

Craftivism: The Role of Feminism in Craft Activism

By

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## **Abstract:**

This thesis project by Rachel Fry entitled *Craftivism: The Role of Feminism in Craft Activism* explores the intersection of feminism, fibre-art practice and activism through an investigation of craftivism. Craftivism is the coming together of craft and activism and focusing on this definition, this thesis uses the language of Third-wave feminist writing, Janet Wolff's theories on the sociology of art, and the cultural theories of Michel de Certeau to explain how modern day craft practices relate to current understandings of feminism. Interviews with eight "cultural producers" of craftivism including artists, curators, activists, and theorists reveal the social intricacies related to craft practice. Their narrative guides the thesis through discussions of gender, race, class, age, and geographical location to explore how these pertain to everyday fibre-art production. This thesis also focuses on the reasons why craft as a gendered practice has an impact on the everyday experiences of women worldwide.

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## **Introduction**

Crafting means a lot to me. I can remember learning how to crochet as early as four or five years old; my grandmother would lean over my shoulder, helping me to form links that would slowly emerge into a long, simple chain. There, in her living room, I would sit for hours making gigantic twisted ropes that could stretch from one wall to the next. Since then, I have never really stopped participating in the production of fibre craft. I learned to knit and needle point when I was just a bit older than that early memory, and for most of my life I never thought anything of it – for me crafting was merely a hobby, another way to pass the time. It was not until I saw a yarn bombed street lamp in downtown Peterborough, Ontario that I began to think about the social intricacies of fibre art. The piece I saw was just one small, red, knitted square, fastened snugly around a pole with a needle and thread; in fact, it was the type of thing that unless someone was looking for it chances are they would not even see it. But on that cold, wintery day I did see this peculiar sight and it made me ask that near-perfect question: “What on earth *IS* this?”

I went online to find out more about why this mysterious street lamp had been draped in red and discovered that this type of art was frequently referred to as “knit graffiti” or “yarn bombing” and it was becoming a popular occurrence in urban and industrial areas in cities around the world. Eventually, I was able to track down a book called *Yarn Bombing: The Art of Crochet and Knit Graffiti* by Mandy Moore and Leanne Prain published in 2009. Moore and Prain book features hundreds of colourful examples of yarn bombing and explains that this type of guerilla aesthetic is associated with a term

called “craftivism”<sup>1</sup> – a word used to describe activist craft. While it only brushes upon the surface of what craftivism is in a few brief pages, reading this book made me intrigued. I wanted to know more and to better understand the intricacies and social implications of this act – one struck me as not only uniquely contemporary, but also simultaneously impactful and perplexing.

Diving into the world of political craft for the very first time, it was to my surprise and delight that I found a wonderful and amazing history of resistance with craft. For thousands of years, people – particularly women – have been using fibre craft as a form of political expression. In fact, there are many authors who bring light to the history of political crafting, one of whom is Rozsika Parker who wrote *The Subversive Stitch* in 1984, a book that is generally considered integral to understanding the intersection of feminism and fibre art.<sup>2</sup> In it Parker argues that while women’s embroidery is often considered a submissive hobby it is in fact a form of high art and should be considered as such.<sup>3</sup> This art form is relegated to the realm of craft primarily because of the gender of its practitioners,<sup>4</sup> and yet despite fibre craft’s history as a gendered pursuit Parker’s text –

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<sup>1</sup> Mandy Moore and Leanne Prain, *Yarn Bombing: The Art of Crochet and Knit Graffiti* (Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 2009), 21.

<sup>2</sup> Kirsty Robertson, “Rebellious Doilies and Subversive Stitches,” in *Extra/Ordinary: Craft and Contemporary Art*, ed. Maria Elena Buszek (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2011), 184.

<sup>3</sup> Parker, *Subversive Stitch*.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 68.

which explores femininity and women's roles so intently – is not a seminal text in the field of Women's Studies.<sup>5</sup>

My education in Gender and Women's Studies has never included the study of craft as part of the curriculum, so I started asking my own questions about the historical connection that Parker discusses as well as evaluating my own practice as a craft maker and feminist activist. As I considered craftivism's potential impact for the first time, I came to realize that politically engaged crafting is everywhere; whether it is my cousin Pat who knits mittens for local charities to auction off for money, the popular red felt square during the Quebec 'Maple Spring' student protests of 2012, or the political needlecraft of women in the 1800s – all of these examples fall somewhere within the spectrum of craftivism because they all represent a type of politically engaged craft action.

Further inquiries into craftivism have revealed to me that current research on craftivism is lacking in academic rigour. Much of the work that has been produced on craftivism thus far has included evidence that is primarily anecdotal and speculative. There also remains a significant lack of focus within academia on the theoretical and social implications of craftivism. This thesis is designed to fill these gaps and aims to help shape a better understanding of how gender, activism, craft, and feminism intersect within the social and artistic phenomena of craftivism. I have developed two questions to shape my investigation:

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<sup>5</sup> Robertson, "Rebellious Doilies and Subversive Stitches," 184.



1. What role are craftivists playing in both maintaining and/or reconstructing contemporary feminism?
2. How do craftivists and fibre artists whose work has been interpreted as craftivist understand the theoretical and political context of their art? Do they see themselves as part of a feminist, or “gender justice” movement? Do they understand their work as activist or craftivist?

These questions have served as a foundation in my understanding of the intersection of gender, feminism, activism, and craft through an exploration of the phenomenon of craft activism known as craftivism. By focusing on the value of craft as a part of everyday life, and by acknowledging the communal efforts involved in art making, my thesis’ theoretical position utilizes a methodological approach that features the voices of eight key craftivists. This methodological approach is designed to feature the political and personal perspectives of those directly involved with craftivism. I will also explore the limitations of not only this thesis but of craftivism itself by analyzing the ways in which race, class, gender, and sexuality intersect to create complex social hierarchies of privilege.

I begin this thesis by reviewing the literature most pertinent to craftivism in order to provide a better sense of the history and scope of what is referred to as “the handmade revolution.” My literature review includes both historical and contemporary writing and it has been invaluable in helping me define important concepts like “craftivism” and “fibre art.” In the literature review I explain my decision to focus specifically on “fibre” as opposed to other kinds of crafts like wood, clay, or glass, for example, because of the medium’s particular historical connection to women’s lives. The next stage of the literature review describes some of the more significant historical moments and debates

that are associated with fibre craft. I include an analysis of the 19<sup>th</sup> century Arts and Crafts Movement, as well as craft's historical connection with femininity and Second-wave feminism as a way to contextualize the practice of craft within a historical framework. I also explain some of the more persistent binaries that exist within craft, including amateur versus professional, process versus product, and art versus craft, and demonstrate how these are still important issues even in the recent resurgence of craft that has seen millions of young women flocking towards fibre art as a hobby.

I begin the second chapter, my theoretical framework, with what is in actuality a continuation of the literature review. In its first few pages I explain and contextualize the history of theoretical rigour in craftivist research and use this narrative to demonstrate how I have arrived at my theoretical conclusions. The theoretical framework that I have chosen to guide my research includes elements of Third-wave feminism, cultural studies, and sociology. I argue that fibre craft can become a communal, politically engaged practice despite the fact that it is commonly understood as a mere hobby. My analysis of craft's "every day" quality is assessed through the use of Michel de Certeau, who in his book, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, evaluates the significance of subverting everyday activities and labour while also focusing on the practice of subversion itself. And while his theories are related more directly to the work place, I apply this theory to craftivism, arguing that the act of producing political fibre craft can be considered part of a quiet and "everyday" rebellion. It is imperative to acknowledge that my thesis is not an aesthetic analysis of art objects. Instead, it is an exploration of practice that focuses on the actions and opinions of the makers themselves.

I also assert that craftivism is intricately connected to Third-wave feminist discourse, as I utilize the theories of Janet Wolfe, a scholar of the sociology of art, to explain how craftivism is part of a communal process of making. Borrowing language from Wolfe's book, *The Sociology of Art*, my thesis refers to everyone involved in the production of craftivism no matter how they participate as its "producers." Like Wolfe, I also claim that there is no such thing as value-freedom<sup>6</sup> in art, an argument I apply to the theory of craftivism. The meaning behind craftivism is informed not only by the maker's social location, but also by the context with which the audience consumes it. This ideology is what has most essentially informed the theoretical and methodological framework of my thesis.

I have chosen my methodology, as outlined in my third chapter, based on what I have perceived to be a lack of acknowledgement of those involved with the direct production of craftivism. This includes the artists and makers themselves, the audience, the curators of craftivist shows and events, and craftivist theorists. While there seems to be a general buzz about craftivism and its connection to Third-wave feminist activism and organizing, I have not encountered any discussions in regards to the practice of "feminism" and "craftivism" that includes the voices of the producers themselves. I needed to know how these producers understand the connection between feminism and the practice of craftivism, and in order to do this I felt it necessary to conduct interviews and make their direct quotes a central part of my thesis' analysis.

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<sup>6</sup> Value-freedom is an adjective defined as, "Free from criteria imposed by subjective values or standards; purely objective".

As I have stated above, I have been in contact with eight cultural craftivists, all of whom have discussed the ways in which they connect with craftivism and feminism. Each of those producers informs an individual “case” in a case study. I then use the data collected during these interviews as the primary point of analysis that is spread out over three chapters. In the first analysis chapter I discuss the various ways in which producers define craftivism and feminism and whether or not they identify with these terms. In the second chapter I discuss the shaping of communities through craftivism, while in the third chapter I explore the concept of value-freedom in craft as I question the general understanding of who is “allowed” to become a craftivist. In this final chapter I also explore the ways in which craftivism perpetuates classism and racism. This is a conversation I further evaluate in the conclusion of my thesis, as I attempt to redefine and broaden the understanding of craftivism as a practice.

My thesis delves into the world of craftivism as a sociological phenomenon. In my exploration of the ways that makers experience craftivism, I focus on the relationships within that world instead of on the objects that it produces. The conception of this thesis has come from a place of genuine curiosity and ends with an open-ended conclusion that I was certainly not expecting when the idea first began to percolate in my mind over three years ago. My analysis of craftivism has led me to believe that it is undeniably multi-faceted in its endless meanings and interpretations. Bringing together such a variety of seemingly disparate ideas shows how they are all distinctly connected and pertinent within the understanding of the everyday lives of women, both historically and contemporaneously. As my thesis explores the many facets of craftivism, it is important

remember that craft is a practice that continues to be manipulated and reimagined, and as this tradition continues, so should its analysis.

## Chapter One: Literature Review

Craftivism – loosely defined as the coming together of craft and activism – is a relatively new subject of study. Even though it is a well-known branch within contemporary craft, it is also so specialized that there is only a limited body of literature that specifically pertains to it. While my thesis is about craftivism, it focuses more specifically on how craft, activism, and feminism intersect and connect. With this in mind, it is important to consider craftivism’s roots as an interdisciplinary and historically complex subject. This literature review will take this into account in order to build a better understanding of what craftivism is. From a feminist perspective it will also explore some of the important historical and cultural moments in the field’s history. Borrowing from Julia Gualtieri’s description of her own literature review from *DIY & Open Source Principles in Practice*, this literature review is not intended to construct *the* history of craftivism.<sup>7</sup> Instead, it is intended to point out that craft and craftivism have an important sociological and historical legacy that is often left out of contemporary craft literature.<sup>8</sup> Before I begin the literature review, I will briefly define and explain some key concepts and terms that will be frequently utilized throughout this thesis.

### Craftivism

The word craftivism has a clear origin: it is simply the combination of the words “craft” and “activism.” Betsy Greer originally coined the term in 2003, based on her

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<sup>7</sup> Julia T. Gualtieri, *DIY & Open Source Principles in Practice* (Rhode Island: Rhode Island School of Design, 2009), 19.

<sup>8</sup> Gualtieri, *DIY & Open Source*, 19.

experiences with activists in New York City who use craft to express their political and social concerns.<sup>9</sup> In her 2008 book entitled, *Knitting For Good: A Guide to Creating Personal, Social, and Political Change Stitch by Stitch*, Greer explains craft and activism as two “intrinsically related” concepts.<sup>10</sup> As Greer states in her 2011 essay, “Craftivist History” in Maria Elena Buszek's edited volume *Extra/Ordinary: Craft and Contemporary Art*, craftivism is in its most basic form “craft + activism.”<sup>11</sup> It is also broadly understood as any type of craft that is inspired by politics or is made in the effort to influence social change. This is how craftivism will be understood within the context of my thesis and it is a very broad interpretation that can include craft as activism or craft used in or as activist demonstrations. It also has the potential to take place in any area of the world and exist as a physically small or large gesture.<sup>12</sup> One of the most well-known craftivist demonstrations, for example, was orchestrated by artist Marianne Jorgensen who, in Copenhagen in 2006, “organized a collaborative project to make a bright pink tea cozy for a military tank... contrasting the weaponry with the familiarity and safety of the knitted wool.”<sup>13</sup>

This particular work is frequently cited in both academic literature and popular

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<sup>9</sup> Betsy Greer, “Craftivist History,” in *Extra/Ordinary: Craft and Contemporary Art*, ed. Maria Elena Buszek (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2011), 176.

<sup>10</sup> Greer, “Craftivist History,” 178.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 178.

<sup>12</sup> Much of the research that has already been conducted on craftivism paints a picture of a form of activism that is primarily Eurocentric, privileged, and Western. However, the lack of feminist critique in much of the craftivist literature has resulted in analyses that make no connections between gender, race, and class within craftivism. My examination of craftivism will seek to better understand this. The geography of craftivism will be explained further in the methodology section of this proposal.

<sup>13</sup> Robertson, 196.

media.<sup>14</sup> The image of the pink tank was featured on the cover of *Extra/Ordinary: Craft and Contemporary Art*, one of the most referenced anthologies on contemporary craft. The tank cozy is generally referred to as an example of “yarn bombing,” (also called knit or crochet graffiti), an act that is frequently categorized as craftivism.<sup>15</sup> This practice of knitting “cozies” for tanks, telephone poles, barbed wire fences, bicycles, and trees builds a new kind of urban landscape by creating a contrast between the warmth of knitted objects and the harshness of the city’s manufactured environment.<sup>16</sup>

Books such as *Yarn Bombing: The Art of Crochet and Knit Graffiti* by Mandy Moore and Leanne Prain use bright and colourful images to explore the various ways that yarn bombing has been used to re-imagine urban landscapes. The book also includes patterns, instructions and tips for people who want to participate in yarn bombing. Other academic articles – such as Ruth Scheuing's 2010 “Urban Textiles: From Yarn Bombing to Crochet Ivy Chains” and Ele Carpenter's 2010 piece entitled, “Activist Tendencies in Craft” – explore yarn bombing from an academic perspective by focusing on the “political claims” of yarn bombing and radical crafting. While both of these articles do an excellent job of reviewing and defining yarn bombing, Carpenter, Scheuing, and Moore and Prain merely touch upon the social and political implications of craftivism. My thesis takes this work much further, foregrounding gender and privilege as integral to understanding the broader social context of craftivism and yarn bombing.

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<sup>14</sup> The image of the Pink Tank has been utilized by author’s Beth Ann Pentney, Maria Elaina Buszek, Kirsty Robertson, Anthea Black, and Nicole Burisch.

<sup>15</sup> Mandy Moore and Leanne Prain, *Yarn Bombing*, 19.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.



One famous example of craftivism that has a clear political agenda is “The AIDS quilt”. This ongoing demonstration, entitled “The NAMES project AIDS,” was founded by Cleve Jones in 1987. He used the imagery of a quilt as a memorial to remember those who have died of AIDS and HIV. The project still continues to this day and has become so large that it is nearly impossible to display in one place.<sup>17</sup>

The intention behind the project is to bring people together to emphasize the breadth and impact of AIDS<sup>18</sup> by presenting quilt squares that have been made by those with the disease and those directly affected by it.<sup>19</sup> The AIDS quilt continues to be displayed and has been written about extensively; some of these articles include Peter S. Hawkin's 1993, “Naming Names: The Art of Memory and The NAMES Project AIDS Quilt,” as well as the 1996 article, “Patches of Grief and Rage: Visitor Responses to the NAMES Project AIDS Memorial Quilt” by Jacqueline Lewis and Michael R. Fraser. Both articles explore the significance of the quilt from the perspective of sociologists while politicizing fibre craft from a perspective that is not solely based in art history. This makes them some of the most relevant examples of research on craftivism in relation to my thesis.

These examples of fibre-based craftivism illustrate only a few of the many ways that this type of activism can be implemented. While craftivism can, theoretically, be executed by means of wood, clay, or glass for example, my thesis will specifically focus

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<sup>17</sup> Peter S. Hawkins, “Naming Names: The art of Memory and The NAMES Project AIDS Quilt,” *Critical Inquiry*, 19, no. 4 (Summer 1993): 755. vol. 19, no 4 (Summer 1993): 755.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

on the use of fibre within craftivism. As stated in my introduction, I have chosen to focus on fibre because of its popularity and accessibility, as well as its historical connection to women. In her 2010 article “Join the Knitting Revolution!: Third-wave Feminist Magazines and the Politics of Domesticity,” Elizabeth Groeneveld quotes Jean Railla, a self-proclaimed “craftster,”<sup>20</sup> as saying, “[crafting] is our history, and dismissing it only doubles the injustice already done to women who didn't have any choice but to be domestic in the first place.”<sup>21</sup> With this in mind, it is important to remember that the relationship between gender, feminism, and craft is very complex.

### **Fibre Art**

While craftivism is a colourful, spontaneous, hands-on activity that can in theory be taken up by anyone, understanding its connection to the more formal category of fibre art is important. Craftivism is most frequently manifested as some kind of fibre action, whether it is knitting, crochet, quilting, or any other kind of work with textiles. It is important, however, to remember that not all craftivism is fibre art and not all craftivists are fibre artists. The same is true in reverse: not all fibre art is craftivist, and not all fibre artists are craftivists. Many scholars have explored the class connection between craft, fibre, and identity. One of the earliest feminist examples was Rozsika Parker's 1981, *The Subversive Stitch*. In it, she argues that it was the easy access women had to the needle

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<sup>20</sup> The term “craftster” is frequently used and was popularized by the website <http://www.craftster.org>. The term is based on the amalgamation of the words “craft” and “hipster”.

<sup>21</sup> Elizabeth Groeneveld, “Join the Knitting Revolution!: Third-Wave Feminist Magazines and the politics of Domesticity,” *The Canadian Review of American Studies*, 44, no. 2 (2010): 259.

arts that added to their use as political tools. For example, women of the sixteenth century embroidered the images of biblical heroines on bible covers, bookmarks, and cushions.<sup>22</sup> These images often featured women in violent and powerful positions and the embroidered pictures were “a reflection of women’s resistance and resignation to the imposition of rigid sex-role differentiation.”<sup>23</sup> However, the work by these women is often considered “amateur” and, while historically significant, has not always been valued as rebellious or political “art.” The terminology of “artist” versus “craftivist” is bound up in historic and cultural meanings – a distinction which will be explored later in my thesis. Now I will focus on explaining the cultural meanings behind “fibre” and what it means to work with these materials.

Elissa Auther, a curator and theorist, documents the importance of fibre art in her 2010 book, *String Felt Thread*. In her work she describes fibre art as follows:

Textile-based objects... since the early 1970s have been encompassed by the term fibre art. Such objects include, but are not limited to; woven wall hangings or tapestries, objects sewn, quilted, embroidered, or beaded; hand dyed fabrics; basketry; and a wide array of three-dimensional objects produced in off-loom, or non-woven, techniques such as braiding, coiling, knotting, netting, linking, looping, twining, and wrapping.<sup>24</sup>

This description of fibre art is broad. Anyone who participates in the practice of

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<sup>22</sup> Parker, *Subversive Stitch*, 97.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Elissa Auther, *String Felt Thread: The Hierarchy of Craft in American Art* (Minneapolis, MN: U of Minnesota Press, 2002), 7.

manipulating fibre could potentially be referred to as a “fibre artist”. However, in most instances the term “fibre artist” is reserved for those who are professional artists making their living through the practice of fibre art. This brings forth an important distinction: while “fibre artist” is a term used to describe a professional artist, it does not imply that their work cannot simultaneously be thought of as “craftivist.” In other words, a professional artist can make work that is politically meaningful and considered a form of activism. There is some resistance to the terms “craftivist” and “craftivism” in the art world, because it is believed that this language denotes amateurism or a collective activity<sup>25</sup>. However, it is important to note that this feeling is not universal.

Amateurism, an important concept within the field of craft, is explored throughout Glenn Adamson's 2010 canonical anthology on craft entitled, *The Craft Reader*. One key essay written by Lucy Lippard in 1978 is called “Making Something From Nothing: Toward a Definition of Women’s ‘Hobby Art’.” In it she discusses the assumptions that differentiate “art” from “hobby art.”<sup>26</sup> She also explores how and when fibre art becomes as culturally important as other kinds of art that are typically more privileged, such as painting.<sup>27</sup> Even within fibre art there exists a dichotomy that separates professionalism and amateurism. There is still an assumption that fibre art is more serious and meaningful than fibre-craft.<sup>28</sup> This is part of the historical art-craft divide that craftivists continue to

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<sup>25</sup> Glenn Adamson, *Thinking Through Craft* (New York: Berg, 2007).

<sup>26</sup> Lucy Lippard, “Making Something from Nothing (Toward a Definition of Women's 'Hobby Art')” in *The Craft Reader*, ed. Glenn Adamson (New York: Berg Publishers, 2010) 490.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid*, 490.

<sup>28</sup> Auther, *String Felt Thread*, 19.

tackle throughout their work.

### **Focusing on Fibre**

I have deliberately chosen to focus on fibre both because of the art form's connections to women and also because it is one of the most popular manifestations of craft activism. The majority of the people who practice craftivism are women, and fibre is deeply rooted in a history that is both culturally and socially connected to women's everyday lives and experiences. Other forms of craft such as pottery, metal, wood, and glass are more frequently associated with men.<sup>29</sup> In Elizabeth Wayland Barber's 1995 seminal text entitled, *Women's Work: The First 20,000 Years; Women, Cloth and Society in Early Times*, Barber explains that women have been responsible for fibre production since prehistoric times.<sup>30</sup> Her study, which primarily uses secondary sources such as ancient myths and texts, explores women's societal roles as the producers of cloth.<sup>31</sup> In other words, women have been involved in the production of fibre for thousands of years – a fact which is all too often forgotten in the formal documentation of women's history.<sup>32</sup>

As Elissa Auther explains, fibre art is “affected by (its) near universal association with women, femininity, and domesticity.”<sup>33</sup> This is true both in the world of professional

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<sup>29</sup> More Information on gendered participation in craft mediums can be found on the following website, [economicoptions.org](http://economicoptions.org), [www.economicoptions.org/WVCODAreportcomplete.doc](http://www.economicoptions.org/WVCODAreportcomplete.doc) (accessed 12 May 2013).

<sup>30</sup> Elizabeth Wayland Barber, “*Women's Work: The First 20,000 Years*” (New York: Norton, 1994) 53.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 53.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 53.

<sup>33</sup> Auther, *String Felt Thread*, 21.

fibre art and in popular culture where fibre craft is traditionally associated with older women and an old fashioned form of domesticity. For these reasons – both cultural and historical – my research will be focused specifically on fibre. As Parker emphasizes, the gender of the artist is significant.<sup>34</sup> It is important to keep in mind women’s traditional role in the domestic sphere. The “housewife” is key to understanding fibre art, while at the same time we must be aware that this kind of dichotomous sexual division of labour has never been a universal experience. From an art-historical perspective, it is also important to understand how the role of the “housewife” plays into the Arts and Crafts Movement – a period of time that has been attributed with the popularization of DIY and craft as we know and understand it today.

### **The Arts and Crafts Movement**

England's Arts and Crafts movement occurred during the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries.<sup>35</sup> The Arts and Crafts movement is most often assumed to be the theoretical root for the DIY movement that began its rise in popularity after the Second World War.<sup>36</sup> DIY, or Do-It-Yourself, is generally considered to be a reference to “home improvement activity.”<sup>37</sup> Only recently in the post-punk movement was this terminology applied to

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<sup>34</sup> Parker, *The Subversive Stitch*, 123.

<sup>35</sup> Wendy Kaplan and Elizabeth Cummings, “Arts and Crafts Movement,” 62

<sup>36</sup> Andrew Jackson, “Men Who Make: The “Flow” of the Amateur Designer/Maker,” in *Extra/Ordinary: Craft and Contemporary Art*, ed. Maria Elena Buszek (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2011), 260.

<sup>37</sup> Nicole Dawkins, “Do-It-Yourself: the precarious work and postfeminist politics in handmaking in Detroit,” *Utopian Studies* 22, no. 2 (2011): 262.

“domestic” crafts usually associated with “home-making” instead of “home building.”<sup>38</sup> This movement is closely tied to industrialization, acting as an early revolt against machine made goods. With an increase in mechanization and the new face of commerce, transportation, and factory production in England, many felt a disconnect between their lives and their belongings.<sup>39</sup> The Arts and Crafts movement rose out of this discontent.<sup>40</sup> Its leaders were a small group of well-educated designers, architects, crafts people, and scholars. Those involved in the movement felt strongly that goods should be well made, well designed, and produced locally. William Morris (1834-1896) is considered the most influential and well-known member of The Arts and Crafts movement.<sup>41</sup> While making an effort to ensure that art should exist to better the lives of the common people he promoted socialism and its connection to hand made goods.<sup>42</sup> Morris, opposed to the inequalities brought about by the industrial revolution, writes in 1888: “We are right to long for intelligent handicraft to come back to the world which it once made tolerable amidst war and turmoil and uncertainty of life.”<sup>43</sup> Morris, a devout socialist, wanted to

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<sup>38</sup> Jackson's paper highlights the many ways that the DIY movement has been gendered since its beginning. Women were encouraged to participate in home-making such as cooking, fibre crafts such as knitting, and other decorative projects. Men on the other hand were encouraged to partake in building and physical labour.

<sup>39</sup> Gualtieri, *DIY & Open Source Principles in Practice*, 19.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

<sup>42</sup> William Morris, “The Revival of Handicraft,” in *The Craft Reader*, ed. Glenn Adamson (New York: Canadian Scholar's Press, 2003), 153.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 153

make beautiful art accessible to all.<sup>44</sup>

While William Morris's Arts and Crafts movement emphasized the importance of the handmade – theoretically including women's needlework and fibre craft like knitting, embroidery, weaving, lacework, and other textile crafts – the movement “maintained an entirely traditional sexual division of labour.”<sup>45</sup> This division remained because men continued to be the primary designers and notable makers during this time and the women involved in the movement were secondary to them. During the Arts and Crafts movement the majority of women were simply the executors of the male designs for embroidery and textiles.<sup>46</sup> There is excellent feminist literature on this disparity in works like Linda Parry's, *William Morris* written in 1996, Janice Helland's, “British and Irish Home Arts and Industries, 1880-1914: Marketing Craft, Making Fashion” written in 2007, and Anthea Callen's 1979 book, *Angel in the Studio: Women in the Arts and Crafts Movement 1870-1914*. While appreciated by many artists as beautiful, women's fibre art was still relegated to the realm of the feminine.

As Helland, Callen, and Parry highlight, women's work was usually taken less seriously than the movement's other craft methods such as pottery, glasswork, and bookmaking – all domains of craft that have historically been dominated by men.<sup>47</sup> Rozsika Parker calls this the paradox of the movement; while Morris promoted women's

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 153.

<sup>45</sup> Rozsika Parker, *The Subversive Stitch: Embroidery and the Making of the Feminine* (London: Women's Press, 1984), 180.

<sup>46</sup> Linda Parry, *William Morris* (New York: Abrams, 1996), 16.

<sup>47</sup> Parker, *The Subversive Stitch*, 182.



involvement, at the same time he encouraged female fibre artists to produce work that was “‘sedulously elegant’, refined, natural, naive, and quaint.”<sup>48</sup> Parker and Callen both point out that while it is difficult to refute the importance of the Arts and Crafts movement as one that glorified craft makers, it most often dealt with only a specific type of craft which glorified male designers at the expense of the female crafters who executed their designs.

Parker also emphasizes that another one of the movement's “‘great paradoxes’”<sup>49</sup> is that while its ideal socialist agenda was to make art accessible to all consumers, the reality was that handmade goods were often unavoidably expensive.<sup>50</sup> In his 1888 essay entitled “The Revival of Handicraft,” William Morris himself said that he hated “‘spending [his] life ministering to the swinish luxury of the rich.’”<sup>51</sup> As Ruth James explains in “Socialist By Design” written in 1997, while the ideology of the movement was well intended, its proponents struggled with the low-cost and convenience of machine made goods, just as many aspects of craft do today.<sup>52</sup> Despite these paradoxes, the legacy of the Arts and Crafts movement is still important. As Gualtieri explains in *DIY & Open Source Principles in Practice*:

The founders of the movement challenged the notion of progress; they did not equate mechanization, efficiency, and mass production with improvement. They asked consumers to consider the entire life

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Morris, “The Revival of Handicraft,” 155.

<sup>52</sup> Ruth James, “Socialist by Design,” *Socialist Review*, no.196 (1997), 3.

cycle of an object – what it was made from, where it came from, who made it, and how it lives in the world after it is made.<sup>53</sup>

As the literature suggests, the Arts and Crafts movement was elitist and highly gendered. However, the sentiment of its founders was one that many people consider quite modern and even revolutionary, anticipating the contemporary political goals of environmentalists, punks, craftivists, and feminists of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.<sup>54</sup>

### **Femininity and Craft as Women's History**

As I touched upon earlier in the literature review, the relationship between women, feminism, and craft is often overlooked in Craft Studies. Rozsika Parker was one of the first to tackle this from a fibre artist's perspective in her 1984 book *The Subversive Stitch*. Her book, which focused specifically on the history of embroidery, emphasized how fibre craft is important because it both celebrates and problematizes women's relationship to art and femininity. In the forward to her canonical text, she writes that “the art of embroidery has been the means of educating women into the feminine ideal and of proving that they have attained it, but it has also provided a weapon of resistance to the constraints of femininity.”<sup>55</sup>

It is important to point out that fibre art is not inherently gendered or sexed.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> Gualtieri, *DIY & Open Source Principles in Practice*, 22.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> Parker, *The Subversive Stitch*, 68.

<sup>56</sup> Robert Rutt, *A History of Hand Knitting* (Colorado: Interweave Press, 1987), 157.

During the 20th century it was unusual for lower class men to knit, especially in Britain,<sup>57</sup> yet despite this men and boys from upper classes were still taught knitting and other needle crafts.<sup>58</sup> Fibre art is now primarily associated with women, and because of this fibre art – knitting, crochet, quilting, and embroidery in particular – is no longer a gender-neutral practice. In Joanne Turney’s 2009 book, *The Culture of Knitting*, she refers to knitting as “a gendered pursuit”<sup>59</sup> and suggests that fibre craft is still “firmly gendered in the popular psyche”<sup>60</sup> because of its associations with ornamentation, domesticity, and the home.

Historically, the literature has pointed to the fact that fibre craft has been gendered, segregated, and subsequently devalued as “women’s work”<sup>61</sup> while also becoming “synonymous with femininity.”<sup>62</sup> The association with “the feminine” and unpaid labour push craft into an even more marginalized position within the broader spheres of craft and art.<sup>63</sup> This has strained the relationship between feminism and fibre art, causing many feminists during the Second-wave to understand “amateur” crafting as

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<sup>57</sup> Certain oral histories suggest that men in the Maritimes may have been the first crocheters – using a tool similar to a crochet hook, they created and repaired their own fishing nets and traps. Fishermen also made mittens as documented in the book *Flying Geese and Partridge Feet: More Mittens from Up North and Down East* by Robin Hansen and Janetta Dexter. Also noted in this book are the knitting practices of male loggers in Maine, U.S. who knit out of necessity and also for leisure throughout the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Their signature pattern, “Shagged Loggers Mittens”, is similar to classic styles found in Newfoundland. Examples of these mittens can be found in the Maine State museum.

<sup>58</sup> Rutt, *A History of Hand Knitting*, 157.

<sup>59</sup> Joanne Turney, *The Culture of Knitting* (New York: Berg Publishers, 2009), 8.

<sup>60</sup> Turney, *The Culture of Knitting*, 8.

<sup>61</sup> Parker and Pollock, *Old Misstresses*, 59.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 59.

<sup>63</sup> Parker and Pollock, *Old Misstresses*, 60.

a negative result of domesticity.<sup>64</sup> Lippard explains in her 1978 essay that some Second-wave feminists actually criticized crafting and craft as apolitical, conservative, and mundane.<sup>65</sup> Turney also states that “from a rather general standpoint, Second-wave feminism views knitting as a sign of women’s oppression.”<sup>66</sup> Instead of seeing the creativity and artistry behind domestic activities and fibre art, many feminists felt that women’s participation in fibre craft was evidence that they were subscribing to a kind of mandatory “feminine sensibility”<sup>67</sup> – or, to put it in a more modern sense, they were subscribing to a feminine “ideal.” In fact, some people including feminists still see knitting and its recent resurgence as a “return to female domesticity.”<sup>68</sup>

However, Second-wave artists like Joyce Wieland, Judy Chicago, and Mariam Schapiro<sup>69</sup> all emphasized the importance of textile work as art.<sup>70</sup> These women brought their conceptual textile art into gallery and museum spaces and “reclaimed” the artistry behind fibre art as one that is valid and worthy of the status of art. The connection between fibre craft and women’s history is not simple, and as Beth Ann Pentney notes, it

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 61.

<sup>65</sup> Lucy Lippard, “Making Something from Nothing (Toward a Definition of Women's 'Hobby Art')” in *The Craft Reader*, ed. Glenn Adamson (New York: Berg Publishers, 2010).

<sup>66</sup> Turney, *The Culture of Knitting*, 9.

<sup>67</sup> Parker and Pollock, *Old Mistresses*, 160.

<sup>68</sup> Catherine Redfern and Kristin Aune, *Reclaiming the F Word: The New Feminist Movement* (New York: Zed Books, 2010), 194.

<sup>69</sup> Karen E. Peterson, “How the Ordinary Becomes Extraordinary: The Modern Eye and the Quilt as Art Form,” in *Extra/Ordinary: Craft and Contemporary Art*, ed. Maria Elena Buszek (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2011), 110.

<sup>70</sup> Robertson, “Rebellious Doilies and Subversive Stitches,” 185.

is “culturally and regionally specific and always enmeshed in issues of gender, class, and economics.”<sup>71</sup> Craftivism is an important aspect of women's history, and like the formal study of art, needs a feminist perspective that has so far been left out of craftivist literature.

### **The Dichotomies of Craft**

While the Arts and Crafts movement helped to elevate craft to a new realm of respect within the world of professional art, the movement emphasized professionally made items designed by men. As Lucy Lippard notes in her 1978 essay, “Making Something From Nothing: Toward a Definition of Women’s ‘Hobby Art’,” men who participate in craft, like those of the Arts and Crafts movement, tend to “raise the sphere (of craft) rather than lower the man.”<sup>72</sup> There remain three important gendered distinctions that exist in the form of dichotomies within craft: art versus craft, amateur versus professional, and the process versus the product. After these three dichotomies have been discussed I will explain why these are integral to understanding my thesis subject and research questions.

### **Art Versus Craft**

There has been an ongoing debate in artistic communities regarding the separation of “art” and “craft” that is essential to understanding the history of craft, craftivism, and

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<sup>71</sup> Beth Anne Pentney, “Feminism, Activism, and Knitting: Are the Arts a Viable Mode for Feminist Political Action,” in *thirdspace: a journal of feminist theory & culture*, 8, no.1 (2008) 9.

<sup>72</sup> Lippard, “Making Something from Nothing,” 488.

womens' role in this debate. Historically, this debate was most heated during the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, and while many artists and craftspeople remain hopeful that the debate is dead, it is in fact very much alive today. Lucy Lippard's essay is still considered one of the most important explorations of gender in high-art and craft. In this essay she explains the ways that craft has historically failed to be considered "fine art."<sup>73</sup> She brings forth several queries as to why this distinction exists and concludes that the dichotomy created between "high art" and craft is primarily rooted in both gender and class.<sup>74</sup> She writes:

Much has been made of the need to erase false distinctions between art and craft, "fine" art and the "minor" arts, "high" art and "low" art – distinctions that particularly affect women's art. But there are also "high" crafts and "low" ones, and although women wield more power in the crafts world than in the fine art world, the same problems plague both. The crafts need only one more step up the aesthetic and financial respectability ladder and they will be headed for the craft museums instead of for people's homes.<sup>75</sup>

Lippard emphasizes that "good taste"<sup>76</sup> is often correlated with the most expensive works of art and what goes on display in museums.<sup>77</sup> For this reason, the hobby artists who do not have access to expensive materials or the skill set to conceptualize their makings will never make work that will easily be considered "art."<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 484.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., 484.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., 484.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid., 484.

<sup>77</sup> Lippard, "Making Something from Nothing," 489.

<sup>78</sup> A new type of craft called "sloppy craft" is breaking down the idea that handcraft is not art. The term,

In many ways there is a conflict within the fibre art world that has forced many makers to aim towards professionalism and the adoption of the term “fibre art” instead of “craft” to identify their work. Lippard also acknowledges the fact that during the Second-wave of feminism many women who made art using fibre were segregated from other artists. For example, many women who made fibre sculptures did so as a conscious effort to honour women’s traditional arts. Their work was frequently categorized as secondary to the “fine art” that was being produced by male sculptors using more traditional sculpting materials like clay, wood, or stone.<sup>79</sup> And yet when women did work in more traditional “fine art” mediums and were recognized for their success, these women were still considered “either inferior or just freakishly amazing”<sup>80</sup> compared to their male peers. It has been historically difficult for craft to be seen or compared to “fine art” as Bruce Metcalf explains in his seminal piece “Replacing the Myth of Modernism.” He argues that those who claim that the conflict between art and craft is over are wrong.<sup>81</sup> His essay’s clearly stated thesis argues that art and craft remain separate and that there are both benefits and detriments to this reality.<sup>82</sup> While his analysis does not acknowledge craft as a gendered pursuit, he recognizes the importance that craft remains separate from

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coined by Anne Wilson, has been described by Glenn Adamson as “unkempt” and “post-disciplinary.” This new and messy art form deconstructs the dichotomies of craft, making it an important point for discussion and controversy in the world of art.

<sup>79</sup> Lippard, “Making Something from Nothing,” 488.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, 488.

<sup>81</sup> Bruce Metcalf, “Replacing the Myth of Modernism,” in *NeoCraft: Modernity and the Crafts* ed. Sandra Alfoldy (Halifax: NSCAD University Press, 2007), 7.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

art so that it has the potential to “develop its own theory about the meaning of handmade objects in this late industrial era”<sup>83</sup>.

### **Amateur Versus Professional**

As I briefly touched upon in the introduction of this literature review, there have been many people who identify as fibre artists while rejecting the label “craftivist.” The two terms, while not inherently distinct, can be seen as such because one suggests amateurism, and the other, professionalism.<sup>84</sup> This is not only true today, but has been true historically when it comes to craft's general role in the art world. Craft theorist Elissa Auther states that “given women's traditional domestic role, it is not surprising that the housewife is a key figure in critical considerations of fibre art, where she functions as a signifier for amateurism and lack of creativity.”<sup>85</sup> Auther emphasizes the significance of gender as integral to understanding why craft is considered merely a hobby.<sup>86</sup> Some craft practitioners still work to maintain the boundary between art and craft, good taste and bad taste, and amateurism and professionalism to maintain their status within the craft world. However, it is important to remember that these distinctions are rooted in deep structures of inequality, including those of gender, class, and race. As I have highlighted, these dichotomies have been well researched but have not yet been fully explored within

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<sup>83</sup> Ibid., 7.

<sup>84</sup> These two distinctions can indicate two very different categories for artists – one suggests passive involvement (amateur) while the other suggests full time engagement (professional).

<sup>85</sup> Auther, *String Felt Thread*, 23.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid., 23.



craftivist literature.

### **Process Versus Product**

Understanding process and product is also closely related to understanding the above dichotomies. It is important that we are mindful that a physical craft product is always the result of some kind of process. Anthea Black and Nicole Burisch explain why this is significant in their 2011 essay “Craft Hard Die Free: Radical Curatorial Strategies for Craftivism.” They argue that the rise of craftivism presents a unique emphasis on a “politically engaged craft practice” which makes people look at craft in a different way.<sup>87</sup> There has been a change in modern craft that “shifts emphasis away” from the perfection of an end product and instead focuses on a “political” or “conceptual” focus.<sup>88</sup> They highlight the ways that this shift has “made room for reconsideration of crafts(wo)manship, performativity, mindfulness, tacit knowledge, skill sharing, DIY, anti-capitalism, and activism.”<sup>89</sup> Here Black and Burisch describe the ways that craftivism can become part of an analysis that goes beyond the product of craft, shifting focus instead on its production.

However, the product or craft-object of craftivism is still tied up in notions of professionalism and understandings of fine art because that is what is exhibited

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<sup>87</sup> Anthea Black and Nicole Burisch, “Craft Hard Die Free: Radical Curatorial Strategies for Craftivism,” in *Extra/Ordinary: Craft and Contemporary Art*, ed. Maria Elena Buszek (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2011), 210.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, 210.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, 211.

primarily.<sup>90</sup> Unlike the work usually made by professional craft producers, craftivist work is not usually of high monetary value. In other words, most of what falls into the category of craftivism is not for sale. Craftivism can be found anywhere: in public, in homes, and of course, on the Internet. Its significance can be found in a physical end product or in the making of the product itself. So while fibre art has found its home in the gallery, craftivism does not have one singular home. It is nomadic, existing in protests and studios, in living rooms and on street corners, at art fairs and in our minds.<sup>91</sup> This one of the key factors which has allowed craftivism to remain open for interpretation and re-invention.

Why are these dichotomies important to consider? It is not only because they are crucial to the understanding of both craft and women's place in the art world, but also because craftivism actively defies these distinctions. It is neither amateur nor professional, nor is it simply art or simply craft; instead it is firmly rooted in a conceptual framework of art, expression, and activism. Therefore, to understand craftivism and what it might mean to adopt a craftivist identity, as my research questions prompt, understanding these dichotomies is essential. Some makers, curators, and critics will identify with the term craftivist, and others will not. But in order to understand why someone may or may not choose to label their work as craftivist, one must grasp how the artist understands these categories and how they position themselves and their work in

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<sup>90</sup> Ibid., 211.

<sup>91</sup> It is apparent that some forms of craftivism are not only being institutionalized by their presence in galleries, but also appropriated through their use by police forces and other structural organizations. These concepts will be explored later on in the thesis.

relation to them. A self-proclaimed fibre artist, for example, may want to be considered professional and may want his or her work in galleries where the focus remains on the product. This may be true even if many others label their work as craftivist or as having craftivist inclinations. The majority of craftivist work does not end up in the gallery, and while this is not exclusively true, it can be assumed that craftivism is a diverse art form with a broad range that expands and changes. Understanding these established dichotomies as being specific to particular identities within the art world is essential to understanding the artistic identities found within craftivist communities.

### **The Resurgence of Craft**

Within the past ten years fibre craft has seen an incredible rise in popularity, particularly in the case of knitting. There is a strong connection between craftivism and knitting – perhaps more than with any other craft practice – due in part to its drastic increase in popularity.<sup>92</sup> It is undeniable that knitting is the most popular craft technique used within craftivism.<sup>93</sup> The Craft Yarn Council of America estimates that 36% of American women knit or crochet.<sup>94</sup> The organization also reports that the number of people under the age of forty-five who are learning to knit had doubled between 1997 and 2002.<sup>95</sup> These statistics make it clear that more and more young people are taking up this

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<sup>92</sup> Groeneveld, “Join the Knitting Revolution,” 263.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, 263.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, 263.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*, 263.

particular form of fibre arts practice. The affordability of supplies as well the skills, which are easily attainable from older generations or online, have made knitting very popular.

This has a huge economic effect, as well. The National Needle Arts Association estimates that North American knitters collectively spend \$629,000,000 per year on knitting supplies.<sup>96</sup> The Craft Organization Development Association estimates that artisanal makers spend over twenty billion dollars on craft supplies annually.<sup>97</sup>

Despite fibre craft's stereotypical image as strictly belonging to the realm of mature women, it is women under the age of forty-five who are flocking towards the craft.<sup>98</sup> The Craft Yarn Council of America has stated that shortly after the turn of the millennium, the number of women under the age of forty-five who knew how to knit had doubled within five years.<sup>99</sup> This means that in 2002, 18% of young American women were knitters.<sup>100</sup> With a growing online presence through pattern and community building websites such as [www.ravelry.com](http://www.ravelry.com), independent selling websites such as [www.etsy.com](http://www.etsy.com),<sup>101</sup> as well as an increasing public visibility,<sup>102</sup> the popularity of knitting

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<sup>96</sup> The National NeedleArts Association. *The State of Speciality NeedleArts 2010: Executive Summary*. Retrieved 15 March 2012 from: <[www.tnna.org/resource/resmgr/pdf/2010reportssummary9-23.pdf](http://www.tnna.org/resource/resmgr/pdf/2010reportssummary9-23.pdf)>.

<sup>97</sup> Craft Organization Development Association. *CODA Review 2011: Craft Artists, Income and the US Economy*. Retrieved 23 November 2012 from: <[www.codacraft.org/home/coda-review-2011](http://www.codacraft.org/home/coda-review-2011)>.

<sup>98</sup> Groeneveld, "Join the Knitting Revolution," 263.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid.

<sup>101</sup> Stella Minahan and Julie Wilfram Cox, "Stitch'nBitch: Cyberfeminism, a Third Place and the New Materiality," *Journal of Material Culture*, 12, no. 1 (2007).

<sup>102</sup> Wendy Parkins, "Celebrity Knitting and the Temporality of Postmodernity," *Fashion Theory: The Journal of Dress, Body & Culture*, 8, no. 4 (2004).

and other closely related fibre arts are clearly on the rise. Millions of people in North America and Europe have noticed that “over the last decade an informal and loosely knit network of persons, discourses, events, practices, and real and virtual spaces has emerged around the terms [sic] *crafting*, *making*, *do-it-yourself*, and *handmade*.”<sup>103</sup> These networks have become increasingly visible, and in turn many of the activities that they represent such as knitting, crochet, quilting, gardening, and home decor have been made even more visible as well.<sup>104</sup>

Scholars agree that activities such as embroidery, knitting, crocheting, and weaving are becoming popular for multiple reasons. One is the increased availability of patterns and sales websites made available online,<sup>105</sup> as well as the visibility of projects themselves through public crafting<sup>106</sup> and the increasing popularity of knitting circles and groups.<sup>107</sup> It is also a way to fight materialism and practice environmentalism<sup>108</sup> while at the same time being ironic, hip, quirky and fun.<sup>109</sup> Historically, craft has had an important place in the lives of women. The accessibility and affordability of craft has made craft activism through fibre an essential means of articulating important messages about

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<sup>103</sup> Dawkins, “Do-It-Yourself,” 262.

<sup>104</sup> Jane Hollows, “Can I Go Home Yet? Feminism, Post-feminism and Domesticity,” in *Feminism in Popular Culture*, eds. Joanne Hollows and Rachel Moseley (Oxford: Berg, 2006), 98.

<sup>105</sup> Pentney, “Feminism, Activism, and Knitting”.

<sup>106</sup> Bratich and Brush, “Fabricating Activism”.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid.

<sup>108</sup> Greer, “Craftivist History”.

<sup>109</sup> Groeneveld, “Join the Knitting Revolution,” 259-277.

feminism, environmentalism, and anti-capitalism.<sup>110</sup> The popularity of fibre craft is without a doubt increasing and it is certainly not because women have to do it, it is because they deliberately choose to.<sup>111</sup>

### **“Craftivism”: An Overview of Feminism, Writing and Practice**

Women in particular have committed themselves to the “reclamation of domestic femininity.”<sup>112</sup> Debbie Stoller, editor of Third-wave feminist magazine *BUST*, writes that “there were plenty of reasons to promote DIY in our magazine, and the first and foremost of these was directly tied to our feminist roots.”<sup>113</sup> However, she also argues that the time was right for “young feminists to reclaim the domestic skills our foremothers had rejected.”<sup>114</sup> While historically we can see that many Second-wave feminists did not reject domesticity, some in fact did, and the idea of a radical pursuit for young women is now part of the discourse of modern craft.<sup>115</sup> Radicalizing craft has made the conception of craftivism a possibility.<sup>116</sup> In many ways, craftivism is an important part of this “handmade revolution”<sup>117</sup> and is a physical manifestation of feminist political values.<sup>118</sup>

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<sup>110</sup> Gualtieri, *DIY & Open Source Principles in Practice*, 22.

<sup>111</sup> Robertson, “Rebellious Doilies and Subversive Stitches,” 176.

<sup>112</sup> Greer, *Knitting for Good*, 15.

<sup>113</sup> Debbie Stoller, *The Bust DIY Guide To Life: Making Your Way Through Everyday* (New York: Abrams, 2011), 8.

<sup>114</sup> Stoller, *The Bust DIY Guide To Life*, 8.

<sup>115</sup> Dawkins, “Do-It-Yourself”, 260.

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*, 265.

<sup>117</sup> The re-popularization of craft is often referred to as a “handmade revolution”.

Craft has a rich and interesting history that can be best understood by examining it through a gendered lens. However, this aspect of craft history has commonly been dismissed or even ignored. It really was not until Rozsika Parker wrote *The Subversive Stitch* (1987) and *Old Mistresses* (1981) with Griselda Pollock that craft was acknowledged as an important personal and social element of women's lives.<sup>119</sup> Parker recognized the radical artistic and social implications of both amateur and professional crafting, understanding that fibre art has the potential to be a visually moving and active art form. It is no wonder that years later Betsy Greer coined the term "craftivism" to describe the ways that craft is used in activism.<sup>120</sup> In her essay "Craftivist History" in *Extra/Ordinary: Craft and Contemporary Art*, Greer explains the inspiration behind the creation of the word craftivism and the complicated meaning it has acquired. She explains that the term has become more than just "craft + activism = craftivism."<sup>121</sup> She goes on to write that the contemporary meaning is "more akin to creativity plus activism. Or crafty activism. It was about using what you can to express your feelings outward in a visual manner without yelling or placard waving."<sup>122</sup> Other authors have described craftivism in different ways. Black and Bratich simply state that:

The rise of craftivism and other politically engaged crafting practices –

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<sup>118</sup> Robertson, "Rebellious Doilies and Subversive Stitches," 184.

<sup>119</sup> Ibid., 184.

<sup>120</sup> Greer, "Craftivist History," 176.

<sup>121</sup> Ibid., 180.

<sup>122</sup> Ibid., 183.

which value the radical potential of a particular craft activity rather than its finished end product – shifts traditional emphasis away from polished, professionally-made craft objects themselves and towards a political and conceptual focus positioning the deployment of the work involved in making them.<sup>123</sup>

Greer describes the term as one that “came about thanks to a few phenomenon occurring simultaneously, mainly the frustration at the rule of materialism, and the continuing quest for the unique, and the rise of the [sic] internet.”<sup>124</sup> Others have described craftivism in a similar way, pointing out that “many people see the act of creating something stitch by stitch with their own hands as a stand against mass-produced goods and corporate values.”<sup>125</sup> In this context, the act or process of crafting is understood as a form of activism.

Anthologies like *The Craft Reader* and *Extra/Ordinary Craft and Contemporary Art* touch on craftivism in theoretical and academic ways. Greer’s book *Knitting for Good: A Guide to Creating Personal, Social, and Political Change, Stitch by Stitch* is an important text in the world of craftivism. Hers is a perfect example of craftivist writing because it blends academia and popular culture, explaining that crafting itself can be understood as a political practice. A craftivist as well as theorist, Greer urges readers to interpret craft as a socially and environmentally conscious activity that could be a key part of anyone's political identity.

Several other books have also been published on the subject, including *Yarn*

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<sup>123</sup> Bratich and Brush, “Fabricating Activism,” 610.

<sup>124</sup> Greer, “Craftivist History,” 178.

<sup>125</sup> Mandy Moore and Leanne Prain, *Yarn Bombing*, 22.



*Bombing* (2009) by Mandy Moore and Leanne Prain, which documents instances of crochet and knit graffiti in urban landscapes. Today, it is not unusual to walk down city streets and see knitted bicycle cozies, crocheted blankets draped over trees, or lace doilies crocheted to fit the dimensions of a street lamp.

Faith Levine's book and documentary *Handmade Nation* (2008) also helped popularize craft. Levine features artists like Jenny Hart whose embroidery designs recreate tattoo and vintage inspired decals. Borrowing from Parker's terminology, she calls herself the Subversive Seamstress and has become one of the most popular crafters in the world.<sup>126</sup>

While Hart, Levine, Moore, and Prain all helped contextualize craft in popular culture, it is generally considered that Debbie Stoller's 2004 *Stitch and Bitch* series helped to popularize *and* politicize craft at the same time. As the editor of BUST magazine, Stoller is a Third-wave feminist icon who invites young women to join the knitting revolution. In her Third-wave feminist magazine she features a regular DIY section that politicizes craft to hip young urban women who have taken up fibre craft through the popularity of her books and magazines. Stoller's inclusion of craft within a feminist context has helped to shape craft as potentially political and subversive.<sup>127</sup> Stoller has become a widely acknowledged and self-proclaimed craftivist. Her magazine and commitment to craft and DIY have made her an important part of the popularization of craft as a form of activism. Redfern and Aune quote Debbie Stoller as saying:

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<sup>126</sup> Stoller, *The Bust DIY Guide To Life*, 8.

<sup>127</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

Why, dammit, wasn't knitting receiving as much respect as any other hobby? Why was it still so looked down on? It seemed to me that the main difference between knitting and, say, fishing or woodworking or basketball, was that knitting had traditionally been done by women...<sup>128</sup>

While some feminists see knitting and its recent resurgence as a “return to female domesticity,”<sup>129</sup> others see it as a conscientious and/or ironic act of defiance. As Catherine Redfern and Kristin Aune point out, even if fibre art is not inherently feminist, asserting the value of what is considered “traditionally feminine” can be.<sup>130</sup>

Despite the rise and resurgence of craft, as well as the popularity and visibility of craftivism, there has been little written directly on the subject, especially when it comes to understanding how it is being used by feminist activists. This thesis is a response to the limited literature that specifically relates to craftivism. It is a marginal subject in many ways and does not easily fit within either the study of craft or gender and women's studies. However, what I can denote from the literature that I have examined is that craftivism is deeply rooted in radicalism, political identity, and a commitment to a subversive aesthetic. Even though craftivism is a new concept it has already had a tremendous social cultural impact.

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<sup>128</sup> Redfern and Aune, *Reclaiming the F Word*, 194.

<sup>129</sup> Ibid.

<sup>130</sup> Ibid.

## Chapter Two: Theoretical Framework

Craft? Spit take. Craft is not art. Craft is skill based. Craft is sentimental. Craft has no theoretical rigour. Craft means that a (one must grudgingly admit) creative person has chosen to limit his or her expression to one medium – *one medium* – in a post-medium world where it's only the idea that is permitted to generate form.<sup>131</sup>

Douglas Coupland, “forward *on craft*” in *40 under 40: craft futures*

Using the terminology and definitions found in Third-wave feminist writing, my thesis argues that fibre craft has the potential to be a political endeavour regardless of its common perception as a mundane activity. By interpreting all participants involved in craftivism as “cultural producers,” regardless of their role in the process of making, my thesis shapes the analytical perspective that craft is always part of a communal/social process. My research focuses on the act of producing, rather than the art objects themselves. I acknowledge that race, class, gender, ability, et cetera. all play a role in the production of craft and the way that it is perceived and understood within craftivist communities. By interpreting the multiple perspectives involved in craft communities, my theoretical framework and methodology work towards developing an understanding of the motivation behind political crafting. To begin this chapter, I will explore theory at work in existing craftivist literature, which will also help to provide a context for the ways I formed the theoretical framework that guides my thesis.

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<sup>131</sup> Douglas Coupland, “foreward: on craft” in *40 under 40: Craft Futures*, eds. Nicholas R. Bell (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 8.

The quote I have chosen to introduce this chapter is from the “forward on craft,” from the *Renwick Museum* exhibition, “40 under 40: craft futures,” curated by Nicholas R. Bell to commemorate the Renwick Gallery’s 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary. This exhibition demonstrates that the “common thread”<sup>132</sup> that connects the producers of craft is not only a shared “philosophy for living differently in the modern world,”<sup>133</sup> but also a mutual commitment to humour and irony. This is demonstrated by Coupland’s quote; his tongue and cheek review of craft sets the tone for the show’s catalogue, specifically highlighting how the art/craft split is still prevalent today. Coupland states that “craft has no theoretical rigor,” and while this is intended to be read as a humorous piece, these allegations are in fact often made about craft. Whether it is those who make crafts, or those who love them, the discipline of craft studies has often been critiqued for having “no theoretical rigour.”<sup>134</sup> This thesis works to bring a theoretical rigour to the study of craftivism.

### **Introducing “Theoretical Rigour” in Craftivist Literature**

In the 2008 article, “Knit One, Stitch Two, Protest Three! Examining the Historical and Contemporary Politics of Crafting,” Trent S. Newmeyer uses a unique theoretical approach to craftivism. As one of the first academic articles to explore craftivism specifically, Newmeyer uses case study methodology to explore two cases of

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<sup>132</sup> Coupland, “foreward: on craft,” 8.

<sup>133</sup> Ibid.

<sup>134</sup> Trent S. Newmeyer, “Knit One, Stitch Two, Protest Three! Examining the Historical and Contemporary Politics of Crafting,” in *Leisure/Loisir*, 32, no. 2 (2008), 437.

craft activism.<sup>135</sup> The first case he studies is The Aids Memorial Quilt, while the second approaches the notion of craftivism itself.<sup>136</sup> In the section of his essay entitled “Developing a Theory of Craftiness,” Newmeyer explains the difficulty in creating a comprehensive theoretical framework for craftivism.<sup>137</sup> He cites, for example, the great deal of social movement literature that is available, but demonstrates that craftivism is not well explained by the study of social movements because it is so difficult to define as a singular, cohesive movement.<sup>138</sup> He explains:

It would be difficult to conceptualize craftivism as a movement per se, given its fragmentation and varied constituencies. In some cases, practitioners are part of larger social movements such as anti-globalization or more localized anti-poverty groups and use their crafting—activity and product—within those movements. For others, their crafting is in response to the conservatism of traditional crafting or the school of feminism that rejects crafts as patriarchal enslavement. Crafting has a multitude of uses, meanings, and targets. What is needed, then, is a general theory that explains how something so ordinary, everyday, and seemingly apolitical as knitting or sewing is transformed into a form of opposition, and why crafts have been chosen to achieve this goal.<sup>139</sup>

Newmeyer establishes the need for a more encompassing theoretical framework that goes beyond the limitations of movement theory. Unlike Newmeyer, I remain open to the possibility of understanding craftivism as being, at least in part, a social movement

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<sup>135</sup> Newmeyer, 444.

<sup>136</sup> Ibid.

<sup>137</sup> Ibid.

<sup>138</sup> Ibid.

<sup>139</sup> Ibid.

simply because I do not believe that *any* movement is without “fragmentation” and “varied constituencies.” I would agree, however, that a more generalized theory needs to be developed for craftivism, one that can explain how and why the practice of crafting can be considered significant.

There are a number of articles that specifically explore “craftivism” or “craft” and “activism.” However, some of the most frequently cited articles on craft and activism either use a set of very unclear theoretical approaches or do not use a theoretical framework at all. An example of this can be found in Ricia A. Chansky’ article, “A Stitch in Time: Third-Wave Feminist Reclamation of Needled Imagery.” This article was published in 2010 in *The Journal of Popular Culture* and is one of the most frequently cited articles on craft and activism – in fact it ties into the majority of the themes I am using in my thesis. Similar to this thesis, Chansky explores textiles, feminism, and craft as a tool used by young activists.<sup>140</sup> She discusses craft’s emotional and meditative qualities, the inequality of domesticity, craft as a business, and even the language of “choice” and the choice to make crafts.<sup>141</sup> While this article has interesting and important content, it does not use a critical or theoretical analysis of craft or craftivism. The evidence used in the article is largely anecdotal and generalized, and because of this it can be read as more of a celebration of craft history than a critique of craftivism. For example, Chansky says that:

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<sup>140</sup> Ricia A. Chansky, “A Stitch in Time: Third-Wave Feminist Reclamation of Needled Imagery,” *The Journal of Popular Culture*, 43, no. 4 (2010), 685.

<sup>141</sup> Ibid.

The [sic] Third-Wave postpunk aesthetic seems ideally suited for an art form that allows practitioners to stab as they create. This method seems like an ideal reflection of our upbringing, done under the watchful eyes of our proud feminist mothers who were actively fighting to tear down gender inequality while simultaneously building a better, more equal society.<sup>142</sup>

Found in the conclusion of this essay, the tone is vague and celebratory, and while elements of her essay are fascinating, it is neither accurate nor constructive to refer to craftivism in this way. Instead of using specific examples and/or unpacking the language of craftivism, Chansky uncritically embraces a rather one-sided perspective on women's role in craft. So even though she brings forward a variety of important ideas forward (similar to the one state above) her theoretical perspective is unclear and is never stated.

Elizabeth Groeneveld, who wrote an excellent article exploring the content of “Third-wave” feminist magazines in relation to political knitting, offers a discursive analysis.<sup>143</sup> While Groeneveld utilizes discourse analysis throughout her paper as a method, the exact theoretical framework put into place is never made clear. The same can be said about similar articles such as “Activism at work: Crafting an alternative business” by Karen Yair, “Craftivist History” by Betsy Greer, and “The Craftivist Collective Guide to Craftivism” by Sarah Corbett and Sarah Housley. All of these articles, which are frequently cited in the limited craftivist literature, have either an unclear or absent theoretical framework.

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<sup>142</sup> Chansky, 698.

<sup>143</sup> Elizabeth Groeneveld, “‘Join the Knitting Revolution’: Third-Wave Feminist Magazines and the politics of Domesticity,” *The Canadian Review of American Studies*, 44, no. 2 (2010): 260.

It is also important to note that Betsy Greer, who is one of the most important figures in craftivism (credited for coining the term, as previously stated), also tends to use theory very loosely in her work. This is true for both her academic writing, like “Craftivist History” *Extra/Ordinary Craft: Craft and Contemporary Art*, as well as her more popular “self-help” style work. Yet her work is frequently cited in academia and is considered important because she has articulated many of the ideas and themes related to craftivism.<sup>144</sup> Her exploration of craft and craftivism is more of a social and artistic commentary than a vigorous academic analysis. While this is an important aspect of craft research, and can be hugely beneficial in the effort to better understand craft culture, it is not always enough.

This leaves me to ask: why is it so difficult to find scholars who attempt to use theory in their work on craft and craftivism? To answer this question I will begin by explaining that, as outlined in the literature review, the study of craftivism as we know it today is fairly new. In fact, the word craftivism itself was not coined until 2003.<sup>145</sup> Because of this there are few articles that specifically focus on the term “craftivism” – especially as it exists as a contemporary social phenomenon. I believe that what we are seeing and reading now is really just the emerging development of the study of craftivism. Like feminism, craftivism is a shifting phenomenon that changes from month to month as crafters innovate new approaches to craft and activism. The research that I

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<sup>144</sup> This assertion is based on her presence in important craft anthologies like Maria Elena Buszek’s foundational anthology, *Extra/Ordinary: Craft and Contemporary Art* and the fact that she is seen as the innovator of the term itself.

<sup>145</sup> Betsy Greer. *Knitting for Good! : A Guide to Creating Personal, Social, and Political Change, Stitch by Stitch* (Boston: Trumpeter Books, 2008).



am doing, along with the previously completed research that I will outline below, will become part of a set of new ideas about what craftivist theory is and what it can become.

This brings me to my second point about craft theory, which is that craft activism is a very broad field of study and necessarily requires an interdisciplinary approach. Craft, and especially craft activism, can be studied from a great variety of viewpoints – including economics, sociology, leisure studies, political studies, art history, gender and women’s studies, utopian studies, and so many more – and while none of these are reasons for scholars to disregard or ignore the theory of craftivism, they undeniably add numerous layers of complexity in the application of their theories.

Although the study of craftivism is new, it is important to remember that “craft” itself has a complex history of theorization. As highlighted in my literature review, the Arts and Crafts movement was one of the first real attempts to theorize craft. Through the work of William Morris, the theories of Karl Marx were the first to be applied to the study of craft – his ideas on the relationship between “labour” and “producer” being the most relevant<sup>146</sup> – as the Arts and Crafts movement came to incorporate Marx into its manifestos and ideologies.<sup>147</sup> Even today Marx’s ideas remain at the forefront of many craft theories, including those of Janet Wolff, whose excellent work will be explored later on in this chapter.

Other theorists have tried to form a theory of craft. A great example of this would

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<sup>146</sup> Janet Wolff, *The Social Production of Art* (New York: New York University Press, 1993) 14.

<sup>147</sup> Wendy Kaplan and Elizabeth Cummings, *The Arts and Crafts Movement World of Art* (Thames and Hudson: 1991) 62.

be Howard Risatti, who published the book, *a theory of craft: function and aesthetic expression* in 2007. Risatti approaches the subject with the intention of comparing craft to art and design.<sup>148</sup> His focus is primarily on aesthetics and seeks to answer the important question: “What is a craft object?”<sup>149</sup> Risatti sets out to explore the craft object from a formalist perspective that allows for a theoretically rigorous and unique book. Formalism, which refers to the Art Historical method of focusing on the formal qualities of an artwork rather than its social relations, is an important concept within the world of art historical analysis.<sup>150</sup> And while Risatti’s work is too heavily weighted on this formalistic, art history approach to apply to my own research – his exclusive focus on the craft object itself is precisely the opposite of what I have set out to do – it shows that a theory of craft and crafting is possible, important, relevant, and timely. Risatti’s work stands almost entirely alone as one of the only books to be published specifically on craft theory. However, this book has not been particularly popular in craft circles as other more generalized social and aesthetic histories of craft published around the same time, such as Richard Sennett's 2008 book, *The Craftsman*. Like Chansky, Sennett’s work is interesting and exciting to read and arguably more accessible to those outside of the world of academia than Risatti’s. This has consequentially left less common, more theoretical works such as Risatti’s to sell fewer copies and be less recognized. Nevertheless, the work of theorists like Risatti has helped to plant the seeds for newer, more theoretical

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<sup>148</sup> Howard Risatti, *A Theory of Craft: Function and Aesthetic Expression* (California: U of California Press, 2007,) 121.

<sup>149</sup> *Ibid.*, 122.

<sup>150</sup> Wolff, 66.

understanding of craft activism.

### **Building a Critical Theory of Craftivism**

There are many benefits to outlining a clear theoretical framework to guide the processes of research and analysis. Having a theoretical framework provides a conceptual basis for inquiry. It helps by guiding the interpretation of data, informs the vocabulary, definitions and language used throughout the writing, and also influences future interpretations of the data. The theoretical framework of my thesis provides much needed context and clarity to a subject that could be approached from a dozen different perspectives. The pre-existing knowledge I have chosen as a guide throughout my writing process has helped me to identify the limits of my research, making it easier for me to ask the complex “how” and “why” questions in my analysis. With that said, I will continue to explore the theoretical framework of my thesis in the remainder of this chapter.

The following section of this chapter will define and solidify the terminology of Third-wave feminism, which I have shown in my lit review to be strongly linked with craftivism. My thesis argues that craftivism is associated with some forms of contemporary feminism both in its practice and in its historical lineage and is therefore often part of a politicized discourse. This association with Third-wave feminism occurs despite craft’s common understanding as an “ordinary” and “everyday” task associated with old age and passivity.<sup>151</sup> To explore the ways in which such an ordinary practice can

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<sup>151</sup> In popular culture, knitting is frequently associated with passivity and old-age. An example of this can be seen in the imagery of this Maynard’s candy which features an older woman with grey hair knitting on a textured, knitted background. This imagery highlights the way in which knitting is featured in

become politicized, I utilize the work of Michele de Certeau – particularly his theory of *la perruque*<sup>152</sup> – to explain how craftivism and the act of crafting can be understood as simultaneously passive and powerful.<sup>153</sup> Through the act of making, craftivists become “cultural producers”. Borrowing this term from Janet Wolff who studies the sociology of art, my thesis analyzes the practice of craft as opposed to the art objects themselves. This perspective allows for a more inclusive understanding of who participates in craft, and relies on the assumption that art is a communal process and the art object does not exist within a social vacuum. My thesis acknowledges that gender, class, race, ability, geographical location et cetera all contribute to the production of craftivism. Informed by my theoretical framework, my research is part of a tradition that works towards shaping a better understanding of the context of art making, specifically focusing on understanding the motivation behind the politicized practice of craftivism.

### **Defining Third-wave Feminism within the Context of Contemporary Craftivism**

My thesis questions are centered on the understanding that craftivism and feminism are inextricably linked. Because it is my intention to understand the relationship between craftivism and contemporary feminism, it is essential to establish a definition and

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popular culture as an activity for “Grannies”. In the literature review I explain that there is a general understanding that craft, fibre-craft, and particularly knitting are “passive”. This passivity is attributed to its association with women (especially older women) and its frequently understood as a mere hobby in popular culture.

<sup>152</sup> Michel de Certeau uses the phrase *la perruque* – which means “the wig” in French – to refer to the practice of “the worker’s own work disguised as work for his employer”.<sup>152</sup> In other words, *la perruque* is the practice of fulfilling personal priorities while at work. This concept will be explored further on in this chapter and its relationship to craftivism will be explained.

understanding of wave analogy and Third-wave feminism. Defining Third-wave of feminism is a complex process because it has so many potential meanings. It is, however, beautifully summarized by Rosemary Tong in the anthology *Feminist Thought: A More Comprehensive Introduction*. There she argues that “Third-wave feminists stress that women and feminists come in many colors, ethnicities, nationalities, religions, and cultural backgrounds,”<sup>154</sup> and in their comprehension of the “interlocking forms of oppression”<sup>155</sup> they are “committed to understanding the various ways that gender oppression combines with other types of ‘human oppression’<sup>156</sup> to shape the circumstances of our lives. In general, the movement strives towards finding a “nonbinary”<sup>157</sup> and “nonoppositional”<sup>158</sup> philosophical stance that aims to “accommodate diversity and change.”<sup>159</sup> Harris elaborates on this, suggesting that “young women’s identities have become more fluid, hybrid, and multiple than earlier feminisms could account for, which has made relations of power and therefore resistance more complex, and requires identifications with a series of movements and sites.”<sup>160</sup> This is how I define Third-wave feminism in my thesis: as a movement of feminism based on an intersectional approach that works towards understanding and interrogating different forms of human

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<sup>154</sup> Ibid.

<sup>155</sup> Ibid.

<sup>156</sup> Ibid.

<sup>157</sup> Tong, 290.

<sup>158</sup> Ibid., 290.

<sup>159</sup> Ibid., 284.

<sup>160</sup> Harris, 7.

oppression.

Third-wave feminism is also criticized for lacking direction, having no unified agenda,<sup>161</sup> and being too splintered.<sup>162</sup> Other criticisms include those highlighted by Astrid Henry who says that, “within contemporary feminist writing, certain feminisms are depicted as old or out-dated in order to posit the new generation’s progress and improvement.”<sup>163</sup> This same terminology is frequently used within craft to refer to craft practices as being out-dated or out of fashion. Other scholars like Dicker and Piepmeier have similar suggestions. They point out that:

Typically, the Third-wave is thought of as a younger generation’s feminism, one that rejects traditional—or stereotypical—understandings of feminism and as such is antithetical or oppositional to its supposed predecessor, the [sic] second wave.<sup>164</sup>

To summarize, it has been argued that many Third-wave feminists today fail to acknowledge the origins of feminism, and instead of recognizing the history of the movement they reject the previous efforts of feminists entirely. It is important to note however that this is a contested claim that has been used to discredit Third-wave feminism and many Third-wave feminisms use analysis that is rooted and based in Second-wave theory. And while this narrative is contested, the same arguments have been

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<sup>161</sup> Tong, 289.

<sup>162</sup> Catherine Redfern and Kristin Aune, *Reclaiming the F Word: The New Feminist Movement* (New York: Zed Books, 2010), 2.

<sup>163</sup> Henry, 6.

<sup>164</sup> Dicker and Piepmeier, “Introduction,” 5.

made in relation to craftivism. As summarized in my literature review, craftivism is frequently associated with youth and a particular aesthetic that rejects the work of previous practitioners or previous generations as out of date. Craftivism is sometimes seen as an active rejection of older generations of women, in particular by referring to work as “not your grandmother’s.” This concept is explored throughout this thesis, in particular during the analysis of the interviews.

My thesis explores all of these limitations by emphasizing and interrogating participants’ understandings of the waves of feminism, the contemporary state of feminism, and also the concept of generations in relation to both feminism and craft. Though like authors Gillis, Howie, and Munford, I also utilize wave analogy in my writing to guide both the producers and the reader towards a better understanding of waves and generations of feminist craft makers for the sake of providing valuable context. *Catching a Wave: Reclaiming Feminism for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* explores the multiple ways that Third-wave feminism and Second-wave feminism are connected. Rory Dicker and Alison Piepmeier argue that it is important that scholars not focus on the conflict between the waves, but instead value the “strands of continuity”<sup>165</sup> that exist between them.<sup>166</sup> This thesis continues in the tradition of exploring feminist waves and generations by reaching towards a better understanding of the ways in which feminism is currently being practiced and by probing further into the artists’ understandings of what is meant by the term “the Third-wave.” Instead of observing participation in feminism through the use of

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<sup>165</sup> Ibid.

<sup>166</sup> Ibid.

secondary research like previous craft historians have done, my thesis asks participants to directly define their relationship with feminism, activism, and craftivism. While this approach differs from the one used by Pentney, I too envision both feminism and craft as practices which are rooted in shifting historical perspectives that can be imagined and understood as coming together to potentially inspire, construct, and incite social and political change.

Third-wave feminism is often used simply to describe differences of opinion between contemporary and Second-wave feminists in order to demonstrate that there is an effort to create a “new” feminism that is distinct from the Second-wave.<sup>167</sup> As Gillis, Howie, and Munford emphasize, these waves are seen as stable, while Henry suggests that this is, at least in part, because:

They conform to our dominant understanding of generations within the United States. Members of the [sic] second-wave can be read as Baby Boomers (people born between 1947 and 1961), while [sic] third-wave feminists are easily collapsed into the larger category Generation X (people born between 1961 and 1981).<sup>168</sup>

In other words, there is an “imagined unity”<sup>169</sup> that is shaped when a generation is named.

The concept of generation is one that Astrid Henry explores thoroughly, explaining that:

A generation is an imaginary collective that both reveals truths about people of a particular age and tries to mould those people into a unified group. Even as we use the often-productive concept of generations, we must be wary of the ways in which it provides a reductive image of relationships between women, between feminisms, and between

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<sup>167</sup> Henry, 3.

<sup>168</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>169</sup> Ibid., 8.



historical periods.<sup>170</sup>

Gillis, Howie, and Munford all agree with this. They suggest that referring to the waves simply as historical moments is reductive, and that this terminology does not include the complexity of real feminisms. This suggests that the wave analogy creates unneeded limitations on our inquiries.<sup>171</sup>

Another way that contemporary feminism will be explored in my research is by asking producers directly whether they identify as activists and feminists, and even more specifically, as feminists of a Third-wave movement. As Redfern and Aune have said, “[F]eminism is pronounced ‘dead’ on a regular basis,”<sup>172</sup> and while the Third-wave feminist movement is criticized for having a diversity of both practice and opinion this is not often considered a strength.<sup>173</sup> I argue that craftivism is one of those subcultures where feminism is still being practiced. Harris notes in her introduction to the book, *Next Wave Cultures: Feminism, Subcultures, Activism*, that “a range of texts that can be identified as ‘third wave’ suggests that young women’s cultural and political action is taking on new forms accordingly, although they note that these may be unrecognizable if interpreted through more traditional paradigms of activism.”<sup>174</sup>

Redfern and Aune argue that feminist activity often goes unrecognized as such

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<sup>170</sup> Henry, 6.

<sup>171</sup> Gillis, Howie and Munford, “Introduction,” 2.

<sup>172</sup> Redfern and Aune, 1.

<sup>173</sup> Ibid., 7.

<sup>174</sup> Ibid.

because people are hesitant to identify with feminism based on the stigma associated with it.<sup>175</sup> In the introduction to *Reclaiming the F Word: The New Feminist Movement*, Catherine Redfern and Kristin Aune discuss how their research shows that most people have feminist attitudes despite the enduring popularity of the phrase “I am not a feminist, but...”.<sup>176</sup> There is speculation that individuals are reluctant to identify as feminist because of the negative connotations associated with feminism, though there is, in general, support for the philosophy and ideas that shape feminism.<sup>177</sup> Redfern and Aune argue that “most young people, then, are feminists without realising it.”<sup>178</sup> They also state that the primary reasons for not identifying with feminism has more to do with the way that feminism is defined, and also the idea that gender equality has already been achieved.<sup>179</sup> They state that “personal definition is important – how one defines feminism influences whether or not they identify as one.”<sup>180</sup> For this reason, my research focuses on self-definition and asks participants involved with the project to define feminism and specify whether or not they identify with it.

Several scholars including Dicker, Piepmeier, and Tong describe the Third-wave as “messy”<sup>181</sup> with few identifiable parameters. The Merriam Webster Dictionary defines

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<sup>175</sup> Ibid., 3.

<sup>176</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>177</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>178</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>179</sup> Ibid., 6.

<sup>180</sup> Ibid.

<sup>181</sup> Rory Dicker and Alison Piepmeier, “Introduction,” in *Catching a Wave: Reclaiming Feminism for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, eds. Rory Dicker and Alison Piepmeier (North-eastern University Press: Boston, 2003) 16.

a subculture as “an ethnic, regional, economic, or social group exhibiting characteristic patterns of behaviour sufficient to distinguish it from others within an embracing culture or society.”<sup>182</sup> While the dictionary definition is straight forward, it is important to note that “we no longer understand subcultures as existing as a singular fixed category that youth affiliate themselves with.”<sup>183</sup> Subcultures are understood as being deeply complex with complex social dynamics and unique intricacies.<sup>184</sup> In *Next Wave Cultures: Feminism, Subcultures, Activism*, editor Anita Harris explores the value of studying political action and cultural involvement through the study of subcultures and their engagement with feminism.<sup>185</sup> Harris explains in her introduction that “young women have new ways of taking on politics and culture that may not be recognizable under more traditional paradigms but deserve to be identified as socially engaged and potentially transformative nonetheless.”<sup>186</sup> Often, new ways of practicing politics are identified as being part of a particular subculture.<sup>187</sup> An example of subculture analysis is highlighted in Harris’ introduction, explaining that the feminist focus on “the domestic realm and the subtle arts of subversion led to closer analysis of the cultural spaces that young women

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See also, Rosemarie Tong, *Feminist Thought: A More Comprehensive Guide* (Westview Press: Colorado, 288) 284.

<sup>182</sup> "subculture," *Merriam-Webster.com*. Merriam-Webster, 2014. Web. 1 March 2014.

<sup>183</sup> Harris, 3.

<sup>184</sup> Ibid.

<sup>185</sup> Anita Harris, *Next Wave Cultures: Feminism, Subcultures, Activism* (New York: Routledge, 2008,) 1.

<sup>186</sup> Ibid.

<sup>187</sup> Ibid.

occupy.”<sup>188</sup> She explains that the study of subculture leads to important academic perspectives on girlhood and the complex ways that young women participate in feminism through the subversion of popular culture.<sup>189</sup> She goes on to identify some of the more obvious examples of female resistance from the 1990s such as riot grrrl and zine culture.<sup>190</sup> She also lists surfers, ravers, and sk8ers as participating in subcultures that have the potential to participate in feminist activities while building community and collective.<sup>191</sup> As Harris explains:

If subculture theory has been the major paradigm through which youth resistance has been analyzed in the West, feminism has been the key theoretical framework to bring young women into these debates about young people’s action for social change.”<sup>192</sup>

My thesis examines craftivism as a type of subculture that is “active, creative, and resistant”<sup>193</sup> and potentially associated with the goals of feminism. Craftivism is a “covert strategy of resistance”<sup>194</sup> that “actively express[es] feminist sensibilities through subcultural practice.”<sup>195</sup>

Beth Ann Pentney’s “Feminism, Activism, and Knitting: Are the Fibre Arts a

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<sup>188</sup> Harris, 5.

<sup>189</sup> Ibid.

<sup>190</sup> Ibid.

<sup>191</sup> Ibid.

<sup>192</sup> Ibid.

<sup>193</sup> Ibid., 2.

<sup>194</sup> Ibid.

<sup>195</sup> Ibid., 6.

Viable Mode for Feminist Political Action?” explores knitting in relation to Third-wave feminism and activism. Her inquiries in this article are based around the question asked in the title of the article, probing – “Are the Fibre Arts a Viable mode for Feminist Political Action?” Central to Pentney’s article (and my own thesis) is the understanding of craftivism as a form of activism. The Merriam-Webster’s dictionary defines activism as “a doctrine or practice that emphasizes direct vigorous action especially in support of or opposition to one side of a controversial issue.”<sup>196</sup> While Pentney does not define activism directly, she does argue that cultural production is a form of activism when it is part of the subversion and resistance of mainstream culture.<sup>197</sup> Betsy Greer also explains that activism does not necessarily look like “feminist activity” or “feminist activism”<sup>198</sup> in the traditional sense of the word.<sup>199</sup> My thesis argues that activism can occur through any kind of expression of political idea – whether that idea is intended for a public audience, or whether that expression/action exists as one part of a larger, shared political ideology.

Feminism is often understood in both popular culture and in feminist research as a social movement, and this language is also frequently applied to craftivism.<sup>200</sup> For the purposes of this thesis, movement will be defined as “a group of people working together

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<sup>196</sup> “activism,” *Merriam-Webster.com*. Merriam-Webster, 2014. Web. 1 March 2014.

<sup>197</sup> Beth Anne Pentney, “Feminism, Activism, and Knitting: Are the Arts a Viable Mode for Feminist Political Action,” in *thirdspace: a journal of feminist theory & culture*, 8, no.1 (2008) 1.

<sup>198</sup> Greer’s definition of traditional feminist activism is rather stereotypical. She explains feminist organizing and activism as “placard waving” and protests which, in my opinion, is a rather narrow view of feminist activism.

<sup>199</sup> Greer, *Knitting for Good*, 12.

<sup>200</sup> Nicole Dawkins, “Do-It-Yourself: the precarious work and postfeminist politics in handmaking in Detroit,” *Utopian Studies* 22, no. 2 (2011): 262.

to advance their shared political, social, or artistic ideas.”<sup>201</sup> There is a great deal of variation that occurs within movements themselves and this is important to consider, especially in relation to feminism. For example, “feminism” is frequently described by mainstream media and press as a singular movement, when in actuality feminism is extremely diverse<sup>202</sup>. In this thesis, not only will I acknowledge the importance of feminism within craftivist communities, but I will also attempt to consistently recognize the diversity that exists within feminism. I will also acknowledge the anomalies that make feminist and craftivist communities so fascinating.

Pentney explores the Third-wave feminist movement in her article, wherein she interrogates “feminist knitting practices, which include active and purposeful knitting projects used in the spirit of feminist goals of empowerment, social justice, and women’s community building”<sup>203</sup>. She argues that:

Third-wave feminism should be imagined as a practice. By doing so, different cultural practices can be utilized for feminist goals by people who may not readily identify as feminist. The advantage of casting a wider net over what ‘counts’ as feminism is that it recognizes that feminism is part of the contemporary North American social fabric, rather than a necessarily reactive political movement.<sup>204</sup>

My thesis research also rests upon this assumption. I argue that feminism, and more specifically, Third-wave feminism, exists as a practice that can be expressed through the active and political engagement of fibre art. Like Pentney, I argue that “knitting can be

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<sup>201</sup> “movement,” *Merriam-Webster.com*. Merriam-Webster, 2014. Web. 1 March 2014.

<sup>202</sup> Pentney, 6.

<sup>203</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>204</sup> *Ibid.*

used for feminist goals because it is grounded in a gendered cultural practice that can readily be politicized for different purposes by different groups and individuals.”<sup>205</sup> Knitting and other fibre based crafts are gendered, a term which is defined as “reflecting the experience, prejudices, or orientations of one sex more than the other.”<sup>206</sup> As discussed extensively in the literature review, this simply means that fibre craft, and therefore craftivism itself, is practiced primarily by those who identify as women. This, of course, does not mean that those who identify as men cannot be craftivists; it simply implies that those who practice craftivism are most commonly women. There are, however, knitting communities that are composed entirely of male identified individuals as and other groups that represent different areas of the gender spectrum.<sup>207</sup> Regardless of this important fact, knitting remains a gendered pursuit in that the practitioners of fibre craft are overwhelmingly female.<sup>208</sup>

Using the work of Anne Gray to guide her research, Pentney explains that understanding feminism as a practice:

Allows for differences among feminists rather than assuming or demanding adherence to a specific subject position (in the case of second-wave, liberal feminists the subject position represented was predominantly white, heterosexual, educated, middle-class, and biologically female).<sup>209</sup>

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<sup>205</sup> Pentney, 7.

<sup>206</sup> “gendered,” *Merriam-Webster.com*. Merriam-Webster, 2014. Web. 1 March 2014.

<sup>207</sup> An example of this would be the “Nomadic Queer Knitting Group” that existed for a brief time in Halifax, Nova Scotia. The group consisted of primarily queer, trans\* and gender non-variant people.

<sup>208</sup> Groeneveld, 260.

<sup>209</sup> Pentney, 2.

Regardless of Pentney's aim to acknowledge differences within feminism itself, her work still rests on the assumption that feminism has existed in three distinct waves. This common assumption is often referred to as "wave analogy,"<sup>210</sup> implying that each of these waves can be interpreted as distinct from one another, with the Third-wave being the most inclusive. Wave analogy assumes that the First, Second, and Third-waves of feminism each took place during "identifiable moments in history that exist as objects"<sup>211</sup> that can be easily identified and studied.<sup>212</sup> Of the three stages of the wave analogy,<sup>213</sup> the first stage – understood simply as the First-wave – took place during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the primary aim of which was to achieve political autonomy and equality for women.<sup>214</sup> The second stage – or the Second-wave – occurred in the 1960s and 1970s and focused on issues concerning women such as reproductive rights, domestic violence, labour, and sexuality.<sup>215</sup> The third stage – or Third-wave – began in the 1990s and debatably continues to the present day.<sup>216</sup> These waves are all understood as "historical moments."<sup>217</sup>

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<sup>210</sup> Stacy Gillis, Gillian Howie and Rebecca Munford, "Introduction," in *Third-Wave Feminism: A Critical Exploration*, eds. Stacy Gillis, Gillian Howie and Rebecca Munford (Palgrave: New York, 2004) 1.

<sup>211</sup> Ibid

<sup>212</sup> Ibid.

<sup>213</sup> Ibid.

<sup>214</sup> Ibid.

<sup>215</sup> Ibid.

<sup>216</sup> Ibid.

<sup>217</sup> Henry, 6.



In her essay called *Genealogies*, Jane Spencer elaborates on these waves, describing them as not only moments in time, but as three sets of distinct attitudes or ideas.<sup>218</sup> The First-wave, she describes as existing primarily as a search for equality.<sup>219</sup> The Second-wave is understood as a “claim of difference”<sup>220</sup> – in other words, Spencer believes that the Second-wave focused on the differences between men and women for the sake of highlight the ways in which society was patriarchal.<sup>221</sup>

### **Michel de Certeau and the Value of “Every Day” Activities**

The theories of Michel de Certeau, highlighted in his 1984 book *The Practice of Everyday Life*, are generally considered an integral part of Material Culture Studies, and while he never specifically discusses craft, his writings on culture and consumption are highly applicable to its study. By applying specific concepts from *The Practice of Everyday Life* – primarily the concept of *la perruque* – we may come to a more general understanding of how and why a task as seemingly ordinary as the act of crafting can become an engaging form of political protest.

Michel de Certeau explains in his introduction to *The Practice of Everyday Life* that he is most interested in looking at what people do in order to “surprise.”<sup>222</sup> He

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<sup>218</sup> Jane Spencer, “Introduction to Part I: Genealogies,” in *Third-Wave Feminism: A Critical Exploration*, eds. Stacy Gillis, Gillian Howie and Rebecca Munford (Palgrave: New York, 2004,) 9.

<sup>219</sup> Ibid.

<sup>220</sup> Ibid.

<sup>221</sup> Ibid.

<sup>222</sup> Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (U of C Press: Los Angeles, 1984,) xix.

outlines this in his theoretical assumptions in the “General Introduction” of his book, explaining how his work is intended to explore “consumer culture” outside of the understanding of people as simply passive consumers.<sup>223</sup> de Certeau's insists that consumers continue to manipulate spaces and technologies that go beyond their intended use.<sup>224</sup> While an item or a tool may have been invented for a specific purpose, people will not necessarily use it in that way and may create new functions and possibilities that go beyond capitalist understandings of an object.<sup>225</sup> This interpretation can explain as well as “acknowledge, and highlight the possibility of resistance through the re-appropriation of cultural material.”<sup>226</sup> His research is based on the assumption that the subtle actions of our everyday lives can be political, even if they often go unnoticed.

Michel de Certeau uses the phrase *la perruque* – French for “the wig” – to refer to the practice of “the worker’s own work disguised as work for his employer.”<sup>227</sup> In other words, *la perruque* is the practice of fulfilling personal priorities while at work. He explains:

It differs from pilfering in that nothing of material value is stolen. It differs from absenteeism in that the work is officially on the job. *La perruque* may be as simple a matter as a secretary’s writing a love letter on “company time” or as complex as a cabinet maker’s “borrowing” a

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<sup>223</sup> Ibid.

<sup>224</sup> Ibid.

<sup>225</sup> Ibid.

<sup>226</sup> Ibid.

<sup>227</sup> Ibid., 25.

lathe to make a piece of furniture for his living room.<sup>228</sup>

While this theory in itself may not appear applicable to craft or craftivism, Trent S. Newmeyer demonstrates, in “Knit One, Stitch Two, Protest Three! Examining the Historical and Contemporary Politics of Crafting,” that de Certeau’s theory of *la perruque* allows us to “acknowledge and highlight the possibility of resistance through the re-appropriation of cultural material.”<sup>229</sup> For de Certeau, *la perruque* becomes a defiant act of resistance because the worker is participating in an activity that is not directly related to the task at hand or the goals/aims outlined by the employer.<sup>230</sup> Using de Certeau’s own examples, as stated above, Newmeyer further explains that while the worker’s defiance is seemingly ordinary and every day:

For de Certeau, workers engage in such activities not only for the pleasure of free, creative, self-directed labour at work but also for the pleasure of "putting one over" on the boss or company. Although this is a far cry from a workers revolution or a Luddite smashing of machinery, for de Certeau it is in the [sic] *micropractices* of culture, in everyday work and leisure, that people ‘make do’ with the imposition of structures ...<sup>231</sup>

*Le perruque*, as I understand it, is a way to quietly rebel, and as de Certeau asserts, this

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<sup>228</sup> Ibid.

<sup>229</sup> Newmeyer, 439.

<sup>230</sup> de Certeau, 25.

<sup>231</sup> Trent S. Newmeyer, “Knit One, Stitch Two, Protest Three! Examining the Historical and Contemporary Politics of Crafting,” *Leisure/Loisir*, 32, no. 2 (2008,) 439.

practice is often “repressed or ignored” because of fellow workers <sup>232</sup>

This is precisely what makes the concept of *la perruque* so highly applicable to craftivism and my research. In general, there is nothing particularly rebellious about a person participating in craft, especially if that person is a woman who is producing fibre-craft – a practice that has been associated with women’s everyday lives for literally thousands of years. As stated above, craft remains a “gendered space of production,”<sup>233</sup> and like going to work, fibre-craft is just about as ordinary as it gets. So, often referred to as a “labour of love,” fibre-craft, and especially knitting, are a part of activities that are frequently considered not only apolitical but also passive and docile. With supplies available at every big box store in North America, and with the increasing popularity of the practice and its dominant cultural presence, it is in many ways remarkably unremarkable.

However, when a person, especially a woman, uses the medium of craft in unexpected ways, it is then that craft shifts from being a simple pastime to its own form of *la perruque*. Even simple acts such as knitting instead of buying, knitting while at work or during a meeting, or borrowing knitting needles from a friend can be considered *la perruque because they are subverting the expectations in place surrounding the practice of craft*. While “craft” remains the practice, activism becomes the outcome and the crafter “diverts” the meaning of the task, subverting the “ordered spheres of modern

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<sup>232</sup> de Certeau, 26.

<sup>233</sup> Jack Z. Bratich, and Heidi M Brush, “Fabricating Activism: Craft-work, Popular Culture, Gender,” in *Utopian Studies*, 22, no. 2 (2011,) 251.

life.”<sup>234</sup> This subversion is how the practice of craft becomes active and how craftivism is made possible. By understanding craft as one of many ways to practice an everyday activity in an unexpected way, de Certeau’s ideas make it much easier for us to “conceptualize craft as power (the ability or capacity to act), [and] as a way of understanding current activist possibilities”<sup>235</sup>

### **The Social Importance Behind the Practice of Craft: Janet Wolff**

Janet Wolff’s *The Social Production of Art* is a seminal text in the world of art criticism. While her book is an interdisciplinary analysis of art through the lens of cultural studies, sociology, and art history, her conclusion is that art (all art) should be understood and studied from a sociological perspective.<sup>236</sup> Put simply by Wolff herself, *The Social Production of Art* demonstrates “the social nature of the arts, in their production, distribution and reception.”<sup>237</sup> She also focuses on the “author” (in both a literary and artistic sense) as being mis-conceptualized as strictly an “individual” when in fact there is a collective process involved behind the making of art.<sup>238</sup> Her work is a theoretical exploration of the reader/viewer relationship that directly argues in the first sentence of the book that “art is a social product.”<sup>239</sup> When Wolff’s book was first

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<sup>234</sup> de Certeau, 26.

<sup>235</sup> Bratich and Brush, 233.

<sup>236</sup> Janet Wolff, *The Social Production of Art* (New York: New York University Press, 1993) 179.

<sup>237</sup> Ibid.

<sup>238</sup> Ibid.

<sup>239</sup> Ibid.

published in 1981 this argument was very important in contrast with the accepted formalist approach of Art History, where the essential forms of an art object are highlighted at the expense of its social contexts.

Wolff emphasizes that “the arts can adequately be understood only in a sociological perspective.”<sup>240</sup> In other words, she insists that art, in any circumstance, never exists within a social vacuum. Her book emphasizes the various ways that people have elevated the artist as a person who works from a “value-free”<sup>241</sup> perspective. A societal understanding of the artist as a “unique creator of a work”<sup>242</sup> is highly misleading, and by contrast point out that people tend to overemphasize the individual artist while ignoring the sheer number of people who are involved in the creation of a work.<sup>243</sup> In art history, scholars have traditionally left the artist as “unexamined” – a position which fails to understand that even the “subjects are themselves constituted in social and ideological processes.”<sup>244</sup> Using Marx, Wolf explains that all forms of “work” or “labour” (including art) have “universal characteristics.”<sup>245</sup> She explains:

The notion of art as a collective applies also to those arts which appear most ‘private’ and individual. Even writers need materials, need to be literate, benefit from acquaintance with some literary tradition and

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<sup>240</sup> Ibid., 1.

<sup>241</sup> Ibid., 144.

<sup>242</sup> Ibid.

<sup>243</sup> Ibid., 137.

<sup>244</sup> Ibid.

<sup>245</sup> Ibid., 15.

conventions (though they do not need to be ‘trained’ in the way ballet dancers or pianists do), and need access to publishers and printers, as well as then being affected by both the book market and (possibly) literary critics. The simple idea of an artistic idea being penned (in whatever form) by an inspired individual, and then available for recognition and consumption by the waiting audience/reader begins to recede into the realm of myth.<sup>246</sup>

Wolf features two key points in this quote: that the audience's consumption of an art piece is not passive, and that there are many people involved in the process of art making and for that reason the art process belongs to more than just the artist but to those who have influenced its creation.

My understanding of contemporary craft analysis leads me to believe that craftivism exists somewhere between de Certeau and Wolff. However, theoretically, authors have not articulated this position – although Bratich and Brush do briefly state that craftivists today are part of a process that is both “communal” and “creative.”<sup>247</sup> In this thesis I emphasize the social production of craft, and by utilizing a theoretical framework that positions craft as part of a collective process, my thesis takes into account the many players that contribute to the making of contemporary craft. I also think that it is the understanding of art as a collective process that allows craftivism to be understood as something that goes beyond the art object itself, extending into the more political realm of movement and activism. Based on this understanding it is not only the cultural context and the artist's intent that makes a work important, but it is also what makes a work activist or not. However, as Wolff makes very clear, it is important that "we do not lose

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<sup>246</sup> Ibid., 33.

<sup>247</sup> Bratich & Brush, 247.

sight of the artist as the focus of this mediation and the facilitator of its expression.”<sup>248</sup>

Art as a collective process changes the perspective of what it means to make art, and what it means for art to exist in a social setting. For this reason, my thesis emphasizes the social nature of art-making while at the same time maintains a focus on the artist as the primary creative catalyst.

### **Wolff's Terminology: The Language of Producers**

Wolff's work has also influenced the terminology I use from this point on in my thesis. In the conclusion of her book, Wolff explains the importance of thinking and referring to artists as “cultural producers.”<sup>249</sup> This terminology of labour and production is borrowed from Marx's theories on art,<sup>250</sup> and when “properly theorised,”<sup>251</sup> she argues, helps to better emphasize the “theory of the artistic practice.”<sup>252</sup> By referring to an artist as a cultural producer, the idea of the artist as being an independent, value-free, and almost magical creative force is less apparent.<sup>253</sup> Instead, this terminology emphasizes the theoretical assumption that “we have to operate with a model which posits the mutual interdependence of structure and agency.”<sup>254</sup> In the sociology of art it is assumed that a

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<sup>248</sup> Wolff, 137.

<sup>249</sup> Ibid., 138.

<sup>250</sup> Ibid., 16.

<sup>251</sup> Ibid.

<sup>252</sup> Ibid., 138-139.

<sup>253</sup> Ibid., 138.

<sup>254</sup> Ibid., 139.



producer's social location defines the “cultural object.”<sup>255</sup>

She comes to this conclusion by referencing the work of Pierre Bourdieu, who argues that art, like many other aspects of social life, is situated in the “‘cultural unconscious’ and ideological, social and material processes and institutions.”<sup>256</sup> Wolff quotes Bourdieu as saying that “the sociology of intellectual and artistic creation must take as its object the creative project as a meeting point and an adjustment between determinism and determination.”<sup>257</sup> In other words, the creation of art is dependent upon the world that it exists within. It does not exist independently of the artist or author, and does not exist solely in the “realm of the aesthetic.”<sup>258</sup> Instead, from its creation to consumption art is a part of a social process of production that is inextricably tied to the experiences of the everyday. As Wolff puts it, “the author [or artist] as a fixed, uniform, and unconstituted creative source has indeed died.”<sup>259</sup>

All those involved in the production of art thus become producers. To illustrate this I will use an arbitrary example of a knitted “tree cozy” – a tree simply wrapped in knitted wool. We may ask where the tree cozy came from, and while of course someone has to have an idea to knit the tree cozy, then carry out the act of knitting, that same person probably had to buy the supplies from a store (or perhaps several stores). That store in turn received their supplies from the person who made the wool, perhaps from a

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<sup>255</sup> Ibid.

<sup>256</sup> Ibid.

<sup>257</sup> Ibid., 137..

<sup>258</sup> Ibid., 141.

<sup>259</sup> Ibid., 136.

sheep farmer or industrial mill. The art piece also exists in a public place and is then viewed by others who interpret the piece in their own way. These are just a few of the steps involved in the making and consumption of craftivism, including everyone who contributes to the product and meaning of that “tree cozy” in their own particular way. As Wolff explains, these processes are interdependent and no art piece exists in a social vacuum.<sup>260</sup>

In my thesis I use the terminology of “cultural producer” or “producer” to refer to research participants and “art object” to refer to finished pieces. I use the word “producer” to refer to all of the research participants. Although they come from a range of backgrounds within craftivism – artists/makers, curators, or theorists – all of them will broadly be referred to as “producers,” as all of them are involved in the production of craftivism. By using this terminology, the focus will be not simply on the practice of art making, but the collective production of art, as well as the importance of social location.

### **Who Makes Art – Analyzing Gender, Race and Class**

As discussed above, it is immensely important to Wolff that artists are not classified as part of some sort of “social vacuum.”<sup>261</sup> She insists that artists themselves, as well as others involved in the production of art, live within a system of social structures that enforce inequality.<sup>262</sup> It is through this sociological understanding of the artist that

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<sup>260</sup> Ibid., 9.

<sup>261</sup> Ibid.

<sup>262</sup> Ibid.

one is able:

[T]o see that art always encodes values and ideology, and that art criticism itself, though operating within a relatively autonomous discourse, is never innocent of the political and ideological processes in which that discourse has been constituted. The sociology of art opens up a perspective in which we may comprehend the social construction of art and culture – it's practitioners, its audiences, its theorists and critics, and its products.<sup>263</sup>

The influence of social positioning in both the making and consumption of art is important because it allows viewers to contextualize and better understand the work.

Without critically analyzing the social location of makers, it can be difficult to understand the intention behind the work and even more difficult to classify, document, or historicize it. I think this is particularly true in the case of craftivism, even compared to other types of art practice, because of the political implications associated with the active component of craftivism. Without knowing who the producers of craftivism are it is difficult to identify the aims and goals of this “movement” which, as discussed in the literature review, is regularly associated with white, middle class, college educated women. In order to find out if craftivism is promoted and organized primarily by and for the cultural elite, it is integral to understand the social location of all those involved in its production – ranging from those choosing whether or not to place it in a gallery, to those crafting the work themselves, to those consuming it. Wolff explains that:

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<sup>263</sup> Ibid., 144.

In the production of art, social institutions affect, amongst other things, who becomes an artist, how they become an artist, how they are then able to practice their art, and how they can ensure that their work is produced, performed, and made available to the public.<sup>264</sup>

Employing a sociological perspective to analyze the social production of craftivism creates a framework where analyzing the privilege behind the practice is not only a possibility, but a necessity.

In this sense, Wolff's theories do what many theoretical positions used to study craft have failed to do: to acknowledge the strengths and weaknesses of a moment in art history (such as craftivism) and recognize the importance of class, race, gender, ability, and oppression and the effect they have on art production. I use the sociology of art to inform my thesis because I am deeply interested in the context of craftivism. Utilizing the ideas of Janet Wolff, de Certeau, and Third-wave feminism, my thesis explores craftivism by investigating the motivations of its practice at its varying levels of production. This will be explored further in the next chapter where I will highlight the methodology of my thesis. Informed by my theoretical framework, my methodology aims to find out precisely how craft becomes political, who is involved in its production, how it is associated with Third-wave feminism, and why it is culturally relevant today.

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<sup>264</sup> Ibid., 40.

### **Chapter Three: Methodological Framework**

This chapter will explore and discuss the methodological framework employed in my thesis. I have chosen to use case study methodology in conjunction with semi-structured interviews in order to accommodate the goals of my theoretical framework outlined in the previous chapter. These goals include highlighting the importance of the social production of art and exploring the impossible claims of value-freedom in the production of art objects. I have also chosen this methodology in order to incorporate my theoretical position from which I argue that the primary focus of craftivism should be on the process of making as opposed to the finished product. In order to feature the producers' thoughts regarding value-freedom and the social production of making I needed to select a method that would allow them to express their opinions and philosophies on the subjects of craftivism and feminism. I also needed to choose a method that would allow me to illustrate these points through the use of images and examples of craftivist acts. Without images and examples, the context of craftivism would be lost.

Overall, my study is qualitative. This is because I am more interested in the voices behind the movement than its overall scope and I intend to focus on the producers and the process of "doing craftivism" as opposed to a more traditional art historical approach of focusing on the art object itself. By incorporating critical feminist methodology into the study of craftivism, my research features a qualitative "multi-method" approach guided by the theoretical lens described in the previous chapter. Through the questions asked to the producers in semi-structured interviews, I will answer the research questions guiding

this thesis. The research questions I ask are: 1) What role are craftivists playing in both maintaining and/or reconstructing contemporary feminism? And, 2) How do craftivists and fibre artists whose work has been interpreted as craftivist understand the theoretical and political context of their art? Do they see themselves as part of a feminist, or “gender justice” movement? And do they understand their work as activist, or craftivist? These questions are explored throughout this thesis, but here in the methodology section they are posed as a reminder of the primary goal and intention of this project: to better understand how feminism, craft, and activism intersect.

### **Case Study Methodology**

I utilize case study methodology in my research. Each producer constitutes a case and the data included in each case is made up primarily of content from interviews, however it also includes images, biographical information, and additional information found online. While numerous scholars have defined this methodology, Bent Flyvbjerg explains that we understand case studies as “an intensive analysis of an individual unit (as a person or community) stressing developmental factors in relation to their environment.”<sup>265</sup> This methodology helps researchers create a “richly detailed” understanding of a “social phenomenon,”<sup>266</sup> and it has been argued that “case studies are

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<sup>265</sup> Bent Flyvbjerg, “Case Study,” in *The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research, 4<sup>th</sup> Edition*, eds. Norman K. Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln (Thousand Oaks, Ca: Sage Pub, 2011,) 301.

<sup>266</sup> David A. Snow, and Danny Trom, “The Case Study and the Study of Social Movements,” in *Methods of Social Movement Research*, eds. Bert Klandermans & Suzanne Staggenborg (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002,) 150).

important for putting women on the map of social life.”<sup>267</sup> The case study approach can be an effective way to analyze and compare the experiences of multiple individuals and it has been used by numerous scholars studying various women's movements, all driven by the “desire to document women's experiences and achievements.”<sup>268</sup> For the purpose of my research, this approach is ideal because it will “increase the visibility of ... women in the movement by documenting the work that they [are] doing.”<sup>269</sup>

Each producer interviewed will be considered an individual case, and each case will be made up of data from the interviews. Because my research is focused on understanding people’s involvement in craftivism, my analysis will focus primarily on what is said during interviews with regards to the practice of crafting as opposed to focusing on the art object itself (which as I have previously indicated would be a more art historical approach). Despite the fact that my research does not study the material intricacies and meanings behind the art-object, I have decided to include images of producer’s work, or other examples of craftivism, as away to contextualize craftivism itself. These images will be a small part of some cases and will provide a better portrait of the craftivist producers, but they will not be part of the primary analysis.

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<sup>267</sup> Shula Reinharz, *Feminist Methods in Social Research* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992,) 174.

<sup>268</sup> Maddison, “Feminist Perspectives on Social Movement Research,” 398.

<sup>269</sup> Reinharz, *Feminist Methods in Social Research*, 19.

## **Methodology Commonly Used in Craftivism**

Much of the research conducted on craftivism has used methodological approaches more closely tied to an art historical approach. Discursive analysis and historiography are also utilized in craftivist research. For example, in the 2008 article “Stitch n’ Bitch: Cyberfeminism, a Third Place and the New Materiality” written by Stella Minham and Julie Wolfram Cox, a discursive analysis of the language used in online communities is conducted to discuss the creation of virtual craft communities. Other theorists, like Ricia A. Chansky in the 2010 article “A Stitch in Time: Third-Wave Feminist Reclamation of Needled Imagery,” use a discursive analysis to describe the feminist philosophies behind needlework. However, these are almost always used in conjunction with case study methodology which prevails as the most dominant methodological approach in craftivist research.

The majority of the research that is similar to mine uses case study methodology, such as Trent S. Newmeyer’s 2008, “Knit One, Stitch Two, Protest Three! Examining the Historical and Contemporary politics of Crafting.” Newmeyer focuses on two cases: the first is the NAMES Aids quilt mentioned earlier in this thesis, and the second is “craftivism” itself. Another theorist who uses a combination of both case study analysis and discourse analysis is Kristen A. Williams in, “Old Time Mem’ry: Contemporary Urban Craftivism and the Politics of Doing-it-Yourself in Postindustrial America” written in 2011. In this article, Williams uses a case study analysis combined with discursive analysis to deconstruct the writings of 18<sup>th</sup> century farmers and the connection between modern day DIY and the values of post-industrial America. Other theorists who use case



study methodology are Elizabeth Groeneveld in “‘Join the knitting Revolution’: Third-Wave Feminist Magazines and The Politics of Domesticity” (2010), Beth Ann Pentney in “Feminism, Activism, and Knitting: Are the Fibre Arts a Viable mode for Feminist Political Action,” (2008) and Kirsty Robertson in “Rebellious Doilies and Subversive Stitches: Writing a Craftivist History” (2010). The majority of these articles use case study methodology combined with some type of discursive analysis.

Although I have chosen to utilize the popular case study methodology, few people in the field of craftivist studies have opted to include interviews as part of their case studies. One of the only scholars in the field of craftivist studies to do so is Nicole Dawkins who, in her 2011 article entitled, “‘Do-it-Yourself’: The Precarious Work and Postfeminist Politics of Handmaking (in) Detroit,” conducts an analysis based on ethnographic fieldwork, case studies, and semi-structured interviews. This multi-method structure allows Dawkins to focus on the politics behind the process of making as opposed to focusing on a finished art object. For this reason, I too have decided to include interviews as part of my case study analysis, allowing me to focus on what it specifically means to be part of craftivism. All of those named above have situated their case studies in the field of craft history and art history, emphasizing visual studies and the finished product over the analysis of the process of making – and because my methodology is unique to the study of craftivism it seeks to address this gap. Using each interview as an individual “case,” my thesis will take the focus away from the art object and instead concentrate primarily on the ideologies behind crafting as an active and engaging process.

## Interviews

As I have stated, I have utilized a multi-method approach, so each individual case study is enhanced through the use of in-depth interviews. The interviews add to the detail of the cases, helping me to contrast and compare multiple producers' perspectives. The interview approach has allows me to "access people's ideas, thoughts, and memories in their own words."<sup>270</sup> This method encourages a thorough analysis of craftivism and helps to reveal the qualities of the larger movement. Originally, I had wanted to conduct five to ten interviews via email or over the phone, however in the end, seven people consented to interviews, and one person submitted a "response" that was used in the project. Two interviews were conducted over the phone, one interview was conducted in person, and all other correspondence occurred via email. All interviews were conducted in or between March and June of 2013. Participants were encouraged to elaborate on a set of eight to ten questions. These questions varied depending on several factors including the role of that person within craftivism (i.e. whether they identify as a crafts person, curator, theorist, writer, professor, et cetera), as well as how the interview was conducted.<sup>271</sup> Using the suggestions of feminist researchers such as Ann Oakley, interviews were semi-structured.<sup>272</sup> Questions were left open ended and the interview was able to flow in a

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<sup>270</sup> Reinharz, *Feminist Methods in Social Research*, 19.

<sup>271</sup> A sample of the research questions has been included in the Appendix of this thesis. See Appendix B.

<sup>272</sup> Ann Oakley, "Interviewing women: A contradiction in terms," in *Feminist Research*, ed. Helen Roberts (New York: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1981).

natural direction.

As I have explained previously, I chose to work with a temporal geography and did not limit participation in this study based on geographic location. Part of the logic behind conducting telephone and email interviews was that this would potentially allow me to interview people from all over the world. This method was intended to assist my understanding of how craftivism is interpreted by a broad range of the craft community's membership. It is central to the multiplicity of perspectives I so greatly desire for my thesis that artists of different identities define not only craftivism but also feminism in a variety of different ways. Instead of focusing on one specific geographic location such as North America or Europe and examining how craftivism unfolds there, my aim is to observe how craftivism unfolds in general. This temporal geographical approach is intended to help open my research questions to a broader interpretation of craft activism, leading to a better understanding of its significance as a complex movement instead of a static product. All participants identified where they were from or where they were currently living, allowing "location" to become part of the analysis after the initial recruitment.

I also conscientiously chose not to limit the geography of this project because I had noticed that there has been a great deal of emphasis on Western craftivism. Also, because my research subjects were found primarily through the Internet, there was no telling who would come forward with an interest in craftivism. A temporal geographical approach allows me to fully understand the scope, meaning, intention and personal politics behind what is being called the "craftivist movement," and I had hoped to avoid

the Euro-centric approach that I have seen in much of the previous literature on craftivism.

Unfortunately, despite my intentions behind this temporal geographical approach, those who chose to participate in my project are all North American. In fact almost all of those interviewed live in Canada, with the exception of three participants who were living in the United States at the time of the interview.<sup>273</sup> This opened up a new set of questions regarding craftivism's role as a privileged form of activism that will be further discussed later on in the thesis.

The producers that were interviewed for my thesis were found in a variety of ways. Some were recommended to me directly by my thesis supervisor, others are well known writers/theorists/craftivists within craftivism, and others were found through blogs/Facebook. All of the producers involved have some kind of online presence and were initially contacted via email. All of the producers also come from a variety of professional backgrounds. These backgrounds range from gallery curator, blogger, fibre artist, professional artist, and theorists, to crafts people themselves. I did not set any restrictions for interviews based on gender. Of the eight producers who participated in my project, one identified as a man, one identified as gender queer, and six identified as women. The ages of the producers varied and so did their levels of participation in craft. Some are casual makers, while others are considered professionals.

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<sup>273</sup> As mentioned here, all of the people involved in the project were North American. Also, all of those involved in the project were white. This is a problematic reality that is discussed in depth in the final chapter of my thesis.

The participants' analyses of the issues and strengths of craftivist practice were rich and detailed, and I was given a great deal of data from the eight cases. I began by transcribing each interview and coding them for broad, repeating themes including feminism, craftivism, community, gender, inequality, et cetera. After completing this initial analysis for each case, I went back to the interview data to find more specific themes that were brought up throughout the interviews and compiled a list of themes that I found to occur repeatedly throughout my sample. These themes were not limited to, but included:

1. Sustainability of craft / local movements / the concept of “slowing” down
2. Internet / technology as integral to craftivism’s popularity
3. Participation of older women - generational / “grandmas”
4. Language of “choice”: “choosing to knit”
5. Craft as interpersonal / community building / warmth / “cosy”-ness
6. Complex understandings and definitions of feminism and craftivism
7. Intersectional analyses of race, class and gender
8. Craft as merely a hobby – i.e. the divide between professional art practice and craft practice

Once I had identified these themes I began to go through each case again, pulling quotations from each of the interviews and arranging these quotations in groups by “theme.” By doing this, I found some dominate themes that have come to make up the basis of the three analytic chapters in this thesis. Those three chapters focus on defining and identifying craftivism and feminism, community building through craftivism, and privilege in craftivist participation.

After the interviews were completed I asked participants to read and confirm

information included in short bios that were written to outline the basic details of their lives. These details include the city(ies) they live and work in, their involvement in craftivist communities, and their profession (if they have one). These bios are featured at the end of this chapter and have been provided as a way to contextualize the producers' social location while adding another layer to the analysis that includes geographic location, education level, et cetera.

### **Limitations**

There remains a significant lack of cultural and racial diversity among the cases in this project and I consider this to be the most fundamental limitation of my research. No participants in this project identify as a racial minority and they are all North American, making it imperative to emphasize racial privilege in connection with craftivism. It is also important to note that the age range of participants is not extremely broad and did not involve anyone under the age of twenty-five or over the age of seventy-five. This further adds to the importance of acknowledging that many people are not represented in this thesis and we must consider why they are not present in the upper levels of the craftivism hierarchy. This missing cultural and racial diversity has deeply influenced the structure and content of my thesis, and these limitations will be further discussed in both chapter three and in my conclusion. For now I will simply state that I believe that the lack of diversity seen here goes beyond the limitations of this project and into the realm of the complex limitations of craftivism itself. In the concluding chapters of this thesis I will

also emphasize that those interested in conducting research in the area of craft and craftivism must continue to address this problem to avoid the white-washing of a complex cultural phenomenon.

I chose to use the Internet as a resource in this thesis for multiple reasons. I believed that by using the Internet as a primary source of communication I would be able to reach more people in a more sporadic way, and therefore my sample would be more diverse. In other words, I thought that conducting interviews and recruiting participants on the Internet would create a less Euro-centric sample to draw from. This was not the case, however.<sup>274</sup> One of my original plans was to recruit participants randomly through the use of online communities, although this method was not successful and this is why it is not mentioned previously in my methodology. I had also intended on using online groups such as knitting organizations and Ravelry in particular, to contact as many members of the craft community as I possibly could. At first, the attempts seemed successful as I was able to begin communication with four individuals ranging in age, geographic location, and racial identity. However, in the switch from the “Ravelry” communication (i.e. discussion via *Ravelry* private messaging) to Gmail communication, these participants were regrettably lost and all four participants stopped responding to my messages. It is not clear why they did not respond to my questions, nor is it clear why they stopped responding to my further attempts to get in touch with them.

In fact, “accountability” proved to be a major point of contention throughout the

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<sup>274</sup> It is important to note that not all the world’s craft’s people have access to the Internet.

project. The four participants mentioned above stopped responding to emails after expressing interest in the project and never sent their answers to my research questions. Several other people who had expressed interest, even agreed to participate, also stopped responding to messages after a certain amount of time. After weeks, days, and even months of correspondence, some participants simply stopped emailing. Other participants frequently cancelled and rescheduled meetings via email to a point where it became clear they did not have time to participate in the project. And while this is a reality of life, I do think that email correspondence as opposed to telephone correspondence allowed people to feel as though they could be more non-committal. I see this as another limitation to my project, and I recommend that anyone wishing to conduct research in a similar way should establish a relationship outside of email – even if it only involves a short phone call or Skype conversation – in order to solidify the person’s participation in the project. However, I still stand behind the email method, as without the use of the Internet, this kind of research would not be possible. Craftivists and craftivist communities exist online, sometimes even exclusively, so it is still extremely important to use the Internet in craftivist research. It is also important to note that while accountability was a problem at times throughout the utilization of my methodology, those individuals who did continue correspondence yielded interview results of excellent quality.

### **The Producers**

My thesis is to focus on the thoughts, feelings, and values behind the process of



production. In other words, I want to better understand the intention of those involved most closely with craftivism, and instead of doing a case study of particular art pieces – something which is certainly an important part of craftivist research – my thesis focuses on the process of making and the intention of the producers. This allows me to better understand the thought that goes into the process of making and produces a different result than the more typical art historical approach of stepping back and assessing the object. In the section that follows, I briefly introduce each of the producers/cases that are a part of my study.

### **Iris**

Bossy Femme is otherwise known as Iris<sup>275</sup> and lives in Peterborough, Ontario, Canada. Iris is a lover of craft who has established an online presence through websites like Facebook and Ravelry and her own website [www.bossyfemme.com](http://www.bossyfemme.com). She started her blog Bossy Femme: pretty assertive in January 2012 where she explores a variety of themes, including “femme visibility, best friends, style, knits & crafts, love, and a sassy golden retriever named Geraldine”.

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<sup>275</sup> Iris did not provide a last name.

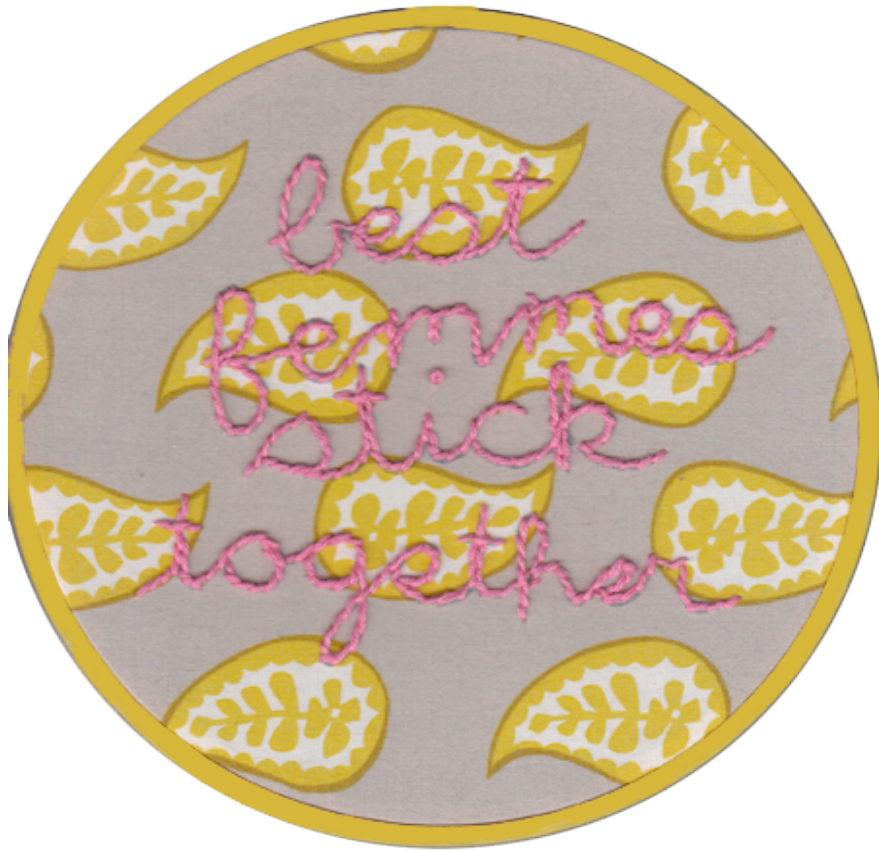


Fig. 1: Bossy Femme, [best femmes stick together,] photograph of embroidery, 2011, image used with permission from Bossy Femme.



Fig. 2: Bossy Femme, [*Anatomical Heart,*] photograph of sculptural knitting, 2011, image used with permission from Bossy Femme.

## **Elizabeth Groeneveld**

Elizabeth Groeneveld is a Faculty Lecturer at McGill University in the Women's Studies Program.<sup>276</sup> She lives in Montreal, Quebec, Canada. Her current area of research focuses on feminist periodicals and zines. She also explores the relationship between textiles and text. Groeneveld has recently written a book on late twentieth and early twenty-first century feminist periodicals that have made the transition from zine to

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<sup>276</sup> All information on producers has been gathered from their respective personal websites and was then confirmed with each producer via email.

magazine. This will be called *Making Public Cultures: Feminist Periodicals on the Cusp of the Digital Age* and will be published by

Wilfrid Laurier University Press.

### **Betsy Greer**

Betsy Greer is a writer and public speaker. She is credited with coining the term “craftivism.” Her work focuses on craft and craftivism, mental health, identity, and activism. She lives in Arlington, Virginia and has an M.A. in Sociology from Goldsmiths College in London. Her first book, *Knitting for Good!* was published in 2008 by Roost Books. In this book, she explores the ways in which crafting can help improve the world we live in. Currently, Greer is working on a craftivism anthology to be published in spring 2014 by Arsenal Pulp.



Fig. 3: Betsy Greer, “I am not a Terrorist,” photograph of needlepoint, 2007, image used with permission from Betsy Greer.



Fig.4: Betsy Greer, [untitled,] photograph of needlepoint, 2007, image used with permission from Betsy Greer.

### **Elissa Auther**

Elissa Auther is Associate Professor of Contemporary Art at the University of Colorado. She is also Adjunct Curator at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Denver. Auther has published work in several journals and has published two books including *String, Felt, Thread and the Hierarchy of Art and Craft*, a book that examines the ways in which fibre has been used in American art while exploring the art/craft divide. Her second book, *West of Center: Art and the Counterculture Experiment in America, 1965-1977* published in 2012 is co-edited with Adam Lerner. This publication focuses on American counterculture and the artistic expression within it.

### **Peter Dykhuis**

Peter Dykhuis lives and works in Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada. Originally from London, Ontario, Dykhuis is now a practicing visual artist, arts administrator, curator, and critical writer. Since 2007, he has been the Director/Curator of the Dalhousie Art Gallery. Formerly the director of the Anna Leonowens Gallery, Dykhuis has also curated work in the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia, as well as several other galleries, while his written reviews can be found in art publications across North America.

### **Sarah Quinton**

Since 1990 Sarah Quinton has been the Curatorial Director at the Textile Museum of Canada in Toronto. Her projects at the museum explore both traditional and contemporary textiles and their relation to many art mediums including photography, design, painting, and sculpture. Quinton has also been involved as a juror, teacher, and lecturer for colleges, universities, galleries, and non-profit organizations around the world. Her work has been recognized with several prestigious awards including the 2008 Curatorial Writing award for “Close to You: Contemporary Textiles, Intimacy and Popular Culture”.

### **Janet Morton**

Janet Morton is a Guelph-based professional artist. Her work has been exhibited internationally, and since 1992 she has been producing conceptual art that is primarily

textile based. Morton uses knitting and sewing in ways that are both symbolic and subversive. Much of her work has an excellent sense of humour while retaining a serious undertone to explore themes such as feminism, homelessness, colonialism, excess, and consumerism.

### **Coral Short**

Coral Short is an artist and curator from the west coast of Canada. Presently, Short divides her time between Montreal, Quebec, and Brooklyn, New York. She is as a multi-media artist whose work ranges from conceptual projects and performances to textile art. Identifying primarily as an “international queer artist”, Short explores themes of feminism, gender expression, craftivism/activism, and sexuality, just to name a few. Along with being a professional artist Short also works as a curator. She recently organized a three day conference in Brooklyn called Craftivism, and has also brought her performance/textile based piece, The Hole-y Army to dyke marches across North America.



Fig. 5: Coral Short, image for series entitled *The Hole-y Army*, photograph of mixed media fibre sculpture, 2012, image used with permission from Coral Short.



Fig. 6: Coral Short, image from series entitled *The Hole-y Army*, mixed media fibre sculpture, by Coral Short, 2012, image used with permission from Coral Short.



The methodological framework of this project was designed to shape a better understanding of how craftivism, feminism, and activism come together. The multi-method case study approach is intended to incorporate the important elements from the theoretical framework outlined in the previous chapters. While I think that over all the methodology has been effective in the execution of this project, there are still major limitations to this project which are, in part, reflective of the limitations of craftivism itself, the most notable being the lack of diversity in its participants. For those conducting craftivist work in the future, I would not advise using communication based solely on the Internet. Allow for some telephone contact, as I think this increases accountability. Ideally future researchers could physically explore the craftivist world that exists beyond the Internet, as this would allow the inclusion of craft communities who do not or cannot actively participate in the online world. Establishing telephone or personal contact is, however, quite challenging when conducting research that explores online communities. Beyond these limitations, I have found that this was an effective methodological research and the rest of this thesis will speak to its results.

## **Chapter Four: Defining and Identifying as Craftivist/Feminist**

The purpose of this chapter – the first “analysis” chapter of this thesis – is to discuss how participants interpret the two key themes of my research: feminism and craftivism. I highlight how producers understand the personal intentions behind their actions in connection with these two themes. In this chapter I also explore how producers’ interpretations of these themes impact the production of craftivism itself. By examining how producers define these concepts, and how they personally identify with them, I theorize that I can build a better knowledge of how those participating in craftivism understand the political intent behind the action of making. Through an analysis of producers’ political and personal intentions, my aim is to better understand the meaning behind their contributions to craft activism. I will begin this chapter by exploring the producers’ connections with the term “craftivism” and compare their responses to the already established definitions of the term.

### **Defining Craftivism**

While not everyone in this project identifies as a craftivist (as I will explore in the next section of this chapter), all those involved had something to say on the subject of craftivism. Here, I will explore some of the ways that producers define and employ craftivism as both a concept and as an action. To begin, I will explain how sociologist Betsy Greer – the person credited with coining the word “craftivism” – understands and defines it. When asked how she personally defines craftivism, she pointed me in the direction of her website, where, in 2005, she defined craftivism in two ways. The first definition is short, explaining that by using the words “craft+activism” it becomes “a way

of looking at life where voicing opinions through creativity makes your voice stronger, your compassion deeper & your quest for justice more infinite.”<sup>277</sup> Her second definition of craftivism is longer and more detailed, as Greer explains:

Craftivism is the practice of engaged creativity, especially regarding political or social causes. By using their creative energy to help make the world a better place, craftivists help bring about positive change via personalized activism. Craftivism allows practitioners to customize their particular skills to address particular causes ... in promoting the idea that people can use their own creativity to improve the world, craftivism allows those who wish to voice their opinions and support their causes the chance to do just that...but without chanting or banner waving and at their own pace.

While Greer's personal definition of craftivism is long and vague (see appendix A for a full description), she was the first person to provide craftivism with a definition. And even today, the explanation that is agreed upon by all those participating in the project of “craft + activism” remains very vague and loose.

On the other hand, radical crafter Coral Short defines craftivism in her interview in a very concise way. She explains craftivism as, “a slow, thoughtful activism [and] a strong powerful display of resistance.”<sup>278</sup> In the summer of 2013 she held an art gathering in the Lower East Side of New York City simply called Craftivism. During this gathering, Short featured a variety of artists whose work in film, performance, and installation explored craft, focusing on the variety of ways that “fabricators are pushing the edges of

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<sup>277</sup> This definition was referred to during my interview with Greer and can be found on her personal website: [www.craftivism.com](http://www.craftivism.com).

<sup>278</sup> Coral Short. Interview by Rachel Fry. Conducted via Email. 2 May 2013. All subsequent quotations and data referring to Coral Short are also from this interview unless otherwise noted.

craft into a new feminist generation for all genders.” As Short explains, those involved in the project were interested in “the act of crafting with political self-awareness as queers” and the “rallying against patriarchy, transphobia, homophobia” to create more “cozy social architectures” or, communities. For Short, craftivism is highly politically motivated and has the potential to become an important tool in political activism and organizing.

Curator Sarah Quinton has a similar, but slightly different definition of craftivism. She suggests that the definition of craftivism is open to interpretation and re-interpretation. When asked how she would define craftivism, she says:

I actually don't think it's for me to say. I think it's grass roots. Self-definition. That really needs to be identified, morphed, and transformed by those who are actually involved in activism. Whether it's craft activism, or other activism.<sup>279</sup>

She also makes an important point that the way craftivism is understood has much to do with the intention behind it and the space where it is presented. She compares two types of craftivist displays: a display in a gallery, and an anonymous display in the street. Quinton explains that craftivist work displayed in the formal institution of the gallery has a different meaning than work that is displayed anonymously in the street. A piece displayed in a gallery with an artist's name attached denotes professionalism and usually some kind of financial compensation, while anonymous street art denotes a radicalism and improvisation that are difficult to attain in an institutionalized gallery space. When it

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<sup>279</sup> Sarah Quinton. Interview by Rachel Fry. Conducted via Telephone. 10 April 2013. All subsequent quotations and data referring to Sarah Quinton are also from this interview unless otherwise noted.

comes to craftivist display, the venue is deeply important and contributes to the definition of craftivism itself.

For Quinton, Short, and even Greer, one of craftivism's greatest assets is that it is not easily defined. For them, the concept of craftivism is fluid and its definition can be left up to interpretation by all of those involved in its cultural production, ranging from the store where the supplies are purchased, to the person who makes the piece, to the audience themselves. When asked to define craftivism, scholar and craft enthusiast Elizabeth Groeneveld states:

I think that that question is really interesting for me to think about because when I think of craftivism I think of a particular kind of crafting and a particular kind of activism. When we use the term craftivism it's often associated with a particular generation, as well. So, I think about other kinds of crafting like church ladies who knit hats for premature babies or for relief efforts. That stuff is generally not being called craftivism as far as I know, or I don't think about it in that way. And so I think there are a lot of different forms of craftivism. A lot of it tends to be anti-state and radical. Activism is being constructed in a particular kind of way and so is what counts as activism and who takes part in it. And then I think probably craft as well, and I think knitting and other kinds of fibre art are frequently part of what is thought about as craftivism.<sup>280</sup>

Groeneveld shows that there is a distinction between what craftivism actually is and what is more commonly understood as craftivism. In other words, there is a particular kind of person associated with the term "craftivism" and this person is usually from a younger

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<sup>280</sup> Elizabeth Groeneveld. Interview with Rachel Fry. Conducted via telephone. 9 May 2013. All subsequent quotations and data referring to Elizabeth Groeneveld are also from this interview unless otherwise noted.

generation that identifies as radical and anti-state. While I firmly believe that “church ladies who knit hats for premature babies or relief efforts” are participating in craft activism, the label of “craftivism” is not always used to describe their work. I speculate that this is because that particular kind of work does not fit into the informal parameters of craftivism being hip, young, and tied to radical politics. This explanation is integral in understanding craftivism because it implies that craftivism has a particular political ethos pre-ascribed to it. Differentiating between these multiple political understandings is essential when discussing craftivism, and while in the context of this thesis anyone who makes craft as an effort to support social justice causes are craftivists, this interpretation is not necessarily a universal one.

Other producers are less familiar with, or less invested in the term craftivism. In contrast to Short, artist Janet Morton does not see the appeal or potential of craftivism. In her response to the proposition of participating in the project, she states, “In all honesty, I am not a fan, nor do I have much interest of much of the work I have seen that posits itself under this category [of craftivism] (i.e.; yarn bombing) I feel a level of discomfort when my work is included in this context.”<sup>281</sup> While Morton does not exactly offer up a definition of craftivism, she does express her discomfort with the concept itself. Peter Dykhuis, who is the curator of the Dalhousie Art Gallery and has helped put on several shows that could be interpreted as craftivist, says, “Well it’s interesting. I’ve never really

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<sup>281</sup> Janet Morton. Interview with Rachel Fry. Conducted via email. 26 March 2013. All subsequent quotations and data referring to Janet Morton are also from this interview unless otherwise noted.

heard it [the word craftivism]. But it's a clever phrase and I get it."<sup>282</sup> He also shared his perspectives on art and its connection to activism, saying, "anything that speaks to taking a position in society both politically, socially, or economically will have some form of activism because it is making active that part of the brain and that part of the conversation." For him, like for Short and Quinton, the intention behind the work itself is what remains most important to its definition.

### **Identifying as Craftivist**

Of the eight people who participated in this study, only three directly identify as craftivists, one of whom is Betsy Greer. She says, "I do consider my work to be craftivist, if only because I consider craftivism an ethos. It's about making the world a better place at its root, using your skills and talents to improve things outside of yourself."<sup>283</sup> For Greer, "craftivist work, at its best, is a dialogue opener and craft activism has become a conversation starter," something that inspires people to ask her questions. Elissa Auther also sees her work as an art historian as having an activist component that could be understood as craftivist. When asked whether she considers herself a craftivist Auther states, "I see my art historical writing as having an activist component."<sup>284</sup> So while she doesn't directly state that she is a craftivist, she makes it clear that she understands her

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<sup>282</sup> Peter Dykhuis. Interview with Rachel Fry. Conducted in person at Dalhousie University. 24 May 2013. All subsequent quotations and data referring to Peter Dykhuis are also from this interview unless otherwise noted.

<sup>283</sup> Betsy Greer. Interview with Rachel Fry. Conducted via Email. 13 April 2013. All subsequent quotations and data referring to Betsy Greer are also from this interview unless otherwise noted.

<sup>284</sup> Elissa Auther. Interview with Rachel Fry. Conducted via Email. 17 April 2013. All subsequent quotations and data referring to Elissa Auther are also from this interview unless otherwise noted.

role as political. The other producer who identified as craftivist was Coral Short. She explains that she does identify as craftivist but that that it is only one type of activism that she engages in. She adds that “there are many types of activism. We are queering the word craftivism by incorporating it into our anti-assimilationist politics.” In other words, for Short, craftivism is only one component in a larger political ethos that incorporates a variety of interconnecting political positions.

Other producers who participated in this project did not associate with craftivism or identify as craftivist. Janet Morton is the only person who positioned herself strongly in opposition to craftivism. Bossy Femme sees her work as a solitary activity and does not identify as a craftivist. When asked whether she sees her work as craftivist, she said, “No, not craftivist. I don't expect my own work to impact anyone beyond me and maybe my small circle of friends/family.”<sup>285</sup> Bossy Femme questions whether craft as a form of activism even makes sense, stating:

Generally speaking I think that crafts didn't CAUSE a majority of problems that feminism seeks to address, so crafts are probably not an adequate means to address them. There might be tangential effects - surely, crafts can be used for awareness-raising, are a great art medium, and learning skills is generally empowering... but I don't think crafts can fix most problems, you know? When people talk about craft as the primary focus of their activism I often think that it means that they want their activism to be fun and comfortable... that they want activism points for doing things that they find personally enjoyable and would do anyway even if a political context were not involved. I don't want to say that craftivism makes no difference, but I think it is less powerful than

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<sup>285</sup> Bossy Femme. Interview with Rachel Fry. 29 April 2013. All subsequent quotations and data referring to Bossy Femme are also from this interview unless otherwise noted.



other strategies and that sometimes it can harm more than it helps.

Bossy Femme's analysis of craftivism is unique and I think it is important to take it into account. While she doesn't completely disregard the potential for craft activism to be useful, she is sceptical as to whether it is an effective way to express a political motive or idea. Bossy Femme points out that there are certainly benefits to political engaged crafting, but questions whether or not craft has the strength or breadth to address serious problems in the world.

Janet Morton does not identify as craftivist, either. However, her reasons for not identifying with craftivism are different from Bossy Femme's. Morton says:

Although I often use materials and techniques associated with craft and the domestic (“women's work”), I do not identify my work as craft. I am a visual artist. My education, and the context of my work is contemporary art practice. I do not say with any hierarchal motivation, simply that I am not a fibre artist, nor a craftsperson and do not see my work in the context of craftivism.

So while Bossy Femme does identify with the “craft” component of craftivism and does not identify with the activist component, Janet Morton does not identify with either the “craft” or “activist” components of craftivism.<sup>286</sup>

The other participants, Elizabeth Groeneveld, Peter Dykhuis, and Sarah Quinton did not directly identify as craftivist either, but all of them did consider there to be some type of activist component in their work. Dykhuis and Quinton, who are both gallery

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<sup>286</sup> In my opinion Morton's response is indicative of the art/craft debate. This aspect of Morton's response will be discussed later.

directors/curators, discuss the variety of ways that their jobs give them the opportunity to manipulate shows or showcase artists in a way that expresses a certain concept or idea – and often these concepts and ideas are political. Both Quinton and Dykhuis discuss the importance of putting on art shows that are inclusive and diverse yet neither identify directly as craftivists. They emphasize the importance of selecting shows that represent different genders, sexual preferences, racial, and class backgrounds.

### **Defining Feminism**

When I set out to do this research, I admit that I expected participants to have a more clearly defined understanding of how their work relates to feminism, and how they each personally define and identify with the term. When the interviews were over, I realized that none of the participants offered up their own “hard definition” of feminism. Instead, most discussed the ways in which they understand and interpret feminism as something that is extremely complex. The producers’ definitions provide a glimpse at how many people understand feminism as an intersectional set of ideas that can be defined in a multitude of ways. As discussed in the literature review, there is no one definition for feminism, at least not one that can be easily agreed upon by every individual involved in craftivist communities. And while I believe that feminism’s diversity is what makes it interesting, I think it is important to discuss the ways that the producers themselves loosely define feminism.

Elizabeth Groeneveld understands feminism as a “hugely diverse collection of things some of which may not really speak to each other at all.” Bossy Femme expressed a similar sentiment, stating that, “I think that there are lots of feminism(s).” And while it

is important to note that Bossy Femme is critical and skeptical of feminism – as she finds it has the potential to be racist, classist, or just generally oppressive – she also optimistically claims that “feminism has advocated for a mindset where everyone can/should choose activities that interest them, whether those things are traditionally masculine or feminine.” Similarly, Coral Short advocates that “feminism, like everything, is always shifting and changing hopefully we can create positive change for the next generation.” All of these producers realize the multi-faceted, fluid definition of feminism and acknowledge its potential to become either a form of oppression or a tool to promote anti-oppression.

### **Identifying as Feminist**

It is interesting to learn how the producers’ definition of feminism relates to their choice to identify as a feminist or not. Unlike the idea of craftivism, where many producers did not identify with the term, all of the producers involved explicitly self-identify to at least some degree with elements of what they describe as “feminism.” Bossy Femme, while identifying with some aspects of feminism, is quick to point out that for her, being a feminist is complicated. When asked about Third-wave feminism, Bossy Femme points out that “there are a lot of feminism(s) and the idea that feminism has never been able to be a unified movement is pretty simplistic for lots of reasons about intersectionality and geography.” She goes on to add that, “as a white educated cis<sup>287</sup>

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<sup>287</sup> Cisgender is a word used to describe people who identify has a gender that corresponds with the sex they were assigned at birth.

femme, I try to use my feminism most often to interrogate ways that my various privileges oppress, say, women of colour and try to minimize that.” When it comes to her practice as a crafter, however, she states that it is “[not really] feminist, or only insofar as I am a feminist and I do stuff.” She explains that her practice in craft is more about the desire to be creative, to make things for relaxation and to improve her mental health. She also points out that it helps her feel connected and part of a community which is, as described in the literature review, an important aspect of craft’s history.

Betsy Greer considers her work to be feminist. She states that,

I guess overall my work would be seen as feminist, but I don't think it is overtly so. And I'm okay with that. Just by choosing to knit or cross stitch or whatever, I am not only honoring past roles and skills of women, I am also exercising my choice to do what I wish, which feminism is all about.

As opposed to Bossy Femme's multi-faceted analysis of what it means to be a feminist today, Greer is focused on the ways that knitting and domestic arts are part of a deliberate choice made possible by feminists of the past. Throughout her interview, Greer continues to point out that, “now we have the freedom to choose to knit a sweater with yarn bought from our own paycheck and to use a drill we bought ourselves, too. It is because of their work that we, as women, can now knit without irony.” Her emphasis on the politics of “choice” is made very clear. Greer believes that women have reached a point in their lives where they have a certain amount of freedom thanks to the work done by feminists of the past. She says that, “I probably should be thanking all the women who sacrificed so much for me to have the freedom to go about my days doing whatever I want.” Unlike Bossy

Femme, who sees “choice feminism”<sup>288</sup> [as] sometimes not rigorous enough,” Greer embraces this identity as a kind of empowerment that encourages creativity. However, Greer is quick to point out that there is still work to be done, as she also repeatedly emphasizes that “we have the choice to craft, whereas many of our female relatives did not.”

Elissa Auther expresses a similar sentiment. She understands the popularity of craft to be the result of a new generation’s idea of what it means to craft. She explains that the resurgence of craft “seems to reflect a new understanding of domesticity as potentially pleasurable rather than a completely oppressive condition foisted upon women.” Both Bossy Femme and Betsy Greer comment on the pleasure of crafting and general joy that results from its practice. Auther, as a theorist, identifies as a feminist and considers her work to have an activist component as well. While she doesn't believe that feminism would be classified as a “strong” political force at this moment in time, she adds that many women today are advocating for a change in politics – specifically citing the public reaction to the “war on women's bodies.” Auther noted that she saw these political themes frequently addressed by crafters and craft communities.

Like Bossy Femme, Elizabeth Groeneveld has a complicated relationship with the term “Third-wave feminism.” However, in the context of craft and craftivism, she agrees that it is a useful way to think about feminism today. Her understanding of feminism now, however, is that it is “hugely diverse” and covers a large array of identities and topics,

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<sup>288</sup> My interpretation of Bossy Femme’s use of “choice feminism” is that she understands this as a concept that exists internally within Third-wave feminism, and not as a specific type of feminism.

“some of which may not really speak to each other at all.” Like Auther, Groeneveld is hesitant to say that feminism is a strong political force today. She adds that there are many feminists who are advocating for a change in politics, specifically citing the reaction we have seen in recent years to rape culture and other political issues related to the body. However, also like Auther, she points out that women today are still actively involved in politics, although to put it in Auther's words, perhaps their politics are not exactly, “revolutionary.”

Peter Dykhuis also notes that there are “different layers of feminism.” He identifies as a feminist himself but explains that many people he comes across are hesitant to do the same. He explains:

I kind of despair when I hear students... saying, ‘Oh, I don't self-identify as a feminist.’ There is a sense that so much has transpired, that we're so post-feminist, we're so beyond it. And asking them, well ok, how many heads of state are women? How many heads of corporations are women? Where is the power base? There is just this delusion that this generation of women is beyond feminism.

He goes on to explain that working with artists and students in academia has exposed him to a group of people, particularly young people, who do not see a need for feminism.

Despite this, Dykhuis tries to utilize feminism and feminist ideologies to acknowledge what he calls his “blind spots.” He argues that he uses his feminism and the input of others with different identities to help him with projects where he may not recognize his “white male euro-centric privilege.”

Janet Morton, who as I explained previously did not provide a full interview, had this to say about her position as a feminist: “I do consider myself a feminist, and I am

aware of the broader political context, and I attempt to critically (and playfully) address some of these issues and concerns in my work.” Like Dykhuis, Morton aligns herself with feminism and does so with a certain amount of comfort. During my interview with Sarah Quinton, instead of identifying as a feminist when I asked her, she laughed and said, “Well, you know my work! What do you think, I'm curious?” Instead of aligning herself with feminism directly, she instead states, “I mean, what I am interested in is opening up an understanding of the world through the lens of textiles. That's really profoundly my interest. And what keeps me going.”

Coral Short on the other hand aligns herself with feminism directly. She says of her practice, “... yes, I am proud to be part of the [sic] third-wave which takes trans, race, class, and ableism into account.” At another point during the interview, Coral Short states, “Yes, I definitely see my practice as feminist.” However, at the same time she recognizes the vastness of feminism and acknowledges the differences that exist even within feminism by saying, “But feminism, like everything, is always shifting and changing. Hopefully we can create positive change for the next generation.” Coral Short's goal is to create a gender inclusive political stance, and points out that it is a huge part of her work as a crafts person. Queer identity, “Queerness, feminism, and textiles go hand in hand for many of these contemporary artists as they reclaim craft in their own unique ways. These installation, film, and performance fabricators are pushing the edges of craft into a new feminist generation for all genders.”

### **Craftivism + Feminism: Interpreting their Connection**

The purpose of exploring how producers define and identify with the concepts of

“feminism” and “craftivism” is simply to better understand the intention behind the production of “craftivism” both as a physical practice and as a political ideology. My research questions explicitly ask how craftivists contribute to maintaining and/or reconstructing contemporary feminism, how craftivists understand the theoretical and political context of their art, and if they see themselves as part of an activist or feminist movement. The interview responses highlighted within this chapter demonstrate how some cultural producers of craftivism understand the political nature of their work. What has come through most clearly in my discussions is that craftivism and feminism are not easily defined. Both isms have a wide variety of interpretations and can be interpreted in many ways.

In recent years there has been a trend in shaping an understanding of “feminism” as “feminism(s),” so maybe “craftivism” can be understood as “craftivism(s),” because it is clear that there is no one unifying definition for what it represents. For some people who are involved in the “craft movement” as producers, craftivism is a form of political expression. For others, craftivism is understood as a privileged pursuit as a type of craft activism practiced by a particular type of person (young, urban, white, middle class). What is unifying about all the producers interviewed was the commitment to the plurality that exists within both feminism and craftivism. Regardless of the differences of opinion in defining craftivism and feminism, all of the producers occupy a position within a community involved in craft.

Returning to my research questions, I think it is clear that those involved in the cultural production of craft activism seem to understand that the work produced in the name of craftivism is part of a politicized discourse that incorporates the ideologies of



feminism, and in particular, Third-wave feminism. Whether or not they themselves identify as feminist or craftivist, there is an acknowledgment amongst those interviewed that fibre-craft produced with a political intention is likely to fall into the category of “craftivism.” And while some agree with, and enjoy the use of the term, others see its potential to be problematic. As Groeneveld states, craftivism itself is associated primarily with younger women and a particular type of “radical” politics that, as Bossy Femme further explains, could be doing more harm than good. So craftivism may already be an exclusive movement, one that incorporates the values of only one specific cultural group: the young, white, middle class woman. The same critique has been made of feminism itself (as explored in the theoretical framework chapter) and it is important that we continue to interrogate the meanings behind craftivism and its production. In Chapter Five, I will continue this investigation and explore how the collective process of making is fundamental to the contemporary understanding of craftivism.

## Chapter Five: Coming Together: Connecting Through Craftivism

During the interviews conducted for this thesis, producers frequently articulated that part of their attraction to craft and craftivism comes from their desire to foster meaningful, human connections. In the previous chapter, I discussed the ways that producers connect with craftivism on a political level. Exploring the producers' relation to feminism and activism, I highlighted their perspectives on their own involvement, as well as the perceived involvement of others, in an attempt to better understand the intended political intention of their articulations of craftivism. In this chapter, I will attempt to enhance our understanding of the producers' political philosophies by exploring the ways in which they form connections through craft and craftivism.<sup>289</sup> I have divided this chapter into three types of "connections": virtual connections, physical connections, and historical connections. By focusing on each of these types of connections I will emphasize the significance and value of the interpersonal nature of craft and craftivism and the creation of political communities.

Almost all of those interviewed for this project focused (at least in part) on how craft and craftivism is about actively engaging in thoughtful labour.<sup>290</sup> Sarah Quinton says of her own experiences as a curatorial director at *The Canadian Textile Museum*, "What I am interested in is opening up an understanding of the world through the lens of textiles. That's really profoundly my interest. And that's what keeps me going." Quinton

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<sup>289</sup> Traditionally, craft has been considered connected through a community of shared materials, and craftivism has expanded this idea to include political or social ideologies.

<sup>290</sup> The only producer who is not included in this chapter is Janet Morton. Morton did not discuss the interpersonal nature of craft and instead discussed craft from a more political, art historical perspective.

emphasizes the significance of textiles in her personal life by highlighting the ways that they function as a tool to inform her everyday experiences. For Quinton, textiles are about the possibility and the potential to create stronger connections with the broader world. Elissa Auther expressed a similar sentiment, stating that craftivism is about taking a step to “embrace ...self-reliance and hand-making as a renewal of one's humanity. There is also a big emphasis on discovering and participating in meaningful kinds of labor.” In other words, craftivism is a purposeful task that is connected to the ways that one experiences everyday life and human interaction. She uses the word “meaningful” to describe the production of craftivism. Bossy Femme expresses a similar opinion, as she too uses fibre craft – and in particular knitting – to form interpersonal connections with others. She explains:

I think a big part of my practice is about expressing love & fondness - I knit a lot of gifts for specific people and it is absolutely a personal way of expressing care for that person in ways that I don't know that purchased gifts can do. Sometimes I want to be like, "I made every stitch of this by hand, for you." The things I make for other people come from a desire to express to someone that they have significance in my life.

For Bossy Femme, Quinton, and Auther, fibre craft is about the act of meaningful production and the expression of humanity. This can be viewed as a kind of collective production.<sup>291</sup>

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<sup>291</sup> There is a strong connection between the concerns of craftivism and the earlier concerns of the studio craft movement. The studio craft movement developed out of William Morris' Arts and Crafts philosophies, referring to a loosely linked group of crafts people that aimed to raise the status of craft to that of fine arts in order to humanize design through simple crafted forms and the honest expression of material and finally focusing on individuality and the politics of joy in labour. Clearly this thesis does not have the scope to address the studio craft movement but it is important to note that there are

In Chapter Two I explained Janet Wolff's theory on collective production. That theory ties in particularly well with this chapter as Wolff emphasizes that no art piece exists in a social vacuum – in other words, no individual art object was ever born from the experiences of only one person. All of those involved in the production of an object – from designers, to curators, to audiences, to muses, to artists – are part of the process of art making and for that reason they have all contributed to the process. The production and reception of art is never truly solitary, and again, this is why we refer to all participants in this project as “producers” - as all of them, despite their role in the process, contribute in some way to the cultural production of craftivism. This chapter focuses on how art, and how art making, are highly influenced by the position of the artist in a broader social context.

In the pages that follow, I explore the collective process of art making to better understand how producers consider the social context of craft and craftivism. In the second of my two original research questions, I asked: How do craftivsts, and fibre artists whose work has been interpreted as craftivist understand the theoretical, social, and political context of their art? Do they see themselves as part of a feminist, or “Gender Justice” movement? Do they understand their work as activist, or craftivist? This chapter will focus on the first portion of my second research question: “How do producers of craftivism understand the theoretical and social context of their work?” I explore this question by explaining that the majority of those involved in the production of craftivism

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connections between the two. For more information on the studio craft movement see Janet Koplos and Bruce Metcalf, *Makers: A History of American Studio Craft*. (Chapel Hill, The U of North Carolina Press, 2010).

understand their work as part of a larger social context, one that is about bringing people together and connecting with others in a variety of unique and interesting ways. I discuss the ways that producers understand the social context of their work, and explore the theoretical implications of collective production.

### **Virtual Togetherness: Craftivism and the Internet**

During the interviews, several producers discussed the idea of an altered geography influenced by the Internet. In fact, many stated that they believed the current form of craftivism has been made possible because of the Internet. Perhaps this is why craftivism has been criticized as a privileged, Western craft practice. According to the producers, the Internet has increased communication and has contributed to the popularity of fibre craft more generally. Websites such as [www.etsy.com](http://www.etsy.com) and [www.ravelry.com](http://www.ravelry.com) are virtual craft-oriented spaces where makers and art-lovers can find patterns, sell their goods, or find inspiration. Betsy Greer credits the Internet as “decreasing the geographical barriers between people, allowing them to meet and talk with people from all corners of the world.” She goes on to say that:

I see the meeting of the fatigue over mass production and the growth of the [sic] internet as the seed that allowed all of this [craftivism] to happen. More people vented their frustration and found like-minded souls, and, then, most importantly, they began to explore options and alternatives. Once we thought about the choices that handmaking can give us in our own wardrobes, a real feeling of rebellion occurred, in daring to take the factory-hidden process of production and recreate it on a smaller scale and with our own hands.

In other words, the Internet has not only contributed to craftivism, for Greer craftivism is

attributable to the Internet. For Greer, the Internet acts as a place for similar people with similar frustrations, to meet, come together, and organize. Using factory and labour conditions as an example, Greer highlights the ways that the Internet inspires people to turn towards crafting in defiance of purchasing cheaply made goods. Like Bossy Femme, Quinton, and Auther, Greer's emphasis is on meaningful production; she suggests that this kind of making is a type of protest made possible, or at least facilitated, through Internet communities.

Bossy Femme says that the Internet played a significant role in exposing her to craft and the ideas that surround craft practice. She has been a part of online craft communities since she was a teenager. Bossy Femme highlights her participation in *Live Journal*<sup>292</sup> communities and *BUST* magazine forums – both of which inspired her to participate in crafting. Suggesting that the Internet was hugely influential in her life, and presumably in the lives of others, she explains, “I would guess that lots of women come to crafts via things like *Tumblr*<sup>293</sup> tutorials. I am absolutely a better knitter because of *Ravelry.com*<sup>294</sup> (3 million users!).” She adds, “Oh and *etsy!* Giving people a place to sell their handmade stuff and also a place to access handmade work that they couldn't get locally was and still is huge.” Bossy Femme has been part of online craft communities for over a decade and these craft-oriented virtual spaces inspire her to continue crafting. Similarly, Coral Short uses the Internet to connect with other makers for personal and

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<sup>292</sup> Live Journal is an online service that hosts blogs.

<sup>293</sup> Tumblr is an image and text based social media website that is formatted in a blog style.

<sup>294</sup> Ravelry is a database of craft related resources including patterns and forums.

collaborative projects. For Short, even Facebook has created new avenues for meeting people and connecting with like-minded individuals. The Internet, says Short, has changed the way she works as an artist. Altering geographical borders, the Internet has allowed artists from all over the world to contribute to her projects and collaborate with her work.

While the use of the Internet in connection with art has its advantages, there are also disadvantages that come along with it. As Coral Short says, “We live in a fast new age with all its pluses and minuses, but craft in fact helps us to slow down.” So while the Internet has in some ways made craftivism possible by increasing people’s chances to form both virtual and physical communities based on a set of shared ideas, craftivism (like craft) is simultaneously understood as anti-technology and part of a gravitation towards “slow living.” This irony is fascinating because while we live in a “fast new age” as Coral Short explains, the practice of fibre related craftivism is really anything but fast – and in fact, the process of fibre craft is often remarkably time consuming. Short explains that, “Crafting is a slow, reflective and meditative process in which to release our politics into the world.” Liz Groeneveld has a similar sentiment to Short, stating, “I think too that the rise of the [sic] internet has had a really, really big impact. You can read craftivism or the desire to make things, to do things that are fairly slow paced as a response to capitalism and the technologies.” So like Greer, Groeneveld sees craftivism as a response to capitalist labour conditions, but in addition to this, also sees it as a reaction to a perceived fast paced and less personal way of life that the Internet has created. So while craftivism is made possible because of the Internet, it is also a response to it – a

methodical, slow, and creative reaction to capitalism.

While Groeneveld cites the fast-paced life associated with the Internet as a negative, she also notes that technology will continue to open up new worlds for craftivism. Peter Dykhuis agrees. When citing the importance of technology, and the changes in the art world associated with it, he notes that “there’s that gaining of [something] through this kind of technology but there is also a loss of it somewhere else.” Despite this, producers are generally hopeful that technology will continue to create new frontiers for craftivist artists. As Groeneveld states, “ I can imagine possibilities for crafting that are somehow also integrated with online networking technologies. And that stuff is already happening – but I feel like it will continue to happen in the future and potentially get developed in interesting ways.” However, it is important to note that the participants in this thesis did not emphasize the privilege that dictates who has access to the Internet and its attendant technologies.

Some people who participate in craft are unable to use the Internet as a resource to connect with other crafters and to learn more about crafting.<sup>295</sup> In fact, the International Telecommunications Union reports that worldwide only 40% of individuals use the Internet.<sup>296</sup> That means that four billion people do not use the Internet and 90% of those people are from developing countries.<sup>297</sup> And while these numbers are decreasing and more and more people have access to the technology and infrastructure involved in

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<sup>295</sup> Ibid.

<sup>296</sup> International Telecommunications Union, “The World in 2014: ICT Facts and Figures,” *itu.int*, <http://www.itu.int/en/ITU-D/Statistics/Pages/facts/default.aspx> (accessed 12 May 2014).

<sup>297</sup> Ibid.



Internet usage, the majority of people worldwide are still not using the Internet.

### **Creating Physical Craftivist Spaces**

In the previous section I discussed how craftivism has brought people together virtually, yet it is important to identify that craft and the political activities of craftivism bring people together in a variety of physical ways. One interesting aspect of craftivism, and more generally fibre-craft, are the ways in which it is a visible part of the social landscape. Whether it is someone knitting in public (as Bossy Femme does when she knits in bars and coffee shops), being part of a knitting group, yarn bombing, or wearing handmade items, fibre craft is a part of many social and aesthetic landscapes. Peter Dykhuis does not knit or crochet himself, however he is interested in the ways that people organize around craft. He says, “It’s totally fascinating that The Loop<sup>298</sup> exists and that there are cultures of people coming together for good old fashioned knitting bees. I find that totally fascinating.” Bossy Femme is a part of that very culture. She says, “I go to a regular knitting group that attracts mostly women,” adding, “We do a lot of skill-sharing that is to do with knitting, and definitely it is a space where we talk about all kinds of things, sometimes feminist, sometimes not.” In this kind of organizing, crafting becomes the central theme that brings people together to form a physical, social group.

Coral Short expresses a similar sentiment, saying that fibre craft is a “social hobby among feminine type people – a place to gossip, talk and create community.” As noted in my literature review, social organization around craft, as well as the visibility of this

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<sup>298</sup> The Loop is an independently owned wool and craft shop in downtown Halifax.

phenomenon, seems to be growing. There are also other types of craft organizing like those that Coral Short practices which truly embody the notion of shaping craft communities for the purpose of collective production. For Short and her peers, crafting is about creating new social landscapes that focus on bringing together a variety of diverse groups. Many of her art pieces integrate performance, fibre and sound, and are also often displayed in public spaces or gatherings. She says of her own experience as a queer person:

The world can be a hard place and we are creating social architecture of queer joy (which in itself is a form of resistance) within our work. I also see humour in our art as laughter is a good inroad towards revolution – if you can make people smile or giggle you are well on your way to opening their minds.

She and her peers use craftivism to create a community amongst themselves, and to form much needed bonds and alliances with those beyond that community. Short and her peers also engage with audiences in an attempt to create awareness and acceptance of “queerness” outside of their community. This emphasizes the ways that art making is a collective process – one which is focused on those who have created it as well as its intended audience.

For Short, craftivism is about combining resistance and community building. She states that as feminists, their “strength comes [from] working and communicating with each other.” When I spoke to Coral for this interview she was in the process of planning a conference in New York City centered on the concept of craftivism. The conference – simply to be called “Craftivism” was held on July 12,13, and 14<sup>th</sup>.2013.



Fig. 7: Event poster for *Craftivism* conference, 2013, image used with permission from Coral Short.

The event poster featured above showcases the work of dozens of artists from around the world. In the curatorial statement<sup>299</sup> for *Craftivism*, Short described the event as:

A welcoming art gathering that showcases an emerging generation of artists for three days. Queerness, feminism and textiles go hand in hand for many of these contemporary artists, as they rethink and reclaim craft in their own unique ways... These artists use their skill sets to fight patriarchy, transphobia and homophobia by creating a pop up community together in the lush blooming garden that is Le Petit Versailles.

Short’s goal in holding this conference was to create a new, inviting “social architecture.”

<sup>299</sup> To see Coral Short’s full curatorial statement, see Appendix C.

The three-day event featured performances centered on textiles, a series of workshops on Saturday and Sunday, a potluck dinner, and a screening of craft and craft related films.

Short's event was designed to show that craftivists support each other and that they are "flourishing."<sup>300</sup> In her artist statement, Short states that the conference was about "intimate community building."<sup>301</sup> The creation of a physical space allows for producers to come together to be "inspired," and as Coral Short states during her interview, this is made possible through not only online communication, but also what she calls "North American travelling privilege" – or the increased accessibility of travel for the middle class. In her curatorial statement for this conference, Short also stated that, "it is usually our grandmothers, mothers and best friends who show us how to thread a sewing machine, to embroider, to rug hook or to cast on. Each artist brings their own particular approach to crafting which results in diverse queer artist practices and methodologies – all which aggrandize our communities." In the next section of my thesis I will discuss the concept of generational crafting and building connections in that way – a theme that came up repeatedly during the interviews.

### **Generational Crafting: Craftivism, Women and Connecting with History**

Another important theme that came up continually during interviews was that of forming historical connections through craft. For many of those involved with craft, thinking about the generational and historical practice of craft was hugely important. Five

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<sup>300</sup> Ibid.

<sup>301</sup> Ibid.

of the eight people interviewed brought up the theme of “generational connections” at some point during their interviews. For many, crafting, and in particular fibre craft, is a part of creating historical connections – whether they are with their own family members and friends, or with an older generation more broadly. As Elizabeth Groeneveld says, “I think that a lot of knitters particularly will talk about learning from a mother or a friend who learned from their grandmother or whatever so there’s actually ways that craft can enable a lot of really interesting sorts of inter-generational alliances.” Bossy Femme is one of those knitters. She says of her own practice as an avid crafter:

When I make things I feel especially connected to my own family's matriarchal history, in some ways. I inherited my grandma's knitting needles and yarn stash, and I like knowing that we used some of the same tools, even though I didn't learn to knit from her. I remember my grandma, my mom, and I crafting together, and that is important to me. I remember wearing and loving things made for me by my grandma and my mom, and that is a big way that I connect with my family.

In other words, even though Bossy Femme did not learn to knit from her family members, the practice of knitting still fosters a connection to her family history. Like Bossy Femme, Coral Short's maternal family members have been hugely influential in her aesthetic choices. Both her grandmother and mother were sewers, and she says the skills that they passed down to her continue to heavily influence her aesthetic across several mediums of work – even contributing to pieces that are not textile based.

Betsy Greer also feels that producing fibre craft is, in some way, forming a connection between herself and previous generations of women in her family. She says that when she sits down to cross stitch or knit she feels as though she is “honoring past roles and skills of women” and participating in a kind of feminism that encourages

reclamation and is part of a “choice based feminism.”<sup>302</sup> Peter Dykhuis also makes connections between generations of feminists in his family and their participation in fibre craft. He notes that while his wife learned some craft related skills from her mother such as sewing, his daughters have learned a fair amount of fibre craft skills from their grandmother. Like Greer, Dykhuis points out that women in previous generations, such as his own mother in-law, grew up during the depression and were forced to craft out of necessity.<sup>303</sup> Dykhuis states that the current generation of young women craft because they choose to and says that craft has “gone from a necessity to a form of leisure.” However, while previous generations crafted because they needed to, that is not to say that they did not enjoy craft and use it for a form of leisure and self-expression as well.<sup>304</sup> It is also important to point out that many people around the world today still craft out of necessity – whether they are using the goods they made or selling them – craft is an important part of many people’s livelihoods worldwide.

I think it is important to point out, however, that the experience of participating in craft in order to connect with previous familial generations is not necessarily universal. Sarah Quinton says, “I know some artists who say, ‘My family didn’t make a thing’ and it wasn’t until those younger artists had an opportunity to explore that they learned how to sew or knit or crochet or make and participate [in fibre].” Therefore, it is clear that learning craft from mothers or grandmothers certainly is not a universal experience.

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<sup>302</sup> The concept of choice feminism and its relevance to this project was discussed in the previous chapter.

<sup>303</sup> Peter Dykhuis perceives this to not only be a generational difference, but a class difference. The theme of “class” will be further explored in the next chapter.

<sup>304</sup> For evidence, see Rozsika Parker’s *A Subversive Stitch*.

Regardless of who teaches the producers their techniques, however, there is a sentiment that the practice of fibre art production helps some connect more closely with past generations of women who are not even a part of their family. Bossy Femme discusses her involvement in physical craft organizing by saying that:

One thing it does is provide a space where younger women get to meet & interact with older women, and those relationships are ones that I don't think I would be able to create independently of the group. I feel like these sorts of relationships are particularly enriching & have definitely broadened my perspective on lots of issues.

So even those who are not directly connected to fibre craft through family members can still experience that connection by participating in an activity or a group that is practiced by many women across multiple generations.

While many young women see the connection between their work and the work of previous generations of women, others do not. In fact, much of craft marketing is currently aimed at making sure that “new” work by young women is viewed as separate from their grandmothers. Marketing aimed at both selling work and inviting new participants in craft often uses phrases that put down grandmothers and praise the new found “hip-ness” of craft. As Quinton explains:

If I see one more headline that says something like, ‘not just your granny’s afghan’ I think I’ll jump off a bridge. Never have these things really been *that* benign and to suggest that they have been... I think that reveals ignorance, to be honest. And so they think, ‘Oh aren’t I clever, I put a little twist on granny’s afghan production.’ These are things that we value whole heartedly as a culture, as individuals, as families – and it’s all changing, for sure, it’s all in transition, hot and heavy transition – but none the less it is changing.

Quinton makes it obvious that she is sick of hearing the sentiment of “not your granny” in the fibre art community because this phrase has become part of the advertising industry’s

common rhetoric. She also explains that while some makers mock grandmothers and emphasize the importance of distinguishing their work from that of older women, they simultaneously place value on particular cultural practices primarily associated with older women. This is true for makers like Jenny Hart who is one of the most prominent artists in the American craft scene.<sup>305</sup> Jenny's website, *Sublime Stitching Embroidery* includes a banner across the top of the screen that reads, "Sublime Stitching Embroidery: This ain't your grandma's embroidery."

What is obvious is that Hart makes a tongue-and-cheek distinction between her work (which should be seen as "cool") and a grandmother's work (which should be seen as "uncool"). And while a lot of Hart's work is based on modern themes and problems, her techniques and style are based on traditional embroidery practices. Despite Hart's insistence that her work is "not your grannys" it is important to note that granny's work is actually part of a specialized art market. Quinton explains that items like embroidered hankies and aprons are of high cultural and also monetary value. Of this, she says "I think it's an extension of embracing the relatively recent past. So I think the personal memory is there ... I think young women are looking for – and have – a very rich culture to riff off of." Additionally, she emphasizes that while textile production does come primarily from "women's worlds" it is practiced by a wide variety of people who come from multiple backgrounds and gender identities.

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<sup>305</sup> Levine, *Handmade Nation*, 36.



## **Building Connections: Virtual, Physical, and Historical**

In this chapter I have demonstrated how producers emphasize the variety of ways that they interpret craft and craftivism as an important part of building connections and organizing social groups. This chapter is designed to answer part of my second research question: “How do producers of craftivism understand the theoretical and social context of their work?” Producers understand the social context of craft and craftivism as one dedicated primarily to forming stronger connections to communities and honouring personal history. Whether communities are virtual or physical, each of the producers highlight in their own ways that they understand craftivism as being part of a broader social network and the historical past. And while some makers embrace those connections, figures like Sarah Quinton point out that some makers attempt to sever them. Instead of accepting and appreciating craft’s undeniable cultural association with older generations of women, many craftivists actively work to separate themselves from this identity.<sup>306</sup> This makes craft and craftivism more marketable and appealing to younger women who, as Groeneveld explains in the previous chapter, are looking for that fun, colourful, radical kind of crafting.

However, as Quinton also explains in this chapter, there are also many people who value the work produced by older women and also appreciate the significance of generational crafting. This is exemplified in the book, *My Grandmother's Knitting: Family Stories and Inspired Knits from Top Designers* where author Larissa Brown

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<sup>306</sup> My research focuses on the ways that craftivists connect with older generations. Most participants reflected upon past generations. However, it is interesting to imagine how things will be different for future generations of craftivists.

explores the generational connections between knitting patterns and young makers. And there are even those like Bossy Femme who did not learn to participate in fibre craft from family members yet still understand the significance of skill sharing between generations while also appreciating the historical value of the practice. These connections are part of the networks that shape modern craft and what makes craftivism possible. All of those involved in these extended networks are part of the social production of art and have contributed to the collective production of craftivism.

## **Chapter Six: Who Participates in Craftivism: Value Freedom and Privilege in Craftivist Practice**

In the previous chapter, I discussed the ways that producers understand the social context of craft and craftivism. I explore how producers interpret craft as social – as an act that can form stronger connections and communities, and simultaneously be a part of honouring a shared or personal history. This chapter delves more deeply into the question: “what makes a craftivist?” In the pages that follow I discuss who participates in craftivism and how this is correlated to gender, race, and class. I also discuss the concept of value-freedom<sup>307</sup> in the process of making and investigate the popular understanding of craft. This chapter examines the stereotypical image of craft producers to help shape a better understanding of who produces craft and why and how craftivism can be considered a privileged pursuit both historically and contemporaneously. I have written this chapter in an effort to explore how craftivism relates to contemporary feminism, who participates in craft, and why they choose to do so.

### **Everyday Life, Class, and Craft**

Many producers who are currently immersed in the art world focus on the

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<sup>307</sup> Janet Wolff’s concept of “Value-Freedom” was discussed at length in the Chapter Two.

importance of “the everyday” – their lives, their work, and their politics.<sup>308</sup> Craftivism often reflects the experiences of the everyday by combining aesthetic and functional values to connect the practice of making with the routine of everyday experiences in a unique way.<sup>309</sup> Sarah Quinton says that “most art practice today works with the ideas of everyday. The richness of everyday life. The everyday material. Everyday ideas. Everyday experiences.” As de Certeau emphasizes, the ways in which one interprets their everyday experience is deeply rooted in an individual’s role in the broader realm society.<sup>310</sup> The concept of “the everyday” is generalized and not universal, and while de Certeau was not referring to craft, his theories can be applied here because they are based on the practice of the mundane – a category that fibre craft can easily slip into. According to de Certeau, the experience of “everyday” is dependent upon a person's individual perspective, which is deeply influenced by their identity.<sup>311</sup> So, de Certeau asserts that even something simple (in this case the general practice of “craft”) is part of a complicated social hierarchy that is dependent upon gender, race, and class.

During my interview with Peter Dykhuis, the current curator of the Dalhousie Gallery, he points out that for him, when discussing participation in craft and craftivism, the analytical focus should be on class:

Now, in your generation, my daughter’s generation, there is no

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<sup>308</sup> De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, xxii.

<sup>309</sup> Ibid.

<sup>310</sup> Ibid., 6.

<sup>311</sup> Ibid.

necessity to do it [participate in craft]. It's like people discovering typewriters. Or Polaroid cameras. It's old technology that was really relevant many, many years ago but we just note with a certain amount of humour. But that discussion doesn't come up of class. *The Loop* is downtown on Barrington, there is a great store in Ottawa, we've stopped at PEI Belfast mini mills and picked up beautiful things<sup>312</sup> – but now it's a cultural object, they're cultural machines, and it's all really, really expensive. I would think that even my grandmother would look at that and not understand it. If you're looking at it from an immigrant, or dirt poor working class family. So it's gone from a necessity to a form of leisure. So that's a long way to say that I do agree with the term [craftivism] but it has to be couched in these historical shifts and again, class, and necessity is possibly not addressed through it.

Dykhuis insists that craft needs to be complicated by including an analysis of class as part of the present day problems within craftivist practice. And, as Dykhuis also says, this is not done often enough.

As I have explored in the literature review, historically, craft has been part of a complex hierarchy associated with class. Between the elevation of “high art” or “fine art,” and the devalued participation in “handmade,” craft has played an interesting part in the history of “high” and “low” art. While some theorists and social commentators argue that these ideas are a thing of the past and that craft can now be considered as important as fine art,<sup>313</sup> this is not true in my view. During my discussions with producers, the complicated hierarchies that still exist within craft practice became apparent. These hierarchies are even further complicated when incorporated into the concept of craftivism.

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<sup>312</sup> In Prince Edward Island, Canada there are a number of antique mills still involved in the production of textiles.

<sup>313</sup> Glenn Adamson, *Thinking Through Craft*, 123.

When I began this research, I did not necessarily consider how the concept of craft activism would confound this hierarchy between art and craft. In the following discussion, I will explore the ways that the production of craftivism has complicated the pre-existing hierarchical relationship between art, craft, and craftivism. Before doing so I should point out the historical moments of privilege that provide the background to craftivism as we know it today.

William Morris, the founder of the Arts and Crafts Movement, came from a wealthy background, and his privileged position haunted him throughout his career and currently remains a contentious issue within Arts and Crafts scholarship.<sup>314</sup> While he was an ardent socialist and follower of Karl Marx, he could not enact these ideologies in his own craft production.<sup>315</sup> His company, Morris and Co., paid workers well, but never enough to afford the craft objects they laboured to create.<sup>316</sup> Thus Morris realized the socio-economic and class distinctions at play in craft, yet neglected to overturn them.<sup>317</sup> As he famously said late in life, he was frustrated “spending...life ministering to the swinish luxury of the rich.”<sup>318</sup> Morris had discovered what every craftsman operating in the free market economy has also realized, that there are limits to artistic rebellion in the capitalist system, particularly when it comes to the crafts.

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<sup>314</sup> Morris, “The Revival of Handicraft,” 155.

<sup>315</sup> Wendy Kaplan and Elizabeth Cummings, “Arts and Crafts Movement,” 4.

<sup>316</sup> Ibid.

<sup>317</sup> Ibid., 223.

<sup>318</sup> Ibid.

More recently, late twentieth-century attempts to subvert capitalism through craft-based activity emerged in the form of zines, which are often considered an important part of Third-wave feminism.<sup>319</sup> The word zine simply describes an independently published piece of writing, often comparable to a magazine that is not widely distributed and is often made on rudimentary publication technology like photocopiers.<sup>320</sup> Zines and the cultures that surround them became popular in North America in the 1990s and existed then, and continue to exist, as a form of anti-capitalist independent publishing.<sup>321</sup> Zines often have a political bent and are frequently the focus of social gatherings like zine fairs, and other social events such as readings and write-ins.<sup>322</sup> For scholar Elizabeth Groeneveld, zines, Third-wave feminist culture, and craftivism are intimately connected. She explains:

I see crafting as coming out of a whole bunch of different areas, 1) Out of the DIY ethos of the zine culture, that was so influential within [sic] Third Wave Feminism. I don't exactly know why that's the case. But what I think is that it also has to do with the rise of mass culture figures like Martha Stewart. There's a sort of interface between mainstream culture and subculture and I think that craftivism is sort of in conversation with both of those things. So yeah, it's interesting because I would go to zine fairs and the late 1990s and early 2000s and I'd see zines on the tables and some craft stuff - but mostly zines. Then a few years later it was like more and more and more crafts. So it's like the people who were making the zines – and many of them are still making zines – started also doing this other stuff (crafting) as well. I can see how actually those things feed into each other really nicely. Because

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<sup>319</sup>Stephen Duncombe, *Notes From Underground: zines and the politics of alternative culture* (Portland: Microcosm, 2008,) 12.

<sup>320</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>321</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>322</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

they're both very material practices.

Groeneveld observes that craft, and in particular craftivism, is connected to the physical manifestation of anti-capitalist material practices. Like zines, craftivism has become part of a DIY aesthetic, one that is connected to particular lifestyles and DIY culture associated with Third-wave feminist activism and organizing.

Craft theorist Elissa Auther points out that the “new” image of craft (i.e. - DIY, hipsterdom, et cetera) can be viewed in a multitude of ways. She emphasizes that, “in some circles, like DIY or indie youth, craft is perceived as a serious, progressive creative and activist outlet. Other sources promote craft as a mere hobby. Still others dismiss it altogether and privilege high art.” Auther is not claiming that craft is and should be separated from the category of “high art” but instead explains that this distinction is still prevalent. And while it is certainly not always true, high art and capitalist success are often associated with the gallery where art is displayed as a rare object of unique and tremendous value.

Sarah Quinton discusses the institution of “the gallery space” and its connection to the art/craft hierarchy. Quinton explains the gallery's relationship to craftivism and the concept of status or hierarchy. In her own experience, she is unsure as to whether craftivist work truly belongs in the gallery:

I guess a museum or a gallery is not necessarily the best place for these things [craftivist works] and I find that there is a great deal of irony and I think it's because many of these artists are quite young. On one hand they are the DIYers. They're politically engaged, they're renegades, but on the other hand they want an exhibition at the museum or the gallery. I'm not convinced it's necessarily the best place for that kind of work. I question that often.



Her own contemplation of where craftivism is displayed most effectively is also interesting. She says that instead of focusing on getting craftivist pieces into the gallery, craftivism might be better showcased by using a more “guerrilla presence” in order to be most politically effective. She lists malls, street corners, and empty storefronts as examples of effective places to display craftivism. Later on in the interview she takes this thought further by saying that “there are many, many ways to engage with an institution” and that “the hierarchy of having an exhibition is kind of the high-end.” By choosing to display items outside of the gallery craftivists can critique the gallery system. As Quinton States:

Craftivism doesn't always “fit” into the gallery space, nor should it, especially if one views them through the lens of anti-commodity. If these objects are produced to make political statements regarding race, class, gender or any of the conditions that inform a free market economy critique then it seems contradictory to desire gallery inclusion, when that space is fraught with the same exclusionary privilege that these works are fighting.

For many, even the category of “craft” being associated with their work is an unwanted categorical assumption. Janet Morton did not want to be associated with craftivism or craft. When I emailed her to enquire about whether she wanted to participate in the project, she responded by saying:

Although I often use materials and techniques associated with craft and the domestic (“women's work”), I do not identify my work as craft. I am a visual artist. My education, and the context for my work is contemporary art practice. I do not say this with any hierarchical motivation, simply that I am not a fibre artist, nor a craftsperson and do not see my work in the context of craftivism.

With her permission, I use this as an example of how, for many artists, the word “craft” is not a welcome association to their work. And while Morton herself strongly emphasizes that this is not associated with any hierarchical aims, the reality exists that craft, art, and craftivism are still often viewed as three very different things. Quinton, however, believes that the hierarchies are less potent and strict as they once were and comments that “the categories are breaking down.” She emphasizes that “the idea of “fine craft” isn’t as prevalent as it was 15 year ago.” But it is still important to remember that many craftspeople, artists, et cetera. insist on maintaining the distinction between “DIY” and the work of a “Fine Craftsperson” and this distinction is both contemporaneously and historically based on privilege and class. Considering this ongoing debate over terminology, it is important to question whether or not this distinction can be read as an indication that the political aims of some artists and craftspeople have not been fully realized, and that their privileged positions have not been critically assessed.

### **This Ain't Your Grandma's Knitting: The Stereotypical Fibre Craftsperson**

As briefly discussed in the previous chapter, the intersection of age and craft is important to consider when analyzing participation in craft and craftivism. In popular culture and media representations, the common image of the crafter – and in particular, the fibre crafter – is of a much older woman, often a “grandma.” This stereotype was mentioned repeatedly during interviews, and its imagery is juxtaposed with another image of the crafter: a young, hip, urban and vibrant young woman. Groeneveld, Faculty

Lecturer and Chair in Women and Gender Studies at McGill University, states that:

I think that in pop culture those representations are frequently used in a way that sets up this kind of binary that is like – “this is not your grandma’s knitting”. Older ladies are frequently cast as a sort of foil... you know, craftivism is cool because it’s young and because it’s new and because the people who are doing it have blue hair (or whatever). I find that really problematic. And also because it renders older women as uncool and suggests that they’re apolitical and also I think that a lot of knitters particularly will talk about learning from a mother or a friend who learned from their grandmother or whatever so there’s actually ways that craft can enable a lot of really interesting sort of inter-generational alliances that I think are not really accounted for or even talked about all in mainstream media representation.

Her analysis of the phrase, “this ain't your grandma's knitting” is intriguing and complex.

Groeneveld argues that younger knitters enforce a binary between themselves and older knitters in a purposeful way as a way to distinguish themselves as “cool.” She goes on to suggest, as explained previously, “when we use the term craftivism it’s often associated with a particular generation, as well. So, I think about other kinds of crafting like church ladies who knit hats for premature babies or for relief efforts. That stuff is generally not being called craftivism...” This is an important distinction to make: while craft is popularly associated with an older generation, craftivism is associated with youth.

Whether this is because the definition of craftivism does not encompass the true scope of craft activism, or whether craftivist movements really are exclusively made up of a younger demographic, I cannot be certain. For many young women the desire is to “reclaim” craft – but from whom are they reclaiming it? Older woman? Past generations? While this thesis will not be exploring the language of reclamation within craft, I think that it is an important arena within craft that has not yet been explored.

Whether or not it is a conscious effort, it is clear that craftivism is culturally branded in a way that makes it seem fresh and new. This has meant that it is also associated primarily with a generation of younger women. In the literature review, I discussed the popularity of craft and explored the concept of “the new knitter.” While we do not have exact statistics on who is participating in crafting, it is frequently assumed that “the new knitter” is fairly young, hip and urban.<sup>323</sup> In the same way that Third-wave feminist ephemera like zines and riot grrrl music were strongly associated with youth culture in the 1990s,<sup>324</sup> craftivism’s use of punk aesthetic tends to elevate craftivism as an art that is aesthetically recognizable as subversive or radical in some way. This aesthetic – which has been associated with very young women for many years – identifies the crafts as radical.<sup>325</sup> So in many ways, craftivism can be seen as highly problematic as it focuses on youth culture despite the fact that knitting – the medium used most often within craftivism - is frequently associated with older women.

### **Race/Geography and Craft**

So far in this chapter I have discussed class privilege in craftivist practice while also briefly exploring the ways in which age comes into play within the craftivist movement. Race is also a key point of analysis when investigating value-freedom in art

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<sup>323</sup> Mandy Moore and Leanne Prain, *Yarn Bombing*, 19.

<sup>324</sup> Duncombe, 15.

<sup>325</sup> It is important to reiterate that this study is missing an important demographic of craft: the older woman or grandmother. All of those interviewed for this thesis were between the ages of 25 and 58 when these interviews took place.

and considering the implications of who participates in craftivism and why. In my online explorations – especially in the fall of 2013 - I found several great examples of craftivists from around the world. One group in Sarajevo, Bosnia is called ‘Yarn Bombing.’<sup>326</sup> The group consists of around twenty members, both male and female, and together they work on a variety of projects including making hats for homeless children and yarn bombing demonstrations.<sup>327</sup> Their group is active on Facebook, and also on their official website <http://yarnbombingih.wordpress.com> where they discuss political issues. Another example of a now defunct nonprofit organization called ‘Adithi’ was established in Bhusura, India at some point in the mid 1990s.<sup>328</sup> This women’s organization transformed the traditional kantha (embroidery of quilts) into a way to discuss the concerns of Indian women.<sup>329</sup> The themes expressed in the quilt include prostitution, AIDs, domestic abuse and rape.<sup>330</sup>

As I discussed in my methodology chapter, I had never intended to focus entirely on North American craftivists. My goal was to include a variety of craftivists from all over the world and to make sure that my case studies were from a large and diverse background. The participants in my project all turned out to be from North America (and

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<sup>326</sup> Yarn Bombing, *Yarn Bombing Official Facebook Page*, <https://www.facebook.com/YarnBombingSarajevo> (accessed 2 May 2014).

<sup>327</sup> Ibid.

<sup>328</sup> William Goodrich Jones, “Embroidered Quilts from the Adithi Collective: Indian Women’s Health Concerns,” 20 Oct 2003, *Uic.edu*, <http://www.uic.edu/depts/lib/news/archive/2003/feature0065.shtml> (accessed 2 May 2014).

<sup>329</sup> Ibid.

<sup>330</sup> Ibid.

more specifically Southern Canada and the Northern United States). The producers involved in this project are aware of the fact that the majority of those participating in visible craftivist communities are white. Groeneveld states:

I feel like the way that craftivism gets circumscribed is as kind of a white, maybe middle class, kind of thing... not necessarily that the people participating in it... they're not necessarily middle class... but you have to have a certain amount of time to be able to do it. And there may in fact be other folks who are doing similar kinds of work who I just don't know about. So I am hesitant... I'm really hesitant... to say this is just a white girl thing because I think that really kind of erases the participation of folks of colour or differently gendered folks who are participating in craftivist stuff.

Her analysis of craftivism in connection to race shows that it is impossible to know exactly who is participating in craftivism but it does suggest that those whose work is “visible” and “known” are white, well educated, and middle class. Throughout this thesis, it has become more and more clear that even the term “craftivism” is complex; there are some who happily adopt the term and embrace it as a part of their identity and those who reject it in its entirety. And then, there are those who have not even heard of the term. Again, considering craftivism as a privileged pursuit is important, as it allows one to ask important questions. For example, are women who participate in charitable craft pursuits craftivists? Are women in developing countries who create things for charitable purposes craftivists as well? Can craftivism be aligned with projects that fit comfortably within free market capitalism, like the artisan fundraising efforts of non-profit charities? Is craftivism limited to those with easy access to Internet craft communities? With such a subjective definition these are not easy questions to answer.

However, they are important questions to pose, and questions like these allow us to return to the historical roots of craft activism. William Morris may have been frustrated by the capitalist constraints placed upon his desire for ethical craft labour and providing beautiful objects for all classes of people, but does the position of privilege mean that those enjoying this largesse should stop their efforts for social improvement through craft? If the Third-wave feminist activities such as Riot Grrrl and Zine trends of the late twentieth century had not been filled with political potency would they still have led to new craft strategies, like the alternative craft fairs they influenced? If those craft fairs are now filled with beautiful objects that cater to Morris's "swinish rich" and not with zines that contain overt political and social commentaries are they automatically rendered hypocritical? For scholars like Groeneveld, the politics of what is considered the Third-wave of feminism are intricately connected to craftivism, feeding into one another through a complex historic relationship. Because of this it is important to apply the same critiques that have been allotted to Third-wave feminist activities such as Riot Grrrl and Zine culture to craftivism.<sup>331</sup>

Various aspects of craftivism are tied to problematic practices also associated with Third-wave feminist activism.<sup>332</sup> Bossy Femme, blogger and cultural figure, discusses how she considers issues of gentrification and poverty to be tied up in aspects of craftivist practice. In the quote below, Bossy Femme explains that yarn bombing, a practice described in the literature review of this thesis, is related to craftivism. She wrote in her

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<sup>331</sup> Pentney, 3.

<sup>332</sup> Groeneveld, 487.

email interview:

Certainly some people see "yarn bombing" as in some way political or feminist, but I kind of hate yarn bombing in most spaces because what it tends to signify (in my opinion) is white feminists taking up too much space. It is a great [sic] interventionary practice when done well (I think I remember some yarn bombing during the Quebec student strikes, for instance), but it so often... isn't. I have seen poor/poc<sup>333</sup> activists talk about yarn bombing as a sure sign that a neighbourhood has been gentrified,<sup>334</sup> for example. And now that there are some instances of yarn bombing being mobilized by police,<sup>335</sup> I kinda feel like it is being appropriated by the state in ways that further marginalize poor communities and I am not down with that.

Like Groeneveld's analysis, Bossy Femme's concern with yarn bombing in connection to gentrification ties in notions of class, craft, and race in a complicated way. For Bossy Femme, yarn bombing is a part of the problematic efforts of some North American feminists. The concept of yarn bombing as wasteful – whether in terms of the use of the time to participate in yarn bombing or the wastefulness of material resources that could perhaps be otherwise utilized - is extremely important because of this issues relation to gentrification and poverty.

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<sup>333</sup> POC is a common acronym for "people of colour".

<sup>334</sup> Gentrification is defined in the Merriam Webster Dictionary as "the process of renewal and rebuilding accompanying the influx of middle-class or affluent people into deteriorating areas that often displaces poorer residents," *Merriam-webster.com*, <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/gentrification> (accessed 2 April 2014).

<sup>335</sup> Bossy Femme is referring to this event in Leicester, England where the local police force started an initiative that employed guerrilla knitting techniques in an effort to make neighbourhoods with high crime rates feel safer. For more information visit: [http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/2013/03/05/guerrilla-knitting-used-police-leicestershire-\\_n\\_2810094.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/2013/03/05/guerrilla-knitting-used-police-leicestershire-_n_2810094.html).



It is important to understand why and how craftivism can contribute to gentrification and poverty, particularly because my analysis leads me to believe that most feminists do not want to contribute to those patterns. It is undeniable, as Bossy Femme so clearly explains, that some forms of craftivism can indeed be interpreted as oppressive behavior. While much of my analysis is based on the sociological elements of craftivist involvement, the art-object which craftivism produces must still be considered. That object, like the makers themselves, takes up physical space and resources, and where it is placed and who places it there is deeply significant. Reaching this conclusion is essential because in order to fully understand how craftivism can become a powerful tool for social change, it is integral that craftivism's misuses are also understood and discussed. Both Bossy Femme and Groeneveld ask whether or not craftivism a "white girl thing", and if it is, why should it be considered anything but another problematic exclusionary political effort? Is it a tool for discussion around race, class, gender, and sexuality in a way that can make change?

Some of the producers interviewed for this thesis argue that craftivism has the potential to make positive change. In her contemplation of the meaning of craftivism Quinton argues that craftivism is, at its very root, intended to be inclusive and solve problems of privilege. As she explains:

What I've seen internationally, and even locally is that [craft] is about sustainability and affordability. I think it's about having more control over one's life. But also access to "stuff", too. New craft practices are focused on design, and also social practices. For example, solar panels in handmade handbags that are then distributed in developing countries to charge their cell phone batteries. While it might be arrogant to assume that they have cell phones but in many developing countries

they do [have them]. That's a pretty neat way of parlaying one's own creativity into a real world dynamic. It improves the quality of life.

For Quinton, craftivism is about creating a more critical discourse about race, privilege, class, and people's access to "stuff." Betsy Greer shares this attitude. She says that by participating in craftivism – a sometimes-perplexing activity – she is "getting people to ask questions, even ones like, 'Why?'" For Greer, craftivism is simply about engaging with people and getting them to ask questions.

Despite this, there is a degree of consumerism that is almost entirely necessary for craftivism to occur – such as the buying of materials – and this is also very important to consider. Who has access to participate in the production of craftivism is an extremely important point to consider because it brings light to new questions about the cultural value of the art form itself. Questions must be raised, such as: does a particular "trendy" or "hipster" movement that is connected to a young white demographic have the ability to resonate politically? And, should said movement be considered ethically viable? One could ask the same questions about William Morris's nineteenth century attempts to enact social change through craft; however, when one considers the wide-reaching effects of Morris's ideologies there are some positive debates that emerge. Bossy Femme states:

One thing I would love is if traditional and "trendy" craft movements could merge more. So many craft related skills that are deemed "hip" and are perceived to be "making a comeback" are things that have been continually practiced by, say, people in poor/poc communities forever. (Thinking of urban gardening, bicycling, certainly mending, sewing...) I would love it if we could make more links between these communities so that "experts" in these fields are not all younger white ladies who "discovered" a "forgotten" skill in like a vintage craft book that they thrifted. Would love to have more documentation and recognition of

people who have been doing craft related work forever just to survive.

Problematizing craftivism, Bossy Femme pulls together aspects of class, race, geographic location, and age. She broaches the topic of an appropriative past but does not disregard the potential for craft to incite change. I agree with Bossy Femme and assert that the problem is not with the idea of craftivism itself, but is instead rooted in how craftivism is recognized as a practice. Here I would like to reiterate the definition of craftivism as the meeting of craft and activism. Its definition is clear and simple and yet despite this, the practice can at times be deeply troubled and rooted in complicated sociological phenomenon such as racism, gentrification, and consumerism. Taking this into consideration, I am inspired to reconsider what acts can be included as craftivism. For example, is the construction of a quilt from recycled materials considered craftivism? Or if a Mi' kmaq person teaches their child basket weaving techniques in order to pass along a cultural tradition, is this craftivism? It is important to consider that the very definition of craftivism itself is tied up in its rhetoric of popular culture as a flashy, young, hip activity. Perhaps broadening our understanding of what can be included in the umbrella of craftivism would help increase our awareness of how craftivism is occurring on an international scale.

What needs to happen in order to ensure that craftivism is as inclusive as it can be? Artists like Coral Short are working to shape a better future for craftivism. In her community she discusses her queer identity and states that she and her peers are “queering the word craftivism by incorporating it into our anti assimilationist politics.

Crafting is a slow, reflective and meditative process in which to release our politics into the world.” Identifying as a “grown up punk,” Short discusses her genderqueer identity and explains that incorporating queer politics into broader feminist communities has not always been readily accepted. She explains:

I myself ID as genderqueer and perform in a multitude of genders. My piece the Hole-y Army was about embracing all genders who ID as dykes at the dyke march which proved to be controversial to some who were transphobic against genderqueers or trans [people] at the dyke march. We had blog posts written about us in hatred by [sic] second wave feminists...

Coral Short explains that she is “proud to be part of the [sic] third wave which takes trans, race, class, and ableism<sup>336</sup> into account. But feminism like everything is always shifting and changing. Hopefully we can create positive change for the next generation.” Like Bossy Femme, Short’s goal is to be part of a new feminist ethos, one that takes the diversity of lived experience – or *everyday life* – into account. Recognizing that there are elements of privilege involved in craft that have not yet been broached by scholars, including elements like the availability and cost of materials, the time involved in manufacturing, as well as learning a new skill, is important. As Coral Short notes in her experience of transphobia in craft, there also exists the very real possibility of unwelcoming and discriminatory environments. It is imperative when considering the social implications of what is referred to as the “handmade revolution,” race, class, gender, sexuality, gender identity are taken into account.

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<sup>336</sup> Ableism is defined by Merriam-Webster as “discrimination or prejudice against individuals with disabilities.”



## Conclusion

This project has explored craftivism by examining the intersection of craft, feminism, and activism. By featuring eight producers associated with craftivism, my research is designed to highlight the social impact that craftivism has had both historically and contemporaneously. Two prominent questions have guided my research: *What role are craftivists playing in both maintaining and/or reconstructing contemporary feminism? And, how do craftivists, and fibre artists whose work has been interpreted as craftivist, understand the theoretical and political context of their art? Do they see themselves as part of a feminist, or “gender justice” movement? Do they understand their work as activist, or craftivist?*

Starting with a review of the literature, this thesis has explored the historical scope of craftivism by highlighting elements of art history, sociology, craft history, and contemporary women’s studies in order to demonstrate why craftivism requires an interdisciplinary approach. I have also chosen a unique theoretical position for my thesis by using the language of Third-wave feminism in order to explore the diversity that exists within both feminism(s) and craftivism(s). This use of Wave Analogy is integral to understanding how craftivism fits into modern day activism, and it places my research within a broader Third-wave feminist rhetoric that seeks to better understand how women participate in modern day activism. My thesis also draws from the work of de Certeau to emphasize the significance of craft as part of the experience of everyday life, as well as the writing of Wolff to emphasize the sociological aspects involved in the process of

making. These are ways in which I have explored how craftivism is perceived and understood by its producers.

My research also deals with the social impact of craftivism. Chapters Four, Five, and Six rely heavily on quotations from the interviews I have conducted with the eight producers who are introduced in the Methodology chapter. Chapter Four evaluates the multitude of ways that producers identify with and define craftivism and feminism; Chapter Five explains the ways that craftivism has fostered a multitude of connections between people in ways that are virtual, physical and historical; and finally, Chapter Six explores the theoretical concept of value freedom in craft and analyzes the ways that race, class, ability, gender identity, and sexuality continue to affect the demographic make-up of craftivism today. It is in the final chapter that I discuss the future of feminism and how it associates with feminism(s) we see today.

Throughout this thesis I have sought to explore the research questions raised in its first few pages, and again in the opening paragraph of this chapter. What I have found in my discussions with participants is that producers of craftivism are self-aware, passionate individuals who are willing to re and de-construct their thoughts and actions. Every single person interviewed for this project brought forward complex, intelligent critiques of craft, feminism, and activism. What they have shown me is that those involved in the physical and ideological production of craftivism are a group of people working towards the reconstruction and critique of contemporary feminist politics. Craftivists and fibre artists understand the politics behind their actions and the actions of their peers and they are not afraid to critique themselves or their communities when they feel they have fallen short.

At the same time I have found that each person involved is striving to create supportive networks that are committed to asking questions. My research questions can thus be explicitly answered in this way: some producers of craftivism – particularly those whose work is situated in more formal art avenues such as galleries – don not necessarily see their work as having feminist aims. These interviews with the producers of craftivism do suggest, however, that those involved in the cultural production of craftivism are aware that it is part of a larger political context and that their actions have unavoidable implications. In other words, the social context of craftivism is taken into consideration and for many of the participants this has meant an adoption of feminist politics and a goal to strive towards inclusiveness and critical thinking in their work as producers.

Despite the producers' political awareness, several of them expressed reluctance, even a refusal, to self-identify as craftivist or feminist. Those that have refused or were at least hesitant to identify with these terms have done so because they recognize their potential to be exclusionary. This did not surprise me, primarily because over the past few months I too have felt reluctant to adopt such terminology and labels in my own life. Throughout the writing of this thesis I have become increasingly worried that the “craftivist movement” is simply a “white girl thing,” and I have been concerned that I am contributing to something I might later regret. I fear that craftivism and craft are merely just a new form of mindless, corporate consumption. I fear that it is just another way to help women feel empowered and politically fulfilled without really contributing anything to influence social change. And I fear that craftivism is classist and racist. In fact, there



have been moments while writing this thesis when I panicked while stopping to ask myself whether or not I am contributing to a new racist, feminist rhetoric.

These questions have forced me to meditate on the word “complex,” which, not surprisingly, has come up continually in my thesis. It is the most direct answer to the internal dilemma have experienced, that craftivism is complicated. It is an activity that certainly has the potential to be racist, Eurocentric, classist, exclusionary, homophobic, appropriative, et cetera, and yet craftivism also has the potential to be eye opening, challenging, heart breaking, transformative, awesome, and inspiring. Craftivism today will not look like the craftivism of tomorrow. As the producers themselves note, craft, art, and feminism are eternally shifting, changing into new and unexpected shapes. Because of this, my new dilemma has become: how can we ensure that craftivism is inclusive? In the future I hope that we can redefine and reconstruct craftivism in a way that includes a wide variety of art and craft production as forms of resistance. In reality, craftivism is everywhere and exists even in the smallest actions, and in the future, if we are to focus on those actions, perhaps then we can find the most inclusive and also the most common acts of everyday resistance.

Of course, craftivism can be better understood as craftivism(s). However, in these final paragraphs I would like to emphasize my appreciation for the producers of craftivism who are overwhelmingly aware of the social impact of their work and the intricate intersections and connections that craft, activism, art, and feminism have with one another. The analysis that still needs to be done – and what this thesis does not do - is to look even closer at what craftivism *is*. While it is briefly touched upon by several of

the makers, what *exactly* constitutes craftivism has still not yet been established. It is my belief that anyone can be a craftivist and that craftivism is any craft made with political intention, but unfortunately this understanding does not negate the real potential for racism, elitism, classism, ableism, or discrimination based on gender and sexuality within the world of craft or in craftivism's scope as a movement. This thesis establishes that like feminism, craftivism is not monolithic, and for this reason it is essential that scholars of craft and fibre art continue to examine, criticize, and problematize the process of making as one that can have a real impact on the everyday lives of thousands of women worldwide.

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## Appendix A

### **Betsy Greer's Definition of craftivism from her website.**

#### **THE SHORT VERSION**

Craftivism is a way of looking at life where voicing opinions through creativity makes your voice stronger, your compassion deeper & your quest for justice more infinite.

#### **THE LONG (ENCYCLOPEDIA) VERSION**

Craftivism is the practice of engaged creativity, especially regarding political or social causes. By using their creative energy to help make the world a better place, craftivists help bring about positive change via personalized activism. Craftivism allows practitioners to customize their particular skills to address particular causes.

Craftivism is an idea whose time has come. Given the states of materialism and mass production, the rise of feminism, and the time spanned from the Industrial Revolution, the beginning of the 21st century was the right time for the evolution of such an idea. Instead of being a number in a march or mass protest, craftivists apply their creativity toward making a difference one person at a time.

Through activities such as teaching knitting lessons, crocheting hats for the less fortunate, and sewing blankets for abandoned animals, craftivism allows for creativity to expand previous boundaries and enter the arena of activism. In the pre-Industrial Revolution era, craft skills were needed to clothe the family and maintain a working household. As mass production increased, there became no need to knit sweaters for winter warmth or weave baskets to hold vegetables. Crafts were bypassed by modernity.

The do-it-yourself spirit was stifled in the area of wardrobe creativity, and post-9/11, a rising sense of hopelessness to change anything in the world was unleashed. Feminism was still heavily rooted in theory and strength, but enough time had spanned between the economic and social disparities between women and men in the 1970s that women began to look again at domesticity as something to be valued instead of ignored. Wanting to conquer both a drill and a knitting needle, there was a return to home economics tinged with a hint of irony as well as a fond embracement.

The term craftivism surfaced in the first few years of the 21st century and gained an online presence with the website Craftivism.com in 2003 to promote the symbiotic relationship between craft and activism. After craft skills such as knitting regained popularity, the idea emerged that instead of using solely one's voice to advocate political viewpoints, one could use their creativity.

By advocating the use of creativity for the improvement of the world, craftivists worldwide taught knitting lessons, sewed scarves for battered women's shelters, and knitted hats for chemotherapy patients. In a world that was growing increasingly large and unfamiliar, craftivism fought to bring back the personal into our daily lives to replace some of the mass produced. In promoting the idea that people can use their own creativity to improve the world, craftivism allows those who wish to voice their opinions and

support their causes the chance to do just that...but without chanting or banner waving  
and at their own pace.

-Betsy Greer,  
"Craftivism." Encyclopedia of Activism and Social Justice. 2007. SAGE Publications

## Appendix B

### Examples of Questions asked during Interviews

1. Craftivism is frequently defined as “craft activism” - or, “craft + activism”. The term is often used to describe crafts that are oriented toward political or social justice aims. Do you agree, or disagree with this definition?
2. Do you believe this definition should be changed? If so, how would you define craftivism?
3. There has been tremendous interest in fibre craft practices amongst young women - i.e. knitting has become much more popular in the past five to ten years. Have you also perceived this growth? If so, what do you attribute it to?
4. We are now in what is commonly perceived to be "the Third-Wave of feminism". Do you interpret this to be true? Do you believe it is a strong political force? Or does it have little influence on your life.
5. What political ideologies do you see being expressed through craft? Do you see any trends, themes?
6. Do you think that feminism has a role in the resurgence of fibre craft?
7. Do you see your own practice as a curatorial director to be feminist? And if not feminist, then having goals or aims similar to those of feminism? Why or why not?
8. Do you consider your own work as a curatorial director to be craftivist? And if not craftivist, then having goals or aims similar to those of craftivism?
9. How do you think craft is perceived in popular culture? Is craft's representation in popular culture accurate, inaccurate?
10. How do you think craft and craft related activism have changed over the years? In what ways do you think they will change in the future?

## Appendix C

### Information on Coral Short's conference called, "Craftivism".

Coral Short: Craftivism is a welcoming art gathering that showcases an emerging generation of artists for three days in New York City. Queerness, feminism, and textiles go hand in hand for many of these contemporary artists, as they rethink and reclaim craft in their own unique ways. Each artist brings their own distinct voice full of personal politics and private passions to their art making practices. These cultural producers are breaking barriers and boldly crafting in new ways, all the while being mindful of the craft herstories that have come before. The textured radical creations will spill out of the garden and into the streets – interacting with the public on the sidewalks of the Lower East Side. The thriving artistic practises are not only used by these creators as political tools against the powers that be, but also to buttress and strengthen community by creating comforting social architecture. These artists use their skill sets to fight patriarchy, transphobia and homophobia by creating a pop up community together in the lush blooming garden that is Le Petit Versailles.

The way we learn to craft is precious. Crafting is about sharing intimate moments with chosen and blood families. Intimate community building is what we will be doing in the many crafting circles of this gathering. It is usually our grandmothers, mothers and best friends who show us how to thread a sewing machine, to embroider, to rug hook or to cast on. Each artist brings their own particular approach to crafting which results in diverse queer artist practices and methodologies – all which aggrandize our communities. Craftivism is anti-capitalistic and anti-appropriative recognizing that many communities that have utilized craft for generations as a form of survival and expression of cultural heritage. Craft itself is politicized, as it is constantly marginalized in the institutions which seek to exclude or re-name it. Crafting therefore is an outsider art, a rebellion against the establishment who does not want to accept it. Do we want entrance the establishment? Do we want acceptance within their institutions? Many of us have been creating our own feminist queer international networks and communities for years.

Friday night, July 12, there will be a dazzling array of performances predominantly centered around Textiles Arts. On Sunday evening join us for a dinner potluck and short films on craft at sunset. Both events will showcase crafting by quirky artists that make up the backbone of a new queer aesthetic and movement. Get ready for witchy workshops on Saturday and Sunday afternoons from the cultural producers themselves. We delight in being queer deviants and have no shame in our groundbreaking craft deviations – only joy! If you would like to meet these new craft superstars who are working in new ways with familiar mediums we invite you to sit in the garden to get inspired by our Craftivism panel at 11 am Saturday July 13.

We hope to hear from these revolutionary artists on their DIY artistic and curatorial practices that are breathing new life into the queer art world, as well as exploring the intersection between politics and art. We are strengthening real life community through our mutual love of craft by sharing our methods of creation and collaboration with each other. Is there a queer aesthetic? Is there such a thing as queer

craft? Come down to the garden and engage in these discussions and view the magnificence that is Craftivism.