

“The Workmanship of Risk: the Performance of Craft”

Richard F. Brush art gallery
St. Lawrence University
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Titled after a 1998 essay by critic Polly Ullrich* that described a movement in the ‘90s in which contemporary artists embraced handcraft as a radical artmaking practice, this show will revisit Ullrich’s thesis. The works displayed here are not just made with a handcraft-like approach that threatens the formal look of contemporary art, they are progressive-to-radical political statements made through subversive, performative strategies that include fashion, ‘zines, communal crafting, and freely distributed software.

Elaine Reichel examines cultural history through a photo/sculpture combination: one is a fuzzy archival photograph of a teepee, and the other is a hand-knitted reconstruction of the photograph’s subject. The knitted teepee hangs next to the enlarged photograph, collapsed and dormant, a reminder that ethnographic photographs are as subjective and handmade as knitted scarves.

Lisa Anne Auerbach, trained as a photographer, combines knitting, photography and writing in ‘zines that record her politicized responses to daily life. A display of her self-published documents includes: “American Stuccolow,” which details her domestic life inside a “stuccoed bungalow” (including short columns like “Yard News,” “Found on the Side of the Road,” and “Fight Club,” in which either she or her husband describe fights they have had or avoided); “Saddlesore,” about riding her bike around Los Angeles instead of taking a car; “American Homebody,” a contemporary counterpart to the 1970s publication “Women’s Household,” and “Last Week in the Project Space,” detailing her work as a knitter artist-in-resident at the Headlands Center for the Arts in San Francisco.

Auerbach’s machine knit banners are more succinct sociopolitical commentary than her ‘zines. Simply stating “Quagmire,” “Shoot to Kill,” and “Freedom is Messy,” these banners invert the domesticity of knitting to become public outcry. The banners, sometimes photographed as shawls worn by Lisa, are compiled on her website which is aptly named after Abbie Hoffman’s revolutionary “Steal this Book”: www.stealthissweater.com. Two of Lisa’s sweaters are also on display: one states “Vote for Kerry,” and the other: “Praise the Lord and Pass the Ammunition,” in response to the end of the assault rifle ban.

Auerbach’s “Body Count Mittens” invite knitters to participate in her public approach to political response. The mittens memorialize the number of American soldiers killed in Iraq at the time the mittens are made. They are, as Lisa states, “a great project to knit in public.” Lisa explains the mittens on her website: “since the numbers escalate daily, each mitten has a different number and date. Seen together, the pair shows a span of time and the increase in killed soldiers over that time. For example, I started my mittens on March 23, 2005, when 1,524 American soldiers had been killed in Iraq. I started work on the second mitten one week later, on March 31, 2005, by which time the number of

American troops killed in Iraq had risen to 1,533.” Lisa concludes her mitten pattern by encouraging the knitter to “wear history sadly and thoughtfully. Let the memories and unfathomable statistics keep you warm.”

Sherri Wood’s “Prayer Banner: REPENT” provides another public response – this one collaborative – to the war in Iraq. Made with other sewers at various protest sites, gallery shows, and religious meetings, the banner depicts tiny cloth coffins bearing the embroidered last names of U.S. soldiers who have died in Iraq. When the banner is complete, there will be one stitch on the quilt for every Iraqi citizen killed, and the coffins will spell out "repent." Sherri began the banner as a "prayer, protest, and memorial" in January 2004, when there were only 450 names.

Jim Finn also enlisted the help of others to make his pillow series. These are portraits of what he terms the "communist heroes of South America," like Brazilian revolutionary Carlos Marighella, whose “Minimanual of the Urban Guerrilla” has become sort of a terrorist textbook. Jim grew up in Saint Louis, where needlepoint was an expression reserved for girls who made needlepoint belts for their boyfriends and brothers. The girls all got their patterns from “Sign of the Arrow,” a needlepoint shop in the affluent suburb of Ladue run by Pi Phi sorority alums since 1966. One can either provide images to the store, or choose from a set of stock images. In a kind of performance, Jim designed his communist portraits in Photoshop and then sent them to “Sign of the Arrow,” where his images were hand-painted onto 13- and 18-gauge needlepoint mesh by store employees.

The knitPro Needlecraft Art Show (hereafter known as KNAS) brings together a diverse group of works united by a single methodology: all were created using software called knitPro. knitPro, created by art group microRevolt so that fiber hobbyists could knit logos of well-known sweatshop offenders, translates digital images into a grid pattern where one pixel is one stitch. Available for free at www.microRevolt.org, knitPro digitally mimics the tradition of pre-industrial knitting circles that freely shared patterns and passed them down from generation to generation. KNAS is a show-within-a-show that presents a selection of anonymous images uploaded by craft hobbyists between July 2005 and January 2006, as well as stitched items that were sent in by crafters all over the world, in response to a call for works posted on microRevolt’s website. Images of the stitchwork in KNAS will be displayed online, and the show will be juried by Mike Bonnano (from the Yes Men), Faith Wilding (pioneering cyberFeminist artist), Eric St. Onge (knitPro programmer) and myself. Results will be presented on microRevolt’s website.

Further tackling the relationships between the handmade and the digital, advertising and labor, production and consumption, Cat Mazza’s video “Talking Stitch” presents Knitoscope, a new software that takes digital video, lowers its resolution, and alters it into images of various stitches. The video depicts interviews with people who have been working in anti-sweatshop activism, like Erica Zeitlin of “No More Sweatshops,” a nonprofit focused on legislative policy change. Knitoscope turns regular footage of talking heads into moving stitch patterns that are flat, pulsating, abstract textiles.

-Sabrina Gschwandtner, exhibition curator

* *“The Workmanship of Risk: The Re-emergence of Handcraft in Postmodern Art,”* by Polly Ullrich New Art Examiner 1998