Tech group at MIT, is inventing what she calls “augmented fashion” by using a microcontroller called LilyPad, which can be sewn into fabric to make it interactive. Her jackets equipped with turn signals which indicate with large luminous arrows which way a cyclist is about to turn are simple yet groundbreaking. With Buechley, the knitting bee has gone digital without forsaking its communal ideal.

Fab Labs around the world are now bringing together technicians obsessed with the original ideals of craft culture and artists interested in the myriad possibilities of new modes of designing and making. Their very existence seems to have been adumbrated by the creative possibilities of online craft. By providing a broader context for craft, Fab Labs will probably augment artists’ studio practice while keeping alive the alternative ideals of the handmade.

Old Mediums, New Media

How striking that embroidery and more generally craft, with its history as long as painting (but one mainly lived in its shadow), and with its gendered associations, can weave together, in a very contemporary manner, the questions of globalized labour, war, the relationship between North and South, digital culture, feminism, queerness, collaboration and modern socializing, thus materially telling the story of our contemporary predicament. Its layered history and malleability seem to have resonated with current issues of community, identity, and production in a post-medium art context open to different material possibilities, old and new. Its utopian quality has today been reclaimed by hackers, engineers, DIY coders and digital dreamers, as well as by artists, in creative and surprising ways, confirming the possibility for the continuation of the modernist ideal of medium specificity in a contemporary context, even if two different media are often needed to each explore the specificity of the other, one old, one new. Something which the title of a 2010 exhibition seems to convey perfectly: “Craftwerk 2.0.”

BIBLIOGRAPHY


**NOTES**

1. On the history of net.art, see the writings of Geert Lovink, David Garcia and Matthew Fuller which were introduced to a French audience by Annick Bureaud and Nathalie Magnan when they edited *Connexions: Art, Réseaux, Médias* (Paris: Ecole de Beaux-Arts, 2002). See also Julian Stallabrass’s critique *Internet Art. The Online Clash of Culture and Commerce* (London: Tate Publishing, 2003). For discussions of the notion of post-internet art as a condition rather than a genre and therefore art which is not necessarily online, see The Image Object Post-Internet


12. Contemporary English artist Freddie Robins’s confrontational It Sucks (2005) seems to pay homage to these attempts at subversion. Her handknit shawl of delicate Shetland lace is so pale that, were it not for its title, we would perhaps miss this modern purled voicing of discontent. She also plays against the traditional, comfortable and domestic associations of craft in Craft Kills (2002), a knitted St Sebastian figure pierced by knitting needles (the artist remarked soon after that knitting needles were now forbidden aboard aircraft for safety reasons and had acquired weaponry status). The work of Los Angeles artist Lisa Ann Auerbach relies on the same kind of tension between the mild-mannered associations of knitwear and political slogans.

13. The painting is an illustration of Thomas Hood’s poem “The Song of the Shirt” which in 1843 told the plight of the distressed and exploited needlewomen whose sad stories recounted in popular newspapers had captured the public’s imagination:

Oh, Men, with Sisters dear!
Oh, men, with Mothers and Wives!
It is not linen you’re wearing out,
But human creatures’ lives!
Stitch — stitch — stitch,
In poverty, hunger and dirt,
Sewing at once, with a double thread,
A Shroud as well as a Shirt

R.B. Inglis et al., Adventures in English Literature (Toronto: W.J. Gage, 1952), 436.


15. Parker, The Subversive Stitch, 4-5.


17. In 2004, the British crafts council presented an exhibition called “Boys who Sew.” The bland, descriptive aspect of this title was of course compensated by its explosive content. Unexpected as
the possibility of male sewing might have sounded, how was it however that the subject should be ‘boys’ rather than ‘men’? Yinka Shonibare, Michael Raedecker, Neil MacGinnis, Hew Locke were among the artists featured in the show. The difficult titling of such an exhibition seems to point to the fact that textiles remain in the vanguard of feminist art practices, but with the post-feminist doctrine expanding to include issues to do with homosexuality and colonialism. And with Grayson Perry’s well-publicized transvestism, queerness and the inversion of gender actually underscore the latter’s centrality.

18. A phenomenon of which the renewed interest in drawing at the very beginning of the twenty-first century was also exemplary.

19. This disenchantment with online communities has been commented upon by British artists Thomson & Craighead in their 2007 Google Tea Towels, actual tea towels embroidered with a series of authentic search engine results for the following Google requests: 'Please Help Me', 'Is Anybody there?', 'Please listen to me' and, 'Can you hear me?'.

20. Garth Johnson lists a series of craft websites in the chapter “Down the Tube: In Search of Internet Craft” in Cortney Heimerl and Faythe Levine eds, Handmade Nation, The Rise of DIY, Art, Craft, and Design (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2008), 30-35. Among the most popular, we can mention etsy.com (eBay for the indie craft community), extremecraft.com and redefiningcraft.com

21. Quoted by Cate McQuaid, “Stars and Stripes & Heavy Machinery” (Boston Globe, July 1, 2005).


23. www.freddierobins.com, a site, the layout of which resembles a craft fair booth.


26. The notion of deskilling has been applied both to economies that replace skilled labour with technologies and semi-skilled or unskilled workers, and to art, with Benjamin Buchloh describing the way twentieth-century art has persistently endeavoured to eliminate manual virtuosity. See, Benjamin Buchloh, Neo-Avant-Garde and Culture Industry: Essays on European and American Art from 1955 to 1975 (Cambridge, MA.: MIT Press, 2003), but also John Roberts, The Intangibilities of Form (London: Verso, 2007) which explores the dialectic of skill-deskilling-reskilling.

27. The Fab Lab (Fabrication Laboratory) program of the CBA (The Center for Bits and Atoms, simply because Fab Lab researchers explore new ways of turning digital information, bits, into physical objects, atoms), http://fab.cba.mit.edu/ See the special of Wired, “The Lab That’s Inventing the Future” (London: Condé Nast, November 2012).


ABSTRACTS

The history of craft and textile is a long and gendered one which contemporary artists have picked up on since the 1960s precisely because it tells such a long story. Today, the craftivism of
the twentieth century has entered a new phase which also allows artists to reflect on their position both in a post-medium and a post-Internet era. What this article aims to do is to address the question of the contemporary art medium in the Internet age by looking more specifically at what could have been the practice most resistant to an online treatment: textile art. By analyzing works by American and British artists such as Michelle Charles, Tracey Emin, Cat Mazza or Liz Collins among others, we wish to demonstrate that it is precisely this very old and political history of craft as a tactical medium which allows for it to open up so many new media possibilities in the form of knitting videos, wiki-embroidery, fab lab textile creations, and more generally a reconciliation of the digital and the handmade.

INDEX

**Keywords:** contemporary art, craft, textile art, medium, media, post-medium era, craftivism, feminism, online art, material culture

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