

The Pussyhat Project: the role of needlework in supporting wellness during political uncertainty

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Abstract

Pussyhat Production and Consumption: The Role of Needlework in Building Resilient and Empowered Communities Submitted by Beth C. McLaughlin On January 21, 2017, over 3.3 million people marched in 650 U.S. cities and 260 global sister marches in response to the 2016 United States Presidential Election. The ubiquitous pink Pussyhat was a powerful presence at the events, worn in immeasurable numbers to symbolize unity, empowerment, and political resistance. This paper examines this material culture phenomenon and positions needlecraft as a viable technic in building healthy, energized, and elastic communities. As plans for the January 2017 Women’s March on Washington crystallized, the Pussyhat Project was conceived to embolden citizens and stimulate solidarity in defense of equality and reproductive freedoms. With low barriers to entry, the Pussyhat offered an accessible, affordable, and eye-catching “call to action” that was heeded across the globe. Millions took part in knitting, crocheting, and sewing the cat-eared hats to ultimately generate the largest example of social action through craft, or craftivism, in modern U.S. history. A variety of dynamics put forth in the paper asserts the Pussyhat movement as a highly effective counter-response to the separatist ideologies of newly elected U.S. leadership. The movement is assessed through the optic of craftivist traditions – in both contemporary and historical contexts – to argue the value of politically aligned handwork in promoting the wellbeing of our communities through supported vulnerability and mutual empathic involvement. Furthermore, the project establishes a framework for sustained activism through healthy makers, empowered citizens, and engaged societies. More than ever before, individuals are seeking out ways to rebound from societal deformation caused by political upheaval. An examination of the Pussyhat initiative in the context of politically charged fiber art traditions strongly supports the efficacy of needlecraft in creating accessible modalities for relational resilience, mental wellbeing, and sustained political action.

Introduction

On 21 January 2017, more than 3.3 million people marched in 650 United States cities and 260 global sister marches in response to the 2016 United States Presidential Election (See Figure 1). Central to the demonstrations were Pussyhats, worn by thousands of marchers in a collective statement of resistance and equality. Mostly knit, crocheted, or sewn, these handcrafted beanies with cat-like ears (See Figure 2) became the largest example of activism through craft, or craftivism, in modern US history.



Figure 1. Sea of Pink at the Women's March on Washington, January 21, 2017. Photo Credit: Brian Allen



Figure 2. Pink Pussyhat donated for distribution at the Women's March on Washington. Photo Credit: Stefanie Kamerman

Using the Pussyhat as a locus, this paper explores the role of needlework in forming healthy communities during deflating, uncertain socio-political climates. A historical review of socially charged textile traditions will contextualize current craftivist practices. Public health data collected during the 2016 US Presidential Election will support a theoretical framework for craftivism as a conduit for wellness during times of political turmoil and personal strife.

Within weeks of the 8 November US presidential election, the Pussyhat Project was launched by Jayna Zweiman, Krista Suh, and Kat Coyle at the Little Knittery in Los Angeles, California. It was developed as a tongue-in-cheek response to Donald Trump's vulgar remarks about groping women without their consent. Aiming to reclaim the term 'pussy' as a means of empowerment, the caps were a symbolic rejection of a hyper-masculine candidacy that seemed to normalize aggressive behavior through disparaging women, people of color, disabled individuals, and other marginalized populations.

The high-volume production occurred in both crafting circles and knit-a-thons, and also by individuals working in a more solitary manner. Hundreds of thousands of unique Pussyhats were created by hand, firmly establishing them as a pop culture phenomenon – as evidenced by the covers of Time Magazine (Vick, 2017) and The New Yorker (The New Yorker , 2017).

Pussyhats and the Historiography of Craftivism

The Pussyhat as craftivist object was groundbreaking in quantity and fame. However, the deployment of handskills for sociopolitical action inherits a long tradition.

Textile traditions in particular have deep roots in this genre, going back to Grecian times with Penelope weaving and unpicking Laertes' burial shroud as a delay tactic for marriage in Homer's Odyssey. Fast forwarding to the 1760s, American citizens revolted against the British taxation on textiles by holding spinning meetings to make their own clothes as a means of boycotting imported goods (Stephanie McCarter, 2017).

During World War I and World War II, knitting continued to fuel acts of patriotism, and the Red Cross led government-sponsored initiatives asking women to knit socks, sweaters, scarves, hats, and even bandages to care for soldiers and keep them warm. This patriotic measure was not relegated to women, as men and children also knit garments and soldiers were encouraged to knit to relieve the stress endured while serving in active duty. Thus, the traditionally feminine praxis broke down the boundaries of gender and age in the name of political action.

Jumping ahead to feminism's second wave in the 1970s and early 1980s, female craft activities were reclaimed as a modality for empowerment, following decades of denigration. At that same time, there was growing acceptance of politically-charged textiles as a fine art form, with artists such as Joyce Weiland, Judy Chicago, and Magdalena Abakanowicz exhibiting their forms in well-regarded galleries and museums in the US and Europe.

This trajectory of craftivism, marked with times of charged activity and periods of dormancy, has led us to modern times and to a resurgence of socially-engaged craft practice. The movement is led by a new generation employing needlework as a social rally cry and resistance technique. Furthermore, as argued here, it is a pathway that supports wellness during societal upheaval.

Strong examples of contemporary craftivist needlework are too numerous to mention here, so I offer a few that are particularly successful:

- The NAMES Project AIDS Memorial Quilt, conceived in 1985 by San Francisco gay rights activist Cleve Jones as a way to memorialize those who lost their lives from AIDS-related causes.
- The Calgary Revolutionary Knitting Circle, a network of knitting circles across the US and Canada that staged a number of actions, most notably the Global Knit-In organized to protest the 2002 G8 Summit.
- Marianne Jorgensen with the Cast-Off Knitters 2006 Pink M.24 Chaffee, also known as 'Tank Cozy', a project in which Jorgensen and volunteers from around the world created thousands of knit and crocheted pink squares that were sewn together and placed over a World War II tank to protest Denmark's involvement in the war in Iraq.
- Our Pink House, an action completed in August 2017 during which Polish-American artist Olek and a team of assistants blanketed a house in Kerava, Finland as social commentary on the 21 million people that were forced to leave their homes in 2015 due to war and political conflicts.

What these projects have in common aside from scaffolding resistance to social injustice is a focused effort to form communities, to engage in political action through craft, and to promote citizens' well-being through handwork.

The Pussyhat Project is distinctive in that it spanned continents, involving makers on a global scale to form a collective reclamation of social capital in direct response to deflating actions against already-stressed populations. This framing begs the questions: What can we glean from this praxis as a submedical provision to promote health and well-being amongst communities? How can it benefit the individual maker during times of elevated anxiety and cultural deformation?

Public Health After the Election

To position this line of inquiry within the framework of the most recent craftivist movements, an exploration of public health during the 2016 US presidential election cycle is germane. Several studies demonstrate the disabling effects, with some mental health professionals naming a new disorder characterized by near-crippling depressions that took hold after the election – PEST or post-election stress disorder (Stucky, 2017).

In the months prior to the election, University of Minnesota psychologist William J. Doherty and his organization, Citizen Therapists for Democracy, drafted A Public Manifesto citing a litany of health implications fueled by Trump's totalitarian campaign, including anxiety, fear, helplessness, and shame. He noted these crises were most pronounced in the populations that were especially targeted by the candidate's separatist ideologies: women, the LGBTQI community, minorities, and non-white immigrants. Over 3,000 mental health professionals signed the manifesto, urging others in the field to speak out on behalf of those impacted by mental health challenges. (Doherty, 2017).

Doherty also surveyed 1,000 voting-age Americans – not limited to those in therapy – to further investigate the impact of the election on citizens' emotional well-being. He found that 43% of the respondents were experiencing stress related to Trump's campaign, and 28% reported distress due to Hillary Clinton's campaign. Even more telling is that a huge 90% of those polled felt the toll of this election was more significant than others in the past.

A January 2017 study from the American Psychological Association's annual Stress in America survey concluded that a significant number of American adults experienced stress from the political environment, with minorities and Democrats the most impacted (Oliver, 2017).

Researchers at Harvard University's T.H. Chan School of Public Health support these findings, claiming that the election may have caused an increased risk of disease, premature childbirth and premature death, with

targeted groups such as Muslims, immigrants, and racial minorities at greatest risk (N.p., Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health, 2017).

That recent research predicted the sociopolitical climate post-election would negatively impact the well-being of stigmatized groups is not surprising. Given the polarization and uncertainty that rippled across the globe, there is indisputably a need to address the emotional distress through affordable, easily accessed tactics, especially amongst populations that are at risk of feeling targeted by the Trump administration's regressive leadership.

Health Implications of Political Activism

The health benefits of political activism have been widely documented, including those social actions that exist outside of the craft realm. These gains include increased coping abilities, psychological and political empowerment, skill development, a sense of purpose, community support, social capital acquisition, hope, and resilience (Williams & Medlock, 2017).

Despite these affirming outcomes, traditional forms of activism – marching at demonstrations, canvassing neighbourhoods for petition signatures, drafting letters, emailing and calling political representatives – often have negative health implications. These activities can be confrontational, socially uncomfortable, heavily transactional, and time-consuming, resulting in depleted emotional reserves, burnout, less time for loved ones and self-care, and feelings of failure and inefficiency.

As an alternative to these undertakings, many have discovered craft as an affirming pathway to inciting social change while promoting individual and community wellness through connection, learning, and reflection. Sara Truog, a marcher from Boston, Massachusetts concurs, explaining 'I don't tend to be a person who is comfortable with "loud and proud" activism – but this was something I could do to support causes that are important to me.'

Craftivism and Well-being

Two characteristics that render the Pussyhat Project particularly effective for promoting wellness are its potential for introspection and its communal nature, rooted in feminist fibre arts traditions. In these ways, the movement stimulates both reflection and connection, along with well-documented health implications of applied needlework.

Reflection and resolution: Needlecraft is a slow, intentional process, and unlike other forms of activism, craftivism promotes individual wellness first to suggest that personal transformation precedes effective global change. The maker is forced to slow down, and space is created in which to reflect on political beliefs, value systems, and prejudices. As explained by Deshea Harris, a Boston-area marcher, 'Night after night of working on my hat pushed me to think ahead of time about why I'm marching. Yes, I'm alone in making my hat, but even then I felt part of something bigger.'

As the craft object takes shape, there are sustained opportunities to reflect on individual civic responsibility and to formulate new ways to directly build healthier, resilient communities in the face of adversity. What's more, as the hands follow a familiar and soothing rhythm in needlecraft, the movement facilitates the transference of difficult feelings from our physical bodies to a tangible object that serves as a marker of the healing (Greer B. , 2008).

In her book *Knitting for Good*, craftivism scholar Betsy Greer writes,

Due to its soothing nature, knitting creates a safe space in which to sit comfortably, whether with our uncomfortable thoughts when we're feeling unsure, with our anxieties when we're nervous, or with our joy when we're happy. In turn, we're not only processing emotion, but we are producing something with our hands that documents the process. When we stick with our knitting, the outcome can be emotionally cleansing as well as visually stunning. (Greer B. , 2008)

This introspection often leads to new pathways of inciting change on both a macro (the world) and micro (the maker) level, and it offers a more restorative approach for the individual who may experience greater stress and shame when engaging in more confrontational, polarizing modes of activism.

Communion and exchange: The communal nature of political textiles is well established, from secret wartime knitting circles to the Pussyhats of today. These powerful groups and craft-based gatherings elicit dialogue and understanding through listening to others' points of view, without the need to make direct eye contact. Coming together in this vein with other makers of all experience levels promotes skill-sharing, brain development, and increased self-esteem from learning a new skill or improving one's practice. What's more, these communal efforts foster connection through supported vulnerability, mutual empathic response, and collective calls to action. Marcher Linda Luke Yee shares, 'Bearing witness to those hats reminded me I wasn't alone. Creating a hat and seeing so many at the March made me feel, for the first time since November, not quite so bad.'

Health Benefits of Knitting and Needlework

There is ample research to prove the positive impact that knitting and crochet can have on our mental health, political intent notwithstanding.

Bestan Corkill, a British physiologist and wellness expert, authored *Knit for Health and Wellness* and founded the website *Stitchlinks* to present knitting as a 'bilateral, rhythmic, psychosocial intervention which has the power to transform people's lives.' Corkhill further explains, 'Our mission is to use knitting and other therapeutic creative activities to improve well-being generally, but also to complement medical treatments in the self-management of long-term health conditions.' (Corkhill, n.d.)

Other health implications of needlework are offered by Dr. Herbert Benson, Founder and President of Harvard University's Mind/Body Medical Institute and author of *The Relaxation Response*. His research has shown that the relaxed state brought on by repetitive, rhythmic activities is linked with such physiological gains as decreased heart rate, blood pressure, muscle tension, and rate of breathing. According to Benson, 'Benefits can come from a spectrum of repetitive, mind-clearing practices that elicit the so-called relaxation response – from swaying in prayer, to saying the rosary, to knitting' (Goldberg, 2005).

Key Factors of Scaling

Since the initial launch of the Pussyhat Project, political tumult and the resulting wellness challenges persist. As we clamour for ways to cope, I submit that the intersection of two proven health interventions – activism and craft – will prove most effective. Given the therapeutic benefits to be derived from the hats and other craftivist programs, it is critical to devise ways in which to scale opportunities to further buttress the well-being of our communities.

Digitalization: To embed socially-engaged craft practice within global populations, a robust digital program is essential. The Pussyhat Project's success largely hinged on its online vigour and social media sharing. As of 18 September 2017, Instagram posts using the Pussyhat Project or Pussyhat hashtag logged nearly 135,000 articles. It was shared widely on Facebook as well, and trended on Ravelry (www.ravelry.com) where over eighty patterns have been published online.

Cultural institutions: The support of cultural institutions is critical to expanding and sustaining this well-making practice. They offer legitimacy, public exposure, storage and exhibition space, human resources, and a neutral gathering point for community contemplation, making, and connection.

Integration: Inclusive, group programs that combat compartmentalization of activist actions should also be supported. Sara Trail's Social Justice Sewing Academy based in Northern California is a strong example of this approach. After an immersive process of research, reflection, performance, and class discussion, students create fabric squares reflecting social issues that impact their own lives. Their vignettes are sent to volunteers from all walks of life to finish the expressions, which they then return to Trail for inclusion in a large-scale quilt. This multi-step process educates and validates experiences through craft. It also crosses geographic, socio-economic, racial, and gender lines to promote understanding, empathy, and the impact of civic action. As craftivist modalities evolve, programs like SJSA that are successful in crossing such boundaries will be what sustain this genre of craft.

Access: The past few years have given rise to craftivist kits: tidy packages containing all the tools and instruction needed to change the world through craft. Sarah Corbett's Craftivist Collective based in the UK, for example, offers a robust menu of agency necessities such as the Stitch for Solidarity Bunting, Mini Banner Kit, and Stitchable Changemakers (<https://craftivist-collective.com/shop/>). These heartfelt and well-conceived sets lower the perceived barriers to entry and minimize the expense and intimidation that may prevent amateurs from trying their hand at a new craft. Makers are encouraged to participate in collective making or through individual practice if they so choose.

Maker spaces: Another trend that supports scalability is the emergence of public maker spaces. These gathering spots encourage crafters of all levels to meet, share skills, and discuss projects and common interests. Their communal nature supports wellness via skill development, opportunities for connection, and empowerment through making objects with personal meaning.

Many of these spaces operate with a social mission. Take for example, Gather Here in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Founded by Virginia Johnson, this shop hosts knit-a-longs and quilt-a-longs in support of politically-aligned initiatives, such as the Welcome Blanket Project. The shop's social engagement extends to We Care Wednesday, a post-election program launched in January 2017 that aims to promote social change by donating 5% of their sales each Wednesday to a Greater Boston non-profit agency.

Gather Here also staged their 'you belong here' campaign to strengthen communities and reflect the spirit of inclusion. Mounted in the shop's front windows in a diverse Cambridge neighbourhood, the public art installation includes small, handcrafted signs declaring 'you belong here' to passers-by. Initiatives such as this have far-reaching impact by promoting resilience and esteem in makers, residents, and service agencies and their clients.

Whether digitally-driven or community-based, these programs cultivate self-esteem, empowerment, and craft engagement, and they are critical techniques for developing the next generation of craft.

Conclusion

On 9 November 2016, people across the world awoke to news that Donald Trump was elected President of the United States. For a great many, this shocking result incited feelings of anger, stress, fear, and immobilization. The launch of the Pussyhat Project sparked a new wave of craftivism, tendering restorative technics to thousands of depleted and anxious makers through an unprecedented union of activism and applied needlework. Today, the divisive political climate and global unrest continue to conjure anxiety, necessitating ways in which to scale craftivism projects to give makers a voice and a path to wellness. While it remains to be seen how this new wave of craftivism will evolve, there are many lessons to be gleaned from the construct as a tool for wellness.

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