

Crafting Objects, Selves, Links: The Embodied Production of Relational Exchange in  
Performances of Craft in the United States

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## **Introduction**

With “Crafting Objects, Selves, Links” I take up an ethnographic analysis of craft as a performance practice, an enacted and embodied production that contributes both to individual and collective subjectivity. As befits such a project, I begin by looking at a rehearsal process for a play. In the spring of 2005 I directed *As It Is In Heaven*, a work by Arlene Hutton that takes as its subject a stretch of time in a Kentucky Shaker community in the 1830s when young women began to see visions of angels. The Shakers are known for their exquisitely crafted furniture and everyday objects, for their utopian leanings and their gender-segregated living arrangements, and for their commitment to the notion that their everyday work was an act of worship. The Shakers’ ecstatic, charismatic origins had dimmed by the 1830s, so this moment of vision signaled a disruptive resurgence. The play calls for the nine actresses to remain on stage throughout the play to work on crafts, consistently reminding the audience of the Shakers’ commitment to these everyday tasks while the primary action of the play dwells on this more transparently extraordinary moment. I asked each actress to mime their crafts, extending an exploration of the interaction between the visible and invisible into the performance of craft.

Each actress selected a craft appropriate to the play’s historical setting—for example, sewing or quilting or basket-making. The actresses then broke that craft practice down into the smallest possible steps and rehearsed those steps to render them repeatable and discrete. We worked with a movement coach, Kym Longhi, to realize the principles of mime. Each craft had to “live” in the body differently and each task had to have a

repeatable “integrity” of form and pacing. Kym noted that the most convincing mimes embraced this seeming paradox: in order to justify an invisible world to an audience, moving one’s hand toward an object requires first moving the hand slightly away from the object. Kym’s mantra was “Back to go forward.”<sup>1</sup>

I was fascinated by the decision-making processes the actresses engaged in throughout the production process. Each committed to the exacting work of mime but some decided to create neat invisible quilting stitches to demonstrate their character’s commitment to those details, while others stumbled with imaginary knitting needles and tangled loops of pretend yarn into sloppy rows to demonstrate their character’s lack of practice or lack of deep care for the task. In rehearsal and performance, the *As It Is In Heaven* cast repeated characteristic Shaker actions and cited the Shaker work/worship intentionality but each performer retained the capacity to be intimate or distant to those elements, going back to go forward in the manner of her choosing. This decision-making process was enacted in the *relationships* the production fostered as well. Some of the actresses leaned into the kind of “bonding” one expects to see in groups who work hard together, while others held themselves apart from the group. I hypothesize that this, for some, had to do with negotiating an ambivalent feeling toward the “bonding” imperative or toward the tightly-quartered community that was our subject in the play.

While we were less interested in the Shaker idea of utopia, we brought into being a community, a temporary and experimental structure that made use of the rituals of rehearsal and the gestures of craft to accomplish our task. As the performers worked I realized our endeavor was less about creating characters that were first and foremost

distinct from one another. Rather, it was one which asked the performers to navigate the embodied gestures of a craft activity, then their own bodily way of rationalizing that behavior, and then the way the task impacted or jostled against the other people—in this way we endeavored to *craft selves* rather than *build characters*.



**Figure In.1**  
**Production still from *As It Is In Heaven* (Christy)**

The production took place in the midst of what many would call a resurgence or a reinvigoration of craft practices in the United States. This resurgence is represented by an emerging and increasingly visible network of small-scale craft organizations, gatherings, and entrepreneurs, and it has also been marked by an expanding interest in the handmade look, feel, and narrative from large-scale retailers. In preparation for *As It Is In Heaven* I picked up knitting again myself with a more voracious appetite than I had before. In

rehearsal I began to consider the potential for examining the relationship between craft and performance, the implications of craft practice and how it constitutes both individuals and groups, and the possibility that the performance of craft is related in some way to the mythology of the “American” self-made subject.

*As It Is In Heaven* is the conceptual starting point for this project. I became to my surprise a participant-observer even during this project and began to consider the possibility of craft culture as a field of inquiry. By investigating a series of physical and virtual sites via literature research, interviews, and participant-observation I have focused my research on the ways that performances of creative craft tasks produce objects at the same time that they open up a focal space for performances of self-hood and relationality. Through my research I have observed how selves are crafted both intentionally—through processes of rehearsal and revision—and in unexpected ways, through learning and discovery. I have also attended to the ways that crafters fashion and refashion contingent social relations through their solo craft practice intermingled with the ways that they exchange with others via craft—by collaborating, buying, selling, trading, and learning. And I’ve attended to the ways crafters embrace an impulse to “Do It Yourself” and to “Do It Yourself Together,” gestures that are both individualistic and community-oriented, in ways that are deeply interlinked with attributes ascribed to the prototypical U.S.-American subject.<sup>2</sup>

In the spirit of linking craft, performance, and identity through repetition, my research is informed by anthropologists such as Victor Turner who noted the mutuality of performance and ritual as structures for explicating cultural processes. The value of

performance as a way of thinking expands past theatrical space and informs readings of other culturally constitutive practices. In this respect I follow Tim Raphael, who in his work on helping students find alternatives to what he calls the “naturalist habit” in their performances, asks this question: “How do teaching and researching performance both as an object of study (something to be documented, analyzed, theorized) and as a method of study (something to be experienced, practiced, and enacted) enhance and challenge text-based epistemologies?” (127) My project posits that anthropology, theatre, and performance studies methods can together articulate a language to speak about handcraft in the United States. Each of these disciplines focus on the way performed tasks and activities depend upon what Erving Goffman termed “expressive practices of strategic impression management and structured improvisation” (195). In turn, the cultural formation of craft provides a space to investigate the ways individuals present themselves, navigate their lives, and develop social ties, both sculpting and exceeding “everyday life.”

### **The research process**

The bulk of my fieldwork, archival research, and interviews was conducted between August 2005 and December 2009 in the two cities I lived in during that time: Minneapolis, Minnesota, and Columbus, Ohio. The play production I discussed earlier is an exception—it took place in the spring of 2005 and constitutes the origin story for this project. Like the *As It Is In Heaven* performers rehearsing their mimed crafts, I

repeatedly went back to this production in order to go forward into the research process. When I told people about the project, the story of the play production was key in helping me explain it, and the production remains my first rationale for considering these personal preoccupations alongside one another. In addition to conducting site research in Minneapolis and Columbus, I visited crafters in Chicago, New York, Philadelphia, and Pittsburgh and conducted interviews in person and over the phone. Throughout the research process I met and got to know crafters online. In addition to these more conventional research activities, I engaged myself actively in many aspects of craft culture. I helped organize an independent craft fair and participated in the startup of Columbus Crafty Cotillion, I attended craft groups in a wide variety of spaces, I participated in an online speed-knitting contest, I learned to quilt for charity, I volunteered at a textiles library, I worked in a paper store and a craft consignment store, I sold a custom-made scarf to someone I met when she waited my table at a restaurant, I watched craft-centered performances and visited craft exhibits in art galleries, I entered into and lurked around conversations online, and I taught classes and led informal tutorials and learned from those who did the same. I also *bought* a lot of crafted objects, from clothes to calendars to bags to jewelry to stuffed animals to books to body products. I made these purchases in shops, in homes, on the street, and online.

My research time has been spent talking with and getting to know crafters, many of whom have formal relationships to performance, most of whom do not. Contemporary handcraft practice in the United States might be defined as a sometimes strategic, sometimes accidental reworking of handcraft technique, process, and

performance. The crafters I have met regularly revise and recombine ideas and materials as often as they obey specific patterns and traditions and processes. They make sweaters with arms and collars and button bands but they also pull them apart to scavenge their parts. They configure new durable fabrics out of throwaway plastic bags and they make drop spindles out of America Online CDs and dowel rods. They organize elaborate trades of craft products and materials, and they use these exchanges to build and deepen networks and contacts. They share, steal, and hack ideas from books and from the web and with and from each other. They read *Martha Stewart Living* and also “not martha,” a weblog of craft projects. They exchange their crafts through gift, sale, and sometimes elaborate trades, and those who sell often position themselves as alternatives to the mainstream commercial options at the same time as they participate in that system.

More often than not, the research I conducted (academic articles, trade publications, pattern books, magazines, and web writings) happened in a way that resembled ethnography—I found my subject in the process of moving along networks, and found myself located in relationship to the proliferating interconnections facilitated by the World Wide Web. Additionally, I locate myself in the field, as a performer of craft. I knitted on the bus and in parks and struck up conversations with others through that craft practice. I learned new skills and tried to hide my embarrassment when some skills did not come easily. I got caught up in people’s stories and bought into—often while buying—the things that they made. As Marjory Wolf asserts in *A Thrice-Told Tale*, ethnographic work relies more and more on transforming objects of research into subjects via a concerted process of collaboration. For instance, in my “data collecting”

conversations with Olivera Bratich, owner of Wholly Craft! (a craft consignment store in Clintonville, a neighborhood north of downtown Columbus, that sells items handmade by crafters all over the U.S.), her narrative and theoretical specificity has been key in helping me to condense and think through work she does and her undertakings that I have been a part of.

Craft is a diffuse term and it comprises an eclectic grouping of behaviors, cultural practices, events, and objects. The isolated quilters of Gee's Bend, South Carolina have their works presented in dozens of art galleries and featured on postage stamps. A group of women and even a man or two gather weekly in a neighborhood coffee shop to "Stitch and Bitch." A wide variety of bloggers sign and publicize a pledge to "buy handmade" for the holiday season. A dancer wears the same handmade dress every day for a year as a performance experiment. All of these events come under the auspices of craft. The notion of "craft" can encompass well-worn terms and ideas that carry ideological weight, as in the gendered notion of "craftsman," the aesthetic, utilitarian, and moral implications of "well-crafted," or the suspect and celebrated status of a "crafty person." All this considered, the notion of craft almost always includes the expectation of objects made by hand via repetitive motions learned through observation and honed through practice.

"Crafter," the common term of reference I use here, has a different set of implications that are enacted and continue to be worked out by the people who take it on as some aspect of their identity. Though the gesture of crafters tends to be broadly inclusive—the idea is that crafters can be people who make *anything*—more often than not when crafters talk about what they do or what crafters that they know do, they dwell

on “soft” or small crafts like knitting, sewing, quilting, collage-making, doll- or plushie-making, small printmaking, clothing-making, card-making, jewelry-making, and body product-making.

Despite the scattered collection of behaviors and sites that constitute craft, craft’s current momentum remains grounded in localities and parochial understandings of community. Whether online or “in real life,” crafters create social formations for any number of reasons. Like performance, and like ritual, craft is a generative tool, and it allows practitioners to draw together a range of strategies, practices, and habits—my conceptual shorthand for this is the craft-specific terminology “patterns”—to constitute a field in which individuals and communities can maintain and grow identities. The ad-hoc dynamic of craft as identity and activity category sustains it as a viable practice and allows its practitioners to form and perform textured selves that are both individualized and interdependent, and persistently in motion. The notion of craft as a kind of a tool or instrument—which forms as it is performed—rather than as a large-scale, dense social process or practice gives it malleability and affords its practitioners the agency to shape their own projects, and by extension, to participate in defining craft’s function and potential.

### **Craft today: an American movement?**

I am also informed by another documentation process that has overlapped almost exactly with the time frame in which I’ve undertaken this project. Faythe Levine, a

crafters entrepreneur and craft fair organizer from Milwaukee, undertook a film documentary project in 2006 and pointed it at the American “movement” of independent crafters. She traveled from city to city in the U.S. for two years and attended craft fairs, conducting interviews and watching and filming people while they made crafts. She titled it *Handmade Nation* and it was a celebratory documentation process that has gotten a broad viewing since its release in 2009. The film profiles a number of crafters in their making-spaces, displays small craft shops, and features crafters interacting with customers at craft fairs—and traces warm connections between them by pulling together thematics in their dialogue like their enthusiasm for making, the way that craft helps them reclaim something in their lives, and the idea that buying something handmade and local can help to change the world for the better. In it, her aim was to tell their “amazing story” (Levine interview).

The promotional materials and the DVD cover for the film shows a hand-drawn logo. In it the mainland of the United States is surrounded by stitches as though it has been patched-on to a fabric surface, and hands reach in to contribute. So the parallel U.S. that *Handmade Nation* invokes is a craft-in-progress, held together by the handiwork of its inhabitants. Levine told me that “a big part of why I’m doing what I’m doing is because, historically, I want to make sure that this movement or this scene or this community is taken note [of] in the grand scheme of art history and women’s history...so to have this as a reference point for where we are in 2006, 2007, I think is really important” (interview). Her work brings into focus two key questions: first, why is it significant that craft is rationalized as a movement? Second, is there a reason to think

about craft practices as constitutive of a kind of nation that overlaps with U.S.-America?

I'll deal with the "movement" question first.



**Figure In.2**  
**DVD cover for *Handmade Nation* (Levine [indiecraftdocumentary.com](http://indiecraftdocumentary.com))**

In this project I assess not only the ways that craft constitutes a performance but that the mobilization of the notion of a "craft movement" is a performance effort too, the performance of something not unlike what Benedict Anderson called an imagined community. The craft "movement" bears resemblances with Benedict Anderson's formulation of nation as a "deep, horizontal comradeship" (7). This thread traces through

almost all of the sites I study. Whether the people I study in this project cite their practice as a result of the “resurgence” of craft as a visible and viable force to be reckoned with in the U.S., or they talk about a “we” when they talk about people engaged in production and consumption practices that divert resources away from corporate interests, it is easy to find reference to the “craft movement.”

Depending on who you talk to, craft’s resurgence originated in one of a series of exchange points—whether it be a response a larger economic downturn, an increase in the availability of chunky, easy-to-knit yarns, the contemporary iterations of feminism, the growth of the internet, or the turning point of 9/11 as a rationale to return to home and hearth.<sup>3</sup> Some crafters align craft with precursors like the punk music scene, zine culture, and the Riot Grrl movement of the 1990s. Craft is aligned with movements to “slow down,” is instigated by the proliferation of sweatshop-made, heavily branded merchandise, is a natural outpouring of a desire for greener and more sustainable living, or is invested in reclaiming aspects of idealized femininity and domesticity from earlier eras while updating or dismissing others. When one reads the popular texts and speaks to crafters who think about the work that they do, the language of trading one thing for another—or often, more precisely, reverting to a previous mode of producing and consuming with key differences—is prominent.

There is plenty of “evidence” for a craft movement in books, in news articles, and online. I will only scratch the surface here by teasing out a few representations in broadly-circulated texts which posit craft as a movement. Debbie Stoller’s wildly popular book *Stitch n Bitch*, which offered a rationale for craft circles as a reinvigorated feminist

space alongside 40-odd knitting patterns, was followed up by *Stitch n Bitch Nation*, a volume that playfully charges the act of knitting together with an off-centered patriotism. Amy Spencer's *Crafter Culture Handbook* denies upfront that craft is a "quirky trend for people who want to sew a new style of skirt or knit an unusual hat" (9); rather, Spencer asserts, it represents a movement with "strong ties in punk rock 'Do-it-Yourself' communities" and is a "distinct part of an independent cultural ethos set apart from the commercial world, a resourceful way to live your life" (162-3). In this way, Spencer proposes that crafts like knitting are "finding a new and subversive role" (213) in society. Betsy Greer (who blogs at [craftivism.com](http://craftivism.com)) offers the notion of Craftivism as a part of the movement, saying that "post 9/11, a rising sense of hopelessness to change anything in the world was unleashed" and "women began to look again at domesticity as something to be valued instead of ignored." She sees Craftivism, a way to connect craft with activism, as an idea with "worldwide" implications that allows crafters to "connect beyond ourselves" (Greer). In her book *The Close-Knit Circle: American Knitters Today*, Kerry Wills calls the resurgence of knitting and crocheting a "renaissance" (29) and rationalizes the widespread desire to make things as a collective "backlash" against disconnection from other people or from the act of making itself (43). And in the film *Handmade Nation*, one of the craft shop owners that Levine interviews proposes that craft is "a movement toward regaining control of your life as opposed to having some corporation feed you your culture."

There is a lot at stake in interpreting craft as a contemporary American "movement." Those who aim to make money from craft are, it could be argued, better

served if their work is described not as a “trend” but participating in a powerful “resurgence.” At stake also is a simplification and popularization of tenets of feminism and economic and labor activism. The notion of the craft movement has promoted truly innovative craft-efforts to intervene in oppressive systems of production and made them easier to access as well, but has also collapsed the categories of craft production and craft consumption in ways that reinforce an alienation from production relations (for instance, by de-emphasizing how or where craft materials are made in the interest of celebrating a crafter’s desire to make something from them). Also, I believe that there is something to the notion that the labor of craft, an excess and surplus practice for the mostly middle-class people who are engaged in it, is connected to an imaginative labor for creating connections as well—to follow Benedict Anderson, community is an *invention* (6). The plentiful supply of physical and educational resources for crafters, not to mention the ease of encountering resources and other crafters on the Internet, make it readily rationalizable as a broadly influential entity with momentum and force.

It is important to note that this movement-performance is *not* a comprehensive one. By no means does this imagined community of a Handmade Nation penetrate all the spaces and minds where craft has taken hold in the U.S. Plenty of crafters process their processes without visualizing their actions contributing to something larger, so if this is taken as evidence too it stands in tension with the notion of a craft movement. A number of the sites I investigate in this project demonstrate that crafters have varying levels of comfort and hesitation in relation to the notion that their practice can stand in as evidence for something larger. And any number of crafters cringe at the notion that their practice is

“political.” This reaction indicates an impulse to remain separate from the sweeping gesture of a “movement.”

I must disclose that in no small part my ability to see craft as a viable research site for this project is dependent on the formulation of craft as a “resurgence” or a “movement.” It is this projection of unity that caused a “field” to coalesce before my view in the first place. However, when I examine the terrain of craft, I see something similar to what the writing duo J.K. Gibson-Graham observe when they identify different feminist politics in different localities around the globe—that is “ubiquity rather than unity” (“Postcapitalist Politics” xxiv).

*Handmade Nation* not only presents an opening to discuss the ways that craft is a movement, but it also gestures toward as an effort to activate something uniquely “American.” In a video that introduces Etsy (the online craft marketplace) to someone who travels to the “about” page of that website, one crafter entrepreneur who has a profile and shop on the site tells this story about America. “There’s definitely a movement to get more things done by hand. We’ve seen what the corporations are doing to our culture, how they’re stifling everything America used to stand for, and I think that worldwide interest in the individual and creating micro-economies is very important, and it’s great to be part of. Etsy’s definitely fostered that for me, both as a seller and a buyer.” This Etsy seller suggests that contemporary practitioners of craft can see themselves as being a part of something larger—this crafter theorizes that craft exchanges can help people take action in a moment when what multinational corporations are doing is framed as a “doing to.” Notably, they can be a part of this something larger by doing “their own

thing,” by practicing craft and buying crafts. She also suggests, and there are a number of different ways to interpret this statement, that crafters work in response to the loss of the things that “America used to stand for.” At least for this crafter, craft (the doing, buying, selling) constitutes the progressive preservation of an American ideal. I see in this conception both a narration of the mythology of “America” and a rationale for an entity like Etsy, which holds as a central premise the notion that crafters *should* make money and that it can reconnect buyers and sellers.

I have been conducting my research in part as a conceptual response to the claim that one work-at-home mother put to me early on in my research: “it’s a kind of revival of the American dream, or perhaps a revision of it” (Craft Revolution personal interview). Her statement suggests that the American dream has opened up to *new* possibilities, that crafters are defining the terms of their own prosperity. I have been looking, then, for ways that crafters craft selves that are “self-made.” I follow Frances Fitzgerald who argues in *Cities on a Hill* that any number of distinct groups (from a fundamentalist church to a gay activist community) employ a thick and saturated blend of Protestant and American ideals regarding the potential for self-transformation and transcendental progress in a free-market society. To a greater or lesser extent each group and individual I study is finding a way to recite and re-site practices which have legitimized craft practices in leisure times—making crafters’ contributions matter by giving them substance. They try to resituate the notion of “work ethic” in varying ways that allow for self-making and community-making.

Additionally, the capacity to form these relationships and enact such an undertaking as revising the American Dream is deeply dependent on cultural constructs that work to be invisible and the identity markers that reinforce that invisibility. In a country where a vast majority of inhabitants identify themselves as middle-class, class relations and hierarchies are not so much irrelevant as operatively subversive. The ability for a crafter to be involved in the broad, information- and image- and idea-rich zone that is the craft “community” on the Internet, for instance, depends heavily on their ability to spend time poring over blogs and discussion boards and how-to pages. The work-at-home mother I introduced earlier is self-employed primarily so she can spend more time with her two children; part of *her* revision of the American Dream resides in that undergirding expectation that mothers will be present to their children (and spouses, in many cases) and will be the prime players in cultivating home life. Crafting entrepreneurship goes hand in hand here with recrafting patterns of domesticity and heteronormativity amidst and among its middle-class participants.

Here is an example of what I mean. In rationalizing her craft practice and craft entrepreneurship in the introduction to her book *The Handmade Marketplace*, a book directed at crafters who might be considering opening a personal business to sell their craftwork, Kari Chapin notes: “I...find crafting a release. It makes me feel useful and whole. An activity as simple as sewing a button back onto my husband’s winter coat brings me much more personal satisfaction than a lot of the things I have to do during a normal day. How about you?” (2) Here, Chapin signals a number of important threads that can be traced through craft practice. First of all, she ties together (re)investing

objects with use value and a sense of personal coherence—craft is tied to the importance of making oneself feel useful and revived. This is a kind of Protestant work ethic proposition writ small; the productivity of craft is soul-work. She also contrasts a micro-task of craft with other “have-to-do” tasks of a typical day, deeming it more like soul-work than all these (we are left to assume that this includes a blend of paid-work tasks, household chores, potentially social or other commitments). Notably, she does so by talking about sewing a button onto her husband’s coat—craft is a release, but not a total departure from conventional setups of who sews buttons back on to garments for whom. Chapin collapses craft with “simple,” feminized home maintenance tasks. By affording this small task the label of craft and the significance of personal enrichment, she suggests that the tiny ways that craft infiltrates her everyday are the ones that return her to herself, give her a sense of being centered and whole. Finally, she points the anecdote at her reader, assuming that it will serve as a point of contact and connection between herself and them—yes, she implies, crafting in the domestic space will set both of us free.

The sites I study in this project engage variously in these dynamics; some participants are energized by the notion that there is a resurgent movement of craft afoot, and others consciously foreground the way they hope to support the “community” of crafters. Others avoid or disregard this kind of language, giving more attention to the way their craft practices transform their personal spaces or give them the mobility to be creative in all kinds of spaces. Others craft because they *need* money and they use the skill-resource that is at hand to make it. Others focus on the way their craft allows them to be in relationship with others.

## The structure of “Crafting the Self”

One of the key elements that holds these chapters together is a focus on the *social ties* that are formed and performed by crafters. Craft is deeply solitary and also deeply social, and the selves that are crafted are contingent on multiple kinds of links and exchanges—with objects, with texts, with other people.

Throughout, it will become clear that crafters think about the ties they forge as constitutive of craft *communities*. Where possible, I choose ways of describing these social ties without presuming that they constitute communities *not* because I think it is foolhardy for people to see themselves as engaged with communities (imagined or otherwise), nor because I hope that crafters move away from understanding themselves as engaging with a craft community. However, the word “community” is a densely significant term that covers over different kinds of interaction and makes it easy to overlook the differences between social formations. It also presumes an “inside” and an “outside” that makes participants feel safe and contained while also making it easy to overlook procedures that exclude and marginalize outsiders. Also, as I’ve discussed, I see the “community” as the proposed agent that propels the “craft movement” forward, and I am interested in investigating the nuances of social interaction that could be lost in this broad discursive gesture. Zygmunt Bauman, for instance, situates community as an object of desire—connected to desires for security, consensus, rootedness—and necessarily implicated in a process of excluding undesirable elements (6-18). Miranda Joseph asserts

that the complementary of community and capital belies the ease with which the term is mobilized as an efficacious “good” by groups with vastly diverse aims and intentions (1-10). And Benedict Anderson’s work notes, among other things, that the kind of imaginative labor inhered in thinking nation is in no small part an effort to conceive of a discursively bounded community. For crafters, the act of claiming “community” provides a structure for belonging and for making sense of craft practice as not just personally satisfying but good for others as well. These are important dynamics, and *key* for the spread of craft practice, but they are just some of the negotiations that happen in craft social formations.

Another element that will recur in these chapters is the ways that performances of craft activate, invigorate, and center historically trivialized, feminized craft practices and socialities. With few exceptions, the craft practices I investigate here have a history of being marginalized as “women’s work” or have been relegated to the denigrated realm of “domesticity.” I find the micro-practices of craft and the micro-rationales of crafters to be ripe with metaphor in part because they are trivialized (can a crafter in fact be self-made? can a group craft change, or be tightly knit together?); this metaphorical potential is a testament to the culture-making power of craft while it also runs the danger of over-mythologizing the practices.

Finally, each chapter aims to focus in tightly on the *doing* of craft. Where it is possible I try to privilege and describe the act of making (and the extended act of making-contact in all kinds of craft exchanges) as a deeply embodied way of knowing and learning. It is in part because I am a scholar of performance that I do this; I am

preoccupied with the potential of all kinds of performed behaviors to bring people into awareness of their bodies, to consider the possibility of transformation, and to make contact with others.

The chapters are loosely organized around four spaces of analysis: performance, craft circles, sites of craft entrepreneurship, and the World Wide Web. In many ways, each is implicit in the others. Though I focus in the first chapter on the most easily-recognizable craft performances, each case study is a site of performance where, as Richard Schechner has put it, participants gather, perform, and disperse (168), and where *doing* craft brings crafters into contact with one another and generates some kind of meaningful space. The third chapter focuses on buying and selling, though the mutuality of craft production and consumption becomes clear in all the chapters. And though I ostensibly limit my focus in the last chapter to the social formations engendered on the Internet, sites in each chapter blur the boundaries between online and offline interaction.

Chapter 1 is titled “Craft in Performance, Craft As Performance.” In this chapter I lay out a rationale for thinking craft through performance and performance through craft. I locate five points of intersection between craft and performance: they are both deeply embodied practices, they bring focus and attention to peripheral sites of production that get passed over in broad narratives about creativity, they both rely on and engage repertoires of action, they both bring a focus on the way the experience of time sculpts and mediates experience, and they weave together “making” and “faking” in a way that generates experiments and stories. Taken together, these intersections privilege the trivialized, small gestures and objects of craft and the liminal space of performance,

finding purchase for the mundane as a storytelling strategy and metaphor for social issues and important questions. I engage the literatures of performance studies and in particular the thinking of Diana Taylor, Dwight Conquergood, and Victor Turner, while also gleaning insights from feminist literature and discussions of participatory and time-based art events and performances. I use a range of performances as case studies, performances that occur in established performance spaces, in the public realm, in homes, and online. The case studies bring to bear a number of the possibilities and limitations inhered in mobilizing craft practices as performances.

Chapter 2 is titled “Performing Craft Circles.” Craft circles constitute a wide variety of commonplace gatherings where people get together to craft—sometimes to make something together, sometimes in a class, and sometimes more straightforwardly to “Stitch and Bitch.” In this chapter I discuss the ways craft circles function as an extension of personal leisure space and allows for social ties that forge common space and contingent interface. I assert that, though these gatherings are easy to write off as spaces of idle or excess gossip and chatter, it is actually the doing of craft that is the primary motor and shaping performance in these gatherings. I study the social dynamics of three craft circles, and draw in literature from leisure studies to unpack the ways that crafters, especially those engaged in feminized handicrafts, navigate the already-blurry boundaries between work and leisure.

Chapter 3 is called “Crafting Entrepreneurship.” I start with two stories of craft sales that extended the relationship between me and a maker/seller beyond the limits of the “transaction.” These stories move me toward my argument that the innovation of craft

entrepreneurship is less about bringing about a consumption revolution or changing the world and more about rethinking exchange in the first place. I also work to locate the independent craft fair as a coalescing-point for the different kinds of exchanges that circulate around buying and selling and render the performance of craft exchange a ground for learning. I draw insights from three scholarly efforts in particular: the notion of an economic ethic elucidated by the writing duo J.K. Gibson-Graham; the significance of affective labor worked out by Michael Hardt, Arlie Hochschild, and others; and the mutuality of community and capital investigated by Miranda Joseph.

Chapter 4 is called “Taking Craft Action Online.” Here, I take my most direct look at social relations that are fostered by crafters on the Web. Far from a comprehensive analysis of the individual and social performances that happen online, this chapter fixes focus on two efforts to generate a network of support for two very different “worthy causes” that simultaneously aim to demonstrate the nation-broad potency of the craft community. I assert that these two case studies point to the ways that crafters have engaged the Internet to experiment with creating civic space for crafters. I discuss prominent perspectives on the form and function of civic space while also attending to feminist interventions into the frameworks for civic and public participation. In so doing I suggest that the sites I study are attempts to mobilize feminized social spaces, translated to the web, toward large-scale ends.

Now I turn my attention to a working-out of the rationale for this project: the intersections between craft and performance. These intersections start in the same shape

as the observations that were in my view when I first began to plan this project: a woman busy making an object in a space where an audience was compelled to watch.

## **Chapter 1: Craft in Performance, Craft As Performance**

*“Can there be performance without bringing the ordinary into the extraordinary?”*

-D. Soyini Madison in *Critical Ethnography: Method, Ethics, and Performance*<sup>4</sup>

In this chapter I look at performances in theatre spaces, performances that travel on streets, a public-realm performance event, and crafts that carry forceful messages that perform an impact on viewers. This chapter aims to examine some of the ways that craft is like performance and that crafted objects can be intentionally brought into performance to communicate. As a performance scholar, I am particularly interested in the ways that performers can make a spectacle of craft and draw attention to craft objects precisely *because* they are commonly considered trivial or private or feminine. Conversely, I am interested in the ways that craft objects engender a kind of exchange between artist and audience that does not ignore but manages to exceed their existence as commodities.

I'll start here by addressing the questions of why I have chosen performance as a way of looking at craft, and why craft for looking at performance. The case studies that I include in this chapter demonstrate the ways that crafter performers use their craft (a mundane, long-term, close-to-hand practice) to create a heightened awareness of and to provoke thought about broad issues that hit close to home—depression, our choices about clothing, city life, wars, and cancer. By focusing on the object in process and, in most cases, the bodies that labor to make them, these performances each ask the viewer to dwell on something mundane, to reconsider their associations about the object at hand,

and enter into a space of storytelling or dialogue by accepting the reaches and limitations of craft's metaphorical potential.

The performers' and the audiences' awareness of the made-ness and in-progress quality of the craft objects in question accomplish a series of effects. The performer's interplay with the craft object promotes a focus on the passage of time that requires observation of or interaction with the making (and usually female) body, giving the viewer pause by inviting a consideration of craft as a "useful" use of that body's time. Craft in performance entails an interplay between truth-telling and fictionalizing that disrupts an easy association of craft objects as "authentic" records of care while confronting a desire for the objects to contain those traces. The performance of craft also calls to mind a complication of the relationship between concerns that "belong" in the public or private realm, inviting audiences to consider potential interminglings and nontraditional associations in those realms.

These effects are significant considerations for the field of theatre and performance because of the way they situate craft objects—ordinary, small, otherwise trivial—in a give-and-take with performers. More than just "stuff" and not merely the setting or background for a performance, the craft objects I discuss here are invested with meaning and said to *matter*—though why they matter and to whom remains a question. The liminal space of performance, I'd assert, has the capacity (perhaps only temporarily) to endow them with a more complicated kind of agency. Whether they are unfinished knitting projects (commodities charged with meaning and plans and work and then discarded mid-stream) or cross-stitch fabric inscribed with angry messages (destabilizing

the standard market association) or a handmade dress (made and worn not just to cover the body but to disrupt the culturally patterned need to buy more clothes), these objects are privileged in these performances in ways that unsettle expectations of value or worth. And in each of these instances, the objects draw attention to the ways that the women (and in almost all cases these are almost all women) that perform craft with them occupy their identities, sometimes confirming and sometimes contesting standard gendered and market expectations of their behavior and choices.

### **Why performance?**

#### *Performance gives credence to the act of making*

The literature in the fields of craft studies and studio craft gravitates toward unpacking the question of the relationship of craft to art. Briefly, some of the implicit assumptions of the art-craft debate are that crafters or craftspeople find themselves labeled as some kind of lesser artists, perhaps made less valuable by their reliance on technique and traditions, or because they create repeated work off of a pattern rather than creating something singular. Also, much of the literature in craft studies spends time addressing, confirming, or contesting a hierarchical spectrum that divides art and craft. Craft, in this arrangement, remains the struggling inferior party in a binary system; crafters are positioned in a struggle for legitimacy whether they view themselves as artists, artisans, or something else. Focusing on performances of craft, both on and off

public stages, has the effect of refracting the art/craft divide and the professional/hobbyist dichotomy.

When we think about craft as performance (and crafters *as* performers) our attention is drawn instead to the way that craft is both a series of actions and also potentially a way of moving through and engaging the world. When we pay attention to what crafters *do*, (or, when we pay attention to the history of the word “perform” we turn to the Old French term *parfournir*, and we think about what crafters bring to completion or accomplish) it takes at least some of the pressure off the status elements of their identity, allowing identity to unfold and shift in a more flexible relation to hierarchies and categories, and allows in particular for a less predetermined sensibility about *use*.

Though the disciplinary distinctions between art-making and craft-making are probably important—there are reasons people choose to use one term or the other, and I’m not suggesting that these reasons are unfounded—the primacy of categories elides the making itself once an object is finished. A framework of performance points to the time in between start and finish, when the “product” (a term for a finished craft object, charged with implications about its commodity status—that is, it becomes a gift or a ware or something to use) is potentially undetermined or unclear given the performer’s enmeshed state in the materials, micropractices, and micrologics of the medium. I know crafters (and have been this crafter myself!) who carry the pleasant secret that the sensual acts of not-being-done with a project are what really drive them, and that the cumbersome tasks of finishing a project either mean the project languishes in the craft basket or never gets used for its intended purpose.<sup>5</sup> Feminist cultural studies scholar

Sadie Plant maintains that for those who craft, “the finished cloth, unlike the finished painting or the text, is almost incidental in relation to the processes of its production. The only incentive to cast off seems to be the chance completion provides to start again, throw another shuttle, cast another spell” (67).

A framework of performance serves as a reminder of some of the ways that a craft practice can both subvert and reinforce the status of craft materials as commodities. For crafters driven by the process of making itself, the “use-value” of the object is contained in the performance itself, a waste according to the priorities of capital. They might feel that they are getting away with something. This process-focus does not, however, preclude crafters from rationalizing the creative process in terms of exchange value. Consider this quotation taken from a knitter’s blog post: “At least it’s cheaper than going out to a movie, and provides infinitely more entertainment” (Hannah). In this instance—and I have come across at least five such comments in different bloggers’ comments over the years—the writer takes herself out of the role of performance creator or agent, suggesting the pleasure she takes in knitting materials can be measured along a spectrum with the packaged, external entertainment experience of the movie theater. She does not let herself get away with a secreted-away use-value here.

***Performance focuses on peripheral spaces of production***

Performance not only places the spotlight on the process of making, but on those sites of production (of ideas, of products, of culture) that do not get attention in media outlets or are not privileged as culture-making. In the words of performance scholar Judith Hamera: “Value accrues disproportionately to the socially sanctioned public

producers. Performance-based approaches are alert to the interanimating facets of production and consumption that hide in the light of everyday practices, removed from, even resistant to, ‘officially sanctioned’ public discourses” (18). By placing attention on the ways that private or everyday spaces are not only sites of passive consumption of publicly exchanged goods—in some of these cases, by bringing private production practice into public spaces—an approach to craft that embraces performance can and has pointed up the ways that crafters blur the lines between production and consumption practices—and ways that in so doing they resist and support dominant practices of capital exchange.

***Performance draws on and draws out embodied repertoires***

The framework of performance also reminds us that the object is not the only trace of the making process. Traces remain in the body as well, as the performance of craft is a deeply embodied affair. In her book *The Archive and the Repertoire*, Diana Taylor articulates that “performances function as vital acts of transfer, transmitting social knowledge, memory, and a sense of identity through reiterated, or what Richard Schechner has called ‘twice-behaved behavior’” (3). She is dealing in her work with the way that written, finished documents serve to preserve knowledge and write history—but always in a continuous interplay with more embodied modes of communicating, teaching, and exchanging. These embodied modes—repertoires—are the sources of the innovations, shortcuts, and habits that give rise to craft products and patterns. These modes persist beyond their makers and can then only be documented and categorized in limited ways—this is one of the reasons that *preservation* of craft practices is a source of

anxiety or even a reason for being for some craft guilds and other historical organizations. Crafters of all stripes perform patterns and cycles of learning, gaining competencies, testing, rehearsing, completing, starting over, rethinking, and passing on – a series of micro-events that are persistently in motion as long as the “crafter” identity marker endures.

Faith Wilding is a feminist performance artist and art teacher who suggests that engaging in—performing—these micro-practices can be enlightening and enlivening, especially for those who might find themselves feeling disconnected from the repertoire of hand skills that can be categorized as domestic crafts.

I have repeatedly seen female (and increasingly, male) students revisit the gendered processes of “women’s work” as a way of connecting to a history of skilled production, of making—and feeling (experience)—which is all but absent from their lives. These students...usually have no traditional domestic craft skills such as sewing, crocheting, knitting, or cooking, but they evince a strong desire to make objects.

Wilding draws the conclusion that her students, in seeking out skills and creating artwork that references these practices, are laboring to reckon with “the absence of something to which they no longer have the connection of lived experience” (“Monstrous Domesticity”). Though there have been a lot of critical theoretical questions about the emphasis on experience that this quotation relies on (does experience, after all, connect you to something real?), I’d assert that there is some worth to the contention that performing patterns from the repertoire of craft can provide a fruitful or educational entry

point to the social and emotional concerns around the history of domestic crafts. Perhaps the space of performance, whether the audience is invited to participate in craft-making or not, can function as “a vital act of transfer” for members of a society who may feel that they are longing for something that persists but from which there is a felt disconnect.

This response to a desire to fill a sense of loss does not need to be uncritically celebratory; the performances I discuss later in this chapter reference (either directly or allusively) the tensions and problematics around the use of craft to gain insight into history or social issues. Many of these performances (again, overtly or otherwise) address the *limits* of the metaphorical potential of craft to bridge a gap between performer and audience to history, to a feminine lineage, to the notion of sustainable living, to “the land,” or whatever other metaphorical purposes craft is put to. But the performers I follow in these case studies make use of the opportunity to bring an audience and performer(s) together around craft practices or craft objects in ways that teach, alert, and move. And these performances work themselves up against the *desire* for craft to unite, inspire, or ground makers and viewers alike.

### **Why craft?**

Craft is not a new subject or course of action in performance; the history of theater is full of the histories of the crafts that theater is dependent on. In particular, in the feminist performance art and installation tradition we find performances that foreground craft materials, using them to symbolize or highlight ways that women have historically

been maintained in a limited spectrum of relations to private and domestic space. Take for example these two projects. In the Womanhouse Project, created in 1972 by Judy Chicago, Miriam Schapiro, and student-collaborators, each contributor created environments out of craft materials and common household objects alongside performances that lived in one room of a 17-room house. The project aimed at many disparate affects, but Faith Wilding, one of the student-collaborators, suggests that the project addressed, in particular, the way that “women’s work of making homes and domestic environments has been pivotal (though largely unacknowledged) in the major innovations of civilization” (“Monstrous Domesticity”). In 1977 Betsy Damon created *Seven Thousand Year Old Woman*, in which she aimed to perform her “woman line of 7000 years.” She appeared covered with bags of flour, and then in the performance took her time snipping the threads that bound them to her. Cutting the threads gave her “this incredible sensation of the dimension of women’s oppression” (qtd in Withers 164). Damon’s performance combined craft and kitchen materials in a way that entailed weighing-down and lightening-up; in performing these acts Damon aimed to bring to the surface the notion that women exist in an unbroken line and have perpetually been burdened by the labors assigned to them.

In the examples described above, craft objects seem to represent a symbol-problematic, marking or standing in for societal contributions women have made that have also served to confine or restrict them. Taken together, these performances circulate around the subjects of work, bodies, standards of domesticity, structures that inhibit women, or the invisibility of class as an influential identity marker in American culture.

They also, in varying ways, make claims about women's work as a perpetual shaping presence in women's lives (and thereby a point of continuity, drawing endless generations of women together). In this way they participate to a greater or lesser extent in a universalizing of women's experience. These works also quite specifically use craft or domestic objects in a "useless" way or in a way that exhausts their use value, demonstrating problems with gendered assumptions about thrift or work ethic in the home environment.

This performance tradition also centers on bodies in contact and interplay with objects. To watch someone craft is to watch them do something mostly slowly, and to watch someone craft in performance is to have that action framed in a way that privileges the small and repetitive acts. Performance can center on issues surrounding the value of making by heightening bodies at work doing tasks that are typically relegated to private places, potentially working to shift the way those bodies are seen in the first place.

In this section I aim to lay out a few reasons for considering craft alongside performance in our contemporary period that do not over-rely on assumptions about continuity between generations of women while still recognizing that there is indeed historical baggage around craft as "women's work."

### *Craft is time-centered*

One reason that craft objects can inflect performance is that craft, like performance, is deeply connected to time. Both require time to unfold, and as a result both can bring makers and viewers into contact with the time-based sensations of impatience, fascination, and worry about waste—in other words, with their awareness of

and experiences with time. Take for instance the point of view of Liza Lou, a crafter who creates intricate domestic scenes out of decorative beads. In an interview she speaks about the interplay between a moment of craft-time and the long hours it requires to complete a project. “Beadwork is a slow, quiet practice that counts the hours, not unlike someone doing time. Sometimes when I’m working on projects, I wake up and realize, wow, eight hours have gone by and I’ve only finished two inches. That narrowness of moment-to-moment focus can drive you insane” (qtd in Jardin, 30).



**Figure 1.1**  
**Liza Lou’s “Kitchen”, shown at the San Jose Museum, June 2004 (sabine7)**

Sometimes I too think about crafting as “doing time.” The process can feel like a trap. Crafted objects hide the seconds and hours spent making, and making crafts calls

into question whether the end product can be considered a sufficient reward for a hard day's work. Alternately, crafters can get so wrapped up in their work that they lose track of time; a kind of transformative entrapment takes over. Lou suggests that the smooth shift out of time awareness, commonly referred to as "flow," can actually be oppressive and dangerous to the mind—imprisonment rather than free play.

In *A Room of One's Own* Virginia Woolf refers to home work as the "drastic discipline." She coins this phrase to point to the work that takes up so much time it fuels a kind of creative power in women. In saying this she aims toward reclaiming agency and distinction in many kinds of solitary labors that take place in a home (while also making a case for the value of the diversity of women's work in the public realm as well).<sup>6</sup> A performance that incorporates craft might call into question the expectations of what constitutes a "useful" use of time by bringing into view that slow flow that otherwise is private, lost, spent, or wasted on practices that many might consider trivial. Or it might serve as an opportunity to open up for examination the assumption that craft is through-and-through a virtuous endeavor, foregrounding the ways that craft can stand in to reinforce obsession, overconsumption, or societal boundaries for behavior.

Also, crafted objects are experienced in a time-based manner, and awareness of this experience comes to the crafter's mind readily in the process of exchange. As a crafter, I am always aware when I give a handmade gift (however honorable and generous my intentions probably are) how long it took to make the gift in comparison to the relatively brief time it takes for the recipient to admire it and set it to the side. Liza Lou also notes the radical disproportion between how long it takes to make a piece (often

her pieces take years to complete) and how long people spend looking at it in an exhibition (a few minutes or even moments before they move on). These gift-giving and visual exchanges do not have to captivate their recipient for a determined amount of time. However, performance brings the audience into the *temporal* experience of making, making them subject to (or, in a few examples later in the chapter, participants in) it. The audience has to wait out the making.

Additionally, craft in performance makes an audience aware of the individual small actions that comprise a finished product—and related issues of the performer’s competence—alongside whatever narrative may be unfolding at the same time. If an object is being crafted in real time, the narrative (scripted or otherwise) may flit about from past to future and back but the performer’s body at work on stage persists. Such a performance asserts that the repetitive, small tasks (and the body that engages in them) are worth attending to.

***Craft practice intermingles truth-telling and fictionalizing***

Another reason craft is a useful mode of action in performance is that craft opens up space for a complex interplay between truth-telling and fiction, a negotiation that also finds a welcoming home in performance. In making an argument for the performance elements in human communication strategies, Dwight Conquergood invoked Victor Turner’s characterization of performance as “making, not faking” (27). I find this to be a truly productive jumping-off point for thinking about performances that saturate everyday life and everyday spaces, especially given widespread cultural/historical distrust of or ambivalence about performance and people who identify as performers. In making this

distinction, Turner and Conquergood after him remind their readers that spaces of performance are in fact spaces where new ideas can be generated, tested, and conjured; they're not just occupied by a bunch of people lying or making stuff up. As such, performance allows for the making and remaking of identity and meaning, *poesis* rather than only *mimesis*. They also imply that performance can be mobilized as a way of getting at whatever *isn't* fake about a culture, a move that Turner suggests might be more ethical and more in line with the aliveness of people ("Dramatic Ritual/Ritual Drama"). However, craft as I have been discussing it here is a corollary to performance, and when craft and performance come together it entails an interplay of making and faking. Conquergood, likewise, does not deny the importance of pretended structures, but discusses situations in which performative utterances allow "strangers to participate in a shared venture, [where] artifice enables articulation" (30).

As I have mentioned before, the performance of craft is both productive and generative. What is unique about the crafter's practice is that it produces a new object while at the same time it helps individuals fashion new ways of thinking and being and relating; one can find a *done* identity in work as a knitter or sewer or needlepointer. To return to the issue of time, this identity seems to have some kind of expiration date or a temporary quality that requires maintenance. I have met many crafters who don't identify *as* crafters when they go a season without making something. Take Sharon Dorsey, whose craft business is on hiatus and whose Etsy site is languishing. She says that in comparison to the other members of a social network of crafter-entrepreneurs she is

involved with, “I’m not a crafter like they are crafters,” because she is not crafting right now.

For some crafters, making is rationalized as a more *authentic* mode of being than they are capable of in the flat everyday. Through the creative act of craft they can produce *realness*, whether that realness be a meditative experience for themselves or a physical manifestation of their care for someone else. In making, especially in making for the purpose of a gift exchange, crafters have told me time and again that they put something of themselves (something real, it would seem) into the thing they make, and that the value of the making process is gone when they, for whatever reason, can not *put themselves* into the work. Encoded in this line of thinking is not only a romantic imperative (in the spirit of Ralph Waldo Emerson’s statement that “the greatest gift is a portion of thyself”) but perhaps also the desire to use the handmade to hearken to modes of exchange that predate capitalism (and that might then feel more basic, more emotionally grounded—providing the maker with a kind of permission to see themselves as reclaiming something “real” in the exchange).

An element of fakery, though, is also present in much craft practice. One can make a gift for someone else and pretend that they are friends. One can sell the crafts they make and imagine that she is a businesswoman. (My crafter entrepreneur friend AmyD compared selling at a craft fair to “putting on a play” and “playing store.”) One can knit a scarf on the bus and pass themselves off as an expert to strangers. One can work on a craft project and, taking advantage of the way it is easy to mistake play for work, pretend that she is busy, pulling one over on others and even on herself. It is this

game of “playing pretend” that gets things started sometimes; this playact can open the faker up to new opportunities, choices, and chance encounters.

Several of the performances I’ll discuss in the next part of this chapter rely on both making and faking, in ways that I think are contiguous with the choices that women in particular can make to navigate and negotiate exchanges in craft life and everyday life. Conquergood proposed in one of the excerpts above that “artifice enables articulation.” The interplay of making and faking can generate power for a crafter, sometimes in a way that allows them to set aside a concern with being “authentic” but not always. Becky Johnson, an actor and a crafter who sells her work at independent craft fairs under the moniker Sweetie Pie Press, says that her craft table is a safer space than the stage for her to enact her creative ideas and her sense of self because her female body is not so riskily implicated in the exchange—at the same time, she recognizes that the clothes she wears to craft shows constitute a costume and she was quite upfront with me about the way the “extra sweet” look of her apron and dress reinforces the humor, irony, and gendered expectations about the objects she makes (B. Johnson interview). Her everyday craft performance presences a reclamation of agency and authority over her body while also faking at stereotypes of the kinds of things people desire craft to be and do. Other individuals who sell at craft fairs—and who feel that they “put themselves” into their objects—have talked with me about focusing on the performance of selling as a helpful way to introduce some distance between themselves and the objects on the table so that they do not feel they are constantly baring their souls to strangers who may not feel the way they do about their craft. A skilled crafter entrepreneur can perform an appealing

realness and protect herself at the same time. A level of performance skill can protect, distract, invite, or illuminate, depending on the strategy of the performer.

In summary, I will highlight some of the considerations that a combined focus on craft and performance can allow – these will serve as frameworks to help interpret and analyze the craft performances below. First, considering craft and performance together puts the focus on the *bodily act of making* as itself a site of inquiry, knowledge production, and aesthetic interest. Second, an event that crosses boundaries of craft and performance brings to the surface considerations about the disparate quantities of value afforded to different *spaces of production*, and specifically stirs up questions about production and consumption practices that typically happen in private or public spaces. Third, craft and performance both focus on *embodied repertoires*, the practices that give them their rhythm and that can presence a desire for community or contiguity with history. Fourth, both craft and performance persistently bring us back to the issue of *time*, opening up for inquiry the value of different ways of “spending,” “wasting,” and “using” time. Fifth, craft and performance rely on an interplay of *making and faking* in ways that carve out space for an individual subject to have to themselves and in ways that confirm or contest expectations of how crafters and craft objects will behave.

Finally, I’d like to note that all of these performances draw attention to the *limits* of craft’s capacity as a metaphor, setting, or community-builder in a way that renders the combination a rich site of dialogue and inquiry. Though I will not highlight all of these considerations in every case study below, I’ll draw attention at least to several that are at work in each. And though taken together, these case studies do not encompass all of the

implications of these intersections, I have chosen these sites because they move us through them and through dense and diffuse kinds of performance.<sup>7</sup>

The first performance that I will discuss took place in a theatre space. In *Wong Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, Kristina Wong works in the pattern of solo performers who have referenced the associations around the embodied repertoires of craft in performance to captivate the visual attention of an audience. She does so, though, in a way that folds in not just the reclaiming-a-proud-tradition storyline of crafting as women's work but also the ways that craft practice can be a compulsion and can betray one's unreliability as a witness or storyteller, complexly intermingling the performer's private spaces and public persona. In this section I use the notion that a crafter's performance involves both making and faking in order to examine Wong's performance as a way of complicating the notion that craft objects leave traces of authentic care.

The second performance took place on the street, in homes, in shops, at work, and online. It took Alex Martin a year to complete her performance, an experiment during which she wore the same self-made dress every day. It is a product of its time and is also *about* time; Martin measured her performance in days, and the performance expanded to fill all of her waking hours. In this section I examine Martin's work as a piece of time-based art, a work that, in order to communicate or hold value, necessarily unfolds over a stretch of time. The Brown Dress Project provides an opportunity not only to consider what it means for an artist to be captivated by a single project for a full year, but also to consider the way a time-centered performance like hers is magnified, complicated, and flattened out when it has a web presence (the contents of which can be perused by the

audience but never, of course, simultaneously to the “live” performance) as a part of its structure.

Massive Knit took place on one May day in 2006 in New York’s Washington Square Park. This one-time performance/memorial/protest was staged in honor of Jane Jacobs, an influential city planner, thinker, and New Yorker. Massive Knit was a de-centered creative event catalyzed by an anonymous group. Knitters or interested parties were invited to come to the park with needles and yarn and knit pieces to attach to trees, park benches, fences, or statues. This project used the participatory assertion of a domestic medium in public space to engender an affective spectacle, proposing that knitting has potential energy when put to use in public spaces, when it is used to map connections and passageways in a city.

Lastly, I will talk about two craft patterns that embed messages into the very fabric of their final product. The first is Lisa Ann Auerbach’s Body Count Mittens, a knitting project she first made in early 2005. The mittens incorporate into the pattern the number American casualties during the Iraq war, customized to the timeframe during which the maker worked on them. Second, I discuss the “Fuck Cancer” cross-stitch pattern that originated on the quarterly web magazine *AntiCraft* in 2006. These projects both embrace and ironize the repertoires their respective crafts, and place the focus on the act of making as generative of dialogue and grieving or processing space.

***Wong Flew Over The Cuckoo’s Nest* by Kristina Wong**

As the audience make their way into the theatre Kristina Wong sits on stage with her legs tucked under, knitting furiously and with focus on a shapeless lump of fabric, surrounded by a carefully organized, color-graded nest of yarn. Hanging awkwardly and haphazardly from the grids over the stage and over the audience are chunks of unfinished knitting, dangling from their own threads and loops. We hear songs like “Put on a Happy Face” and “When You’re Smiling (the Whole World Smiles With You).” Wong sings along with the songs playing over the speakers and knits in time. She glances up warily at the audience members as they enter. Her hands are small, their occasional trembles magnified by the huge needles she is holding as she works—her work is speedy and skillful to my knitter’s eye. The time for the performance proper approaches and an overhead voice interrupts the music: “*Five minutes, Kristina.*” She leaps into some incomprehensible action: she yanks her knitting off its needles, runs across the stage in her stocking feet and ties it to a dangling thread, then pads back to her nest where she picks up another piece of knitting and begins working away. “*It’s time to begin, Kristina.*” She sings “It’s a beautiful day in the neighborhood,” and pulls on her shoes and sweater.

The play begins, Wong’s hands in her cardigan pockets. She disrupts our expectations by greeting us directly, welcoming us to the performance. She started pulling this work together when she came upon this troubling statistic—Asian American women have the highest incidences of suicide and depression in the United States of any single demographic. She assures us that the play is *not* based on her life story or of those of her family, who she has promised not to embarrass with this play or this subject

matter. She has us all chant the magic word “fiction” from time to time, and she informs us that mental illness doesn’t exist in China (ignoring us when we laugh at this assertion). She tells us that she has set out to give us the play that we all want, the play that will honor all the stories of depressed and suicidal Asian American women.

Wong dedicates her performance to Iris Chang, an Asian American writer who wrote about Asians and Chinese Americans (most famously in *The Rape of Nanking*) and who committed suicide in 2004. She holds up one of the unfinished knitted scraps and then tucks it into her pocket, saying “this is for Iris Chang,” and at the same time communicates the key conceit of her performance—each knitted object on stage stands in for an Asian American woman who was depressed or who committed suicide. She talks about/to Iris Chang and tucks the unfinished knitting into her pocket. Then she tells us about dropped stitches, a dreaded occurrence any knitter will understand. A dropped stitch is one that inadvertently slips off a needle as the knitter progresses from stitch to stitch. If it’s not immediately picked up again a dropped stitch is notoriously hard to find and reincorporate, because it’s just a loop that unravels from its neighbors and burrows deeper and deeper into the rows of fabric beneath. Wong says that she is going to give us the play we deserve, which will collect up and account for all the “dropped stitches” in the United States.

Like the Womanhouse Project and the Seven Thousand Year Old Woman performances referenced earlier, craft materials are rendered symbol-problematics, but in this case we will see that they are insufficient ones. The metaphor that Wong picks up and plays with mixes the impossible tasks of recuperating dropped stitches and

representing/recuperating the proliferate bodies and narratives of Asian American women with depression or who have committed suicide.

Demographics of one hypothetical suicidal Asian American woman flash on the screen. Wong reads them and identifies one piece of unfinished knitting that recalls this woman. When she holds that piece of knitting, she uses it to transform from her performer-persona into that person, to represent them and tell their story—but she fails, inadvertently mistaking their plight for her own and substituting her own story. Another set of demographics flash on the screen. She drops the unfinished garment, moving on to the next narrative and then the next, but then the demographics begin flashing too fast for her or for anyone to count. She thrashes around on the stage, trying to match unfinished object with person, and scatters yarn and fabric around the stage, tangling strands together uncontrollably. She pants and then becomes still, having broken her promise to represent for us all the stories of depressed or suicidal Asian American women already.

Despite the “fiction” she carefully couches her performance in, it is of course impossible to distinguish Wong from the character that she portrays. She tells her story (but not before reminding us, once again, that it is fictional) of trying to get counseling without health insurance, demonstrates the way she rehearsed her depression sob story with government workers over the phone until it was acceptably dismal and urgent, and gives each of us in the audience a copy of her resume, which features her role as Victim in a production of *Granddaughter of Chinese Immigrants* and notes that one of her special skills is Acting Disempowered. Her story, which she never admits to being based in true events, is always attached to performing a role. The performance of calling

government institutions in the play starts out being emotionally resonant and sympathetic, but diverts into farce as she repeats her story to different people over the phone. Her comical retelling of a sad story reinforces the ways her own fakery makes her implicit in her situation, as she relies on her “craft” of acting/faking in order to open up the possibility of transformation.

The end of the play arrives. The knitted cardigan, donned after the fashion of Mr. Rogers at the beginning of the play, has fallen apart piece by piece throughout. Wong has cloaked herself in the character of Mrs. McFeely, a crazed postal worker with designs on playing God, costumed in a collage cape constructed from Priority Mail envelopes. She says that we—she and us, the audience—are going to start over from scratch, and make a world where all the crazy people fit somewhere. She divides the audience up into various societies (we are bipolar or schizophrenic or normal or depressed), gives us mantras to repeat, and assigns each of us a list of crazy people to join our numbers and become our neighbors, including herself. Large bouncing balls covered in green and blue yarn, looking more than anything like fuzzy little worlds, bound from the rear of the theatre and knock the performer flat on the stage. As she celebrates her success in generating a utopia, where even crazy people have a place, the voice on the loudspeaker pipes up: “*Activity time is over, Kristina.*” She sheds the Mrs. McFeely persona and then her sweater, now shredded to bits as the action of the play has taken its toll on her. She puts on a loose hospital gown; she is revealed before our eyes as a mental patient. The last words of the play: “I’m sorry. I’m sorry.” Despite her voracious knitting, storytelling,

and other forms of labor, things have unraveled. Wong, unable to “help” make the issue of depression coherent, unhelpfully blames herself.

I saw the play in its second home at the Painted Bride Arts Center in Philadelphia in March 2007; previously Wong had staged it in La Peña Cultural Center in Berkeley. I first came across Kristina Wong’s work via *CRAFT Magazine*’s weblog—the craft network performed its mobilizing function online (Drieu). Wong put out a request for knitters to send her their unfinished projects and was flooded with donations from all around the United States, after her request was widely linked-to on craft blogs, websites, and discussion boards.

In an interview for *Vogue Knitting*, Wong noted that

knitting has become such a huge part of my life and psychology, and my yarn collection had grown so obscene, that I knew I needed to work this compulsion into the show somehow, especially since it is about mental illness...I felt like the massive quantities of knitting I produced were like tangible reflections of my own strange brain, and how I was able to create peace when thinking about such a scary topic....[Knitting is] calming, but it can be obsessive, as evidenced by my collection of...500-plus skeins that have accumulated over the course of one short year [since I learned to knit]....That line between meditation and madness is what really drew me into exploring knitting as a metaphor for the show (Sieff 44).

Knitting is a key mode of action that transverses Wong’s onstage and offstage selves. The play suggests that knitting is meant to be taken in interplay with the

performance persona's interiority, because as she knits we are invited to view Wong's mind. The craft in Wong's performance positions the act of making and the space of making with the power of generating the meaning of the play. However, it shows this effort to "make meaning" to be ultimately fruitless and exhausting. Likewise, the use of knitting in the play materially fixes Wong's complex blend of lying and truth-telling. We see her knitting as indicative of furious labor and unreliability.



**Figure 1.2**  
**Production photo of Kristina Wong at the top of the play (kristinawong.com)**

Over the course of the performance, the stage became a visual translation of the way personal space and sense of self are redisciplined by a crafter's sometimes obsessive consumption and production.<sup>8</sup> Wong exhibits knitting skill in the performance, crafting stitches effortlessly, but the standard link we imagine between the skilled work of knitting and the completion of a product is visually disrupted in the stage space—she starts and stops, never completing anything, and the act of creation is not pleasurable but tense. Just as Wong's performance persona is only tenuously separated from her person, the disparate balls of yarn become undisciplined themselves, tangling in to one another. Inside the neat nest of yarn she occupies at the beginning of the play a "rat's nest" of yarn develops, exacerbated by her furious activity in its midst. The yarn and unfinished knitting projects are also scattered across the stage by the end, and it is clear what a supreme effort it would take to restore each strand to a functional state. She works with other yarns in the play as well, the kind that are real or made-up stories; these yarns also tangle together irrevocably.

At the very end of the play, our view of Wong's interior/intimate narrative space is then transformed in the moment that we realize that she is in an institution – the voice she hears is not her own but that of a panoptic figure who can start and stop the performance on command. Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett describes panoptic procedures for display and viewing in this way: "The panoptic approach offers the chance to see without being seen, to penetrate interior recesses, to violate intimacy. In its more problematic manifestations, the panoptic mode has the quality of a peep show and surveillance; the viewer is in control, like a warden in a prison" (54). Kirshenblatt-

Gimblett's configuration of the panoptic view is resonant with the dramaturgy of the play. As the source of the violent voice is unseen in that moment so are we, and that voice is found to hold the power. As an audience member I was shocked to suddenly find myself in the position of voyeur (even though in the imaginative space of theater this is of course always a possibility). My breath caught in my throat when I saw Wong's body draped in a threadbare hospital gown instead of a thick green sweater. Where before she seemed safe if a little unbalanced, our assurance of her safety has gone out the window. We assumed that, despite her assurances that this story was all fiction, we were getting some kind of "authentic" view of Wong's interior life.

But instead the conceit of the show, that this knitted space is ours to see, is dismissed as a kind of violating fiction in favor of another, equally fictional framing device—that the performer is trapped in institutional "care" (in this portrayal a frighteningly impersonal and depersonalizing space). Though there has been a complicated interplay between making and faking throughout the play, the story is rendered tragic because faking wins out in the end. Though the play deals complexly with the assumptions around suspension of disbelief—calling out as foolish the notion that we could gain insight into a woman's mind through a play and a cozy craft metaphor—it seems to me that Wong (the performer *and* the persona) loses too when the fake-out wins.

When we spoke the morning after her last performance at the Painted Bride in Philadelphia, Wong was exhausted and relieved to be finished. The exhaustion started early in the week, brought on by the sheer effort involved in transporting several suitcases full of yarn and unfinished knitting projects on airplanes from San Francisco to

Philadelphia. The burden of the performance was made manifest in the volume and weight of yarn; she was literally responsible for carrying her weighty set in suitcases through airports across the country. Her weariness was then magnified by dealing with the subject matter again, “being implicated” in the course of the performance as she discussed with me. While we talked and ate breakfast she knitted simple garter stitch on a fuzzy scarf. The first thing she told me is that the stage at the end of the play looked so much like her apartment, it was scary, and from there our conversation swerved rapidly back and forth between the practical ramifications of carting around pounds and pounds of other people’s yarn and the surprising emotional weight of taking on the subject matter.

One journalist put Wong’s plight this way:

As Wong grows as an artist, by wading into more complex emotional territory, she finds herself in the unique and uncomfortable role of becoming an ironic kind of standard-bearer and emotional pillow for a significant and needy sector of her audience—Asian-American women. This is a role she didn’t seek, doesn’t want and it’s beginning to drive her nuts. It appears that Wong has opened a Pandora’s box of communal neuroses (Fletcher).

Wong put it this way:

This whole show was so hard for me to do. In the process of making it, of people asking me, “is it autobiographical?” and me having a total breakdown—no, I mean, it’s just that—*(fake crying)* “oh, no, this is what

happened, oh no!” and then just going uuuuh. I mean literally, like a year and a half ago, two years ago, when I was like (*cheerleading motion*) “I’m gonna do this show” and that question came—uuuuhhh! (*vomiting motion*)

I did the knitting, because (*laughter*) I was totally avoiding the heaviness of this, and I wished I never took on this show, because everyone wants this to be the “save me, Kristina” show, and it’s literally like a lot of issues that I was going through as the narrator in the piece was happening in the creating of this show. It was just like, “I’m going to do the show because it’ll be important, blah blah blah,” and then instead, it became me taking on everyone’s shit, and then my mom saying “don’t talk about me, don’t talk about us in the show,” and I’m just like, how am I going to do a show about mental illness and not talk about my mom? How would I do this without implicating myself?<sup>9</sup>

By placing her focus on knitting, Wong found a way into the material. Her newfound knitting habit was an outcome of her visceral and emotional response to the expectations her family and friends brought to the table when talk of her play project came up, to her emerging status as a “standard bearer.” In making, she was able to fake distance from the material and from some kind of gendered, genealogical or racial responsibility. However, that very fake-out strategy proved a generative way to play with the issues at hand. Her craft distraction, which Wong suggests took over and redefined her apartment, intruded on the performance territory and reshaped it too. Though it was

not her initial intention to cover the stage space in knitting, the use of knitted products and materials grew out of an experiment in rehearsal that stuck.

I had all these disparate parts that I was trying to weave together, and I was just like, how can knitting be a part of this? Because it's such a part of my life, and there's so much about knitting that's interesting, it kind of connotes a lonely woman, the crazy woman, the spinster, and it's been kind of a bigger part of my life than anything—it's really kind of changed my life picking up knitting again, and a great distraction from, um, (*laughter*) from having to work on the show because there's always more to knit.

And, uh, so we're [Wong and her director] sitting there, we brought all this yarn, we open up the suitcase and there's all these different balls of yarn, and she's like, "who does this remind you of? This ball of yarn?" I'm like, "that one would be my aunt...who died...because, you know, she was kind of intense crazy"...I had an aunt who was mentally ill and—everyone just kind of ignored her, and it was just like (*dismissive hand gesture, uncomfortable laughter*) and and, uh, just kind of hoping it would go away on its own—she ended up dying. "This (*gesturing*) would be my mom, this would be my grandma," and so this is where we began to think about how these could stand in for people—we could talk, talk about people without (*dramatic gesture*) "this is what they look like!"

The objects, then, perform in their own right, performing both the presence and absence of people, named and unnamed, that are represented in Wong's performance. Of course, as a metaphor for actual people the play asserts that these objects are insufficient—neither the pieces of unfinished knitting nor the performer herself are up to the task of representation. The performance disrupts any assumption of a singular or readily encompassed Asian American female experience of depression. However, these knitted objects remain in view throughout the performance, more persistent than any other touchpoint that Wong invokes. The knitting-rich environment both soothes and disturbs the performer's mind. The knitting makes Wong crazy and the opposite, whatever the opposite of crazy is. It is not there for "all of them" but for her.

Notably, the unfinished knitting objects are known to everyone in the audience to have a history—Wong's mode of seeking out contributions from far-flung knitters was widely publicized as a part of the origin story for the play, and the play's program even invited audience members to consider contributing their own donations to the growing assemblage of unfinished projects. These objects come to Wong as a result of this rhythm: for a while, they mattered to their makers, and then, for whatever reason, they didn't matter any more. Perhaps some of their makers saw sending them to Wong as an opportunity to put them to some kind of "good use," their usefulness as a project or product having been stalled out. Wong mode of accumulating these unfinished objects are then another testament to the interplay between truth and falsehood—formerly they apparently held traces of "authentic" care but this care is fleeting. Their mobilization in performance, though, recharges their very status as discarded works-in-progress as an

important identity in and of itself. Even if their expected use is disregarded they have a use in performance *because* of that act of discarding.

In conversation with me, with a week of performances fresh in her mind, Wong's primary relationship with the subject matter is that it is a burden. However, her relationship to her audience seemed to be changing a bit—throughout our conversation Wong discussed ideas about how she could encourage audience members to be knitting throughout the performance. (She likes the idea of the knitters in the audience functioning as a chorus, putting something together while things are falling apart on stage.) However, this idea remains unformed and, as of the time of our conversation, Wong retains a mixture of contempt and care for the people who sent their own unfinished work her way.

So anyway, I had women send the knitting and it was great. And it was good for me to put a personality behind each piece. Because I still—when I pick up your piece I go, “oh, it's Jessie.” And I think about the baby that grew up too [fast]—that's probably all huge now. I remember this big box came, I was so pissed—I am not a fucking Goodwill! I definitely didn't want any disgusting afghans that I would have to cut apart or something.

But it's good for me to know that I'm not just a dumping ground, but to know about all these unfinished intentions. And some of them, the first few ones especially were amazing. One woman, she was waiting for her kidney to come—she had a bad kidney, so she learned to crochet in dialysis because, you know, you're sitting there while they, I guess, clean

it out or something—and she has a new kidney now, but she still crochets. So it was just really sweet to read this story she wrote about how she still does it. To be able to do this thing that is really creative when you are immobilized in other ways.

The knitting that constitutes the setting for this performance functions on many levels, crossing freely between them—for the woman on dialysis, the piece of crocheted fabric she sent bears traces of an experience of purposing time that would otherwise have been occupied only with waiting, inaction. For an audience member, the unfinished projects transform through the course of the performance from lumps of string to flexible representations of people to a tangled mess. For Wong the performer, the knitting (both her own and that of others) was her way into the narrative and structural space of performance. Wong noted to me that at this stage in the process she can't remember which stories associated with the unfinished knitting projects were true, and which ones she might have made up through the course of arranging them on stage during rehearsal and performances; they retain their makers' connotations and are freely assigned new ones. Fakery and imaginative fictions are irreparably looped together with the real objects and their histories.

Wong exhausts herself with a performance that expects too much, which she feels she must in the end apologize for, and which doesn't make anything of the knitted objects on the stage but pulls them apart. If Wong's performance can provide some insight into the relationship between craft and performance, it is the way the labor of craft and the labor of performance alike can overextend the maker. However, the performance also

foregrounds the way that the crafted environment of theater can provide a space for storytelling (to return to Conquergood, artifice-enabled articulation), imaginative reworking, and complexly picked-up and put-down metaphors.

Wong re-envisioned the final moment of the play in the seven months between the staging in Philadelphia and a video recording. In the staging I viewed, the play ended with Wong's apology to her audience; she was sorry, sorry, sorry that she couldn't fix the world's craziness. The implication is that some kind of fault is in her hands and that she accepts the guilt for whatever it is that perpetuates the problem of mental illness. However, I viewed an alternate version recorded months later, and by then the ending had changed. In this version, Wong no longer apologizes but simply exits the stage obediently. As a viewer, I am relieved that Wong, even if she remains mired in the burden of representation, no longer apologizes for her "failure" to deliver on an unkeepable promise. However, I am saddened that she seems cut off from transformation or comfort, and that she remains subject to the forces outside her unruly mind.

### **Alex Martin's Brown Dress Project**

*September 8: I feel so connected now to the idea of choosing something sturdy and sticking with it through thick and thin. Why are my things not designed to stick with me?<sup>10</sup>*

Alex Martin is a dancer and sewer who engaged in a year-long performance she titled *The Brown Dress Project*. In preparation for the performance project, she designed and crafted a dress with nearly constant wear in mind. With one (accidental) exception, Martin never got dressed or left her home for the 365-day stretch between her birthday in July 2005 and her birthday in 2006 without donning the dress. Each day Martin took a photo of herself in the dress and she documented many of her experiences and reflections in a stripped-down online journal. As the project progressed and gained more attention, Martin expanded her website, [www.littlebrowndress.com](http://www.littlebrowndress.com), to include comments from in-person and online viewers, records of media attention, and finally the pattern she created for the dress itself. Finally, Martin celebrated the end of the project year with a public dance performance called *The Undressing*, which ended when she changed clothes on stage.

Like *Wong Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, *The Brown Dress Project* is a solo work (albeit one with a more diffuse audience), and similarly, the crafted object provides the setting in which the performance takes place (in this case the setting and rationale for the performance travels with the performer more effortlessly). Martin's project began as a series of inquiries: why are there some *things* that we just take for granted? More specifically, what are the taken-for-granted expectations that women have about themselves and other women—and how might one go about questioning expectations of fashion and habits of self-adornment? How would it impact Martin's relationships and people's perceptions of her if she intentionally subtracted the element of fashion choice from her everyday practice—if she wore the same clothing, day after day?

The question Martin asked in the September 8 journal entry, quoted above, brings into view one of the lines of inquiry that rose up unexpectedly through the doing of the project. Wearing this self-made dress day in and out created new connections for her, and by embodying a clothing practice that privileged the durable over the disposable, she surprised herself by bringing up questions about whether it is possible to craft a space separate from the quick turnover of a culture of consumption. Earlier in this chapter I pointed to the ways that the persistence of time as a defining factor of both craft and performance can draw performers and viewers into a temporal experience, calling attention to the small, repeated, and trivial. Here I aim to discuss the way that engaging in a time-based craft performance disrupts assumptions and brings to the surface questions about the relationships between people and their objects. How long is it reasonable to expect something to last, and can the limits of reasonableness be stretched? To what other purposes will one put her time when she is not preoccupied with what she will wear that day? How does time engender and transform our relationships with objects, and what can we expect from them as they become (as Sherry Turkle put it) “companions to our emotional lives or...provocations to thought” (5)?

Though the dress was completed at the beginning of the project year, its made-ness persisted as the principal line of Martin’s performance “script”—it came up first when she discussed the project with people that she met—and in its longevity in the face of repairs. As a yearlong work of art it cannot be consumed in the ways that other art works can and as a result engagement with the work is more about both the performer and the viewer being in relation with the work, with the object and the body at its center,

in space and time. It labored to test the endurance of the material as well as the attention of an audience—not to mention the attention of the performer herself. The stakes of the dress’s made-ness continued to be worked out over the course of the full year, and its sturdiness asks the viewer not to draw speedy conclusions.

I spoke with Martin in the late summer of 2008, after the U.S. economy had entered a much-discussed downturn, the impact of which persists at the time of this writing. In the *New York Times Magazine*, Rob Walker suggests that the project took place “before confronting consumerism went mainstream” (“This Year’s Model”) in the wake of the economic downturn. It is significant that Walker locates the project as a prelude to a larger social phenomenon, one which (presumably) continues to this day. Certainly one of the rallying features of the diffuse DIY and craft resurgence is constituted as some kind of rejection of consumer items, whether it be through locating greater authenticity in the handmade or through a more immediately political gesture of attempting to undermine consumer systems that perpetuate oppression or wastefulness (like sweatshops or other symptoms of globalization).

Martin’s experience with her audience was in line with Walker’s positioning of her performance as a part of a larger, society-broad consumerism-questioning narrative: “I thought that these conversations would be about feminism and...personal mythology that we make about ourselves. And instead they were – they all became conversations about consumerism, which was fantastic.”<sup>11</sup> The open nature of the project did not foreclose on potentially resonant subject matters but allowed more widespread, emergent, and potentially more broadly appealing and accessible subjects to be central.

A quick Google search will yield dozens of different 365-day projects, many of which involve taking daily photos of the person engaged in the project. Not all of these are performance projects. For many of these the main preoccupation is documentation, experimentation with form, or some other goal which may be related to but is not in a direct line with performance. Martin's work, though, drifting through her waking hours for a year, was both a time-based craft experiment *and* a performance (and thereby more useful for our consideration here) for a number of reasons.

The first reason lies in the performer's identity: Alex Martin is herself a performer—a dancer—and she has shaped her instincts to find the performed aspects of the things she does in her everyday life as well as her actions on stage. Secondly, the project itself heightened the everyday every day, rendering the public and private places she traversed themselves spaces of performance, because the project was about being seen, about having an audience.

Everyone I encountered for an entire year, I was making them a part of the performance. I mean, everyone who didn't recognize the dress, or didn't say anything about the dress was just as important as the people who wrote to me [after seeing the website or hearing about the project through some media outlet] in a way. You know, just everything I learned from all of them, I feel like I was, I was...I don't know, I guess on a secret mission in a way.

Her "secret mission" was in part the covert operation of wearing the same garment day after day (an unspoken-of transgression in current-day America), and in part the act of

transforming everyday interactions into performed experiments—Martin’s words suggest that she *got away with* this by discreetly bringing other people into the space of performance, watching their actions and reactions for anything that indicated an exchange of ideas, interplay. She was undercover, whether in a public or private space. The only time during the year that she forgot to wear the dress outside of her home (a moment that she characterized as “TOTAL PROJECT FAILURE” on September 17), it was not until she got in the car with a friend and was *seen* by someone other than herself that she knew her project had momentarily broken down. She said that at that moment “the shock of the realization was physical.”

This act of *being seen* as a performer in this project was, throughout the year, an intensely embodied and vulnerable experience. It was also a *gendered* experience, with the “just one dress” framework calling attention to the expectations of how many dresses a woman ought to wear over the course of a year. In this way, Martin operates in a tradition of women performance artists who bear an awareness of the stakes of representing themselves. Martin performed on a number of levels – as a woman, as crafter, and as performer too. For Martin, because the project was all-encompassing of her time to the point of being mundane, the stakes of her performance emerged most at the moments of disruption—being seen without the dress or, as I’ll mention later, when the dress as material crafted object was compromised (when she had to replace buttons, when it just wasn’t warm enough, or when it ripped). It seems to me that the performance became heightened, or Martin’s “secret mission” was exposed if you will, when it was shown to bear some artifice, when attention was called to the fact that the dress would not

always be there covering her up. The performance, of course, is finally disrupted during the intentionally heightened Undressing at the end of the project year.

The third reason can be extrapolated from one of Martin's journal entries, in which she discusses why she decided to use a single handmade dress to define the project: "If I'm really doing a project about 'fashion' or the absence of 'fashion,' it really shouldn't matter what I'm wearing, right? But the project has to have a shape, a rigor, a rulebook, or it's nothing" (September 17). In this statement, Martin points to the artifice of conventions in performance—she recognizes that the performance is worthwhile *because* its boundaries are clearly defined, but that those boundaries are to some extent arbitrary, self-made and self-imposed. In my conversation with her, she highlighted another project purpose—cultivating mindful living—and noted that this purpose felt self-centered or even a little forced. "I don't—we don't give ourselves very many opportunities for [mindfulness] in our culture. And I don't know, we—it felt a little false to create that for yourself, but—then, at the same time it becomes true when you do it." Martin saw the project as a chance to craft a space of mindfulness for herself, and through that process had a felt experience of simultaneous making and faking that played out over the course of the project year—by maintaining the somewhat artificial boundaries she had set for herself, she generated something that felt authentic. This aspect of Martin's performance—creating arbitrary boundaries around a length of time in a way that felt selfish—draws on cultural presumptions about what constitutes a "useful" use of time, and poses the possibility that a year of mindfulness might test the limits of cultural acceptability. Martin's intellectual pursuit, the fact that she begins with high-

minded questions, might cushion that transgression, allowing it to slip under the radar while her clothing experiment wore on.

Because the Brown Dress Project was meant to test how wearing the same clothes for a year impacted her relationships with friends, family, acquaintances, and strangers, she “thought that I was going to have to be a missionary of some sort, or justifying it to people, but instead no one noticed.” Her concern was that she would be critiqued, written off, or frowned upon, but in practice she received none of these dismissals. Martin in fact had to be more persistent about initiating performance-conversations in everyday life than she had expected. In the spaces she traversed on a day-in and day-out basis, the performance component was always on the verge of disappearing as in mundane time, no one pays attention.

Martin located her anxiety about this dynamic—her worry that she would constantly have to prove herself—in the cultural habit of expecting variety from clothing, an expectation that is reinforced privately in the interest of successfully assimilating in public (with particular strenuousness for women).

I think that what probably set me up for the critique expectation was just, you know, like my mom when I was in kindergarten—my mom saying, “Honey, you can’t wear those green pants again—I know they’re your favorite but you wore them yesterday. You can’t wear the same thing every day.” Being like—this rule that is like, engendered in us from so early. And I think that that cultural rule had me set up for somehow getting busted.

Key to her understanding of this project is that she was doing something *wrong* by wearing one dress every day for a year. The “cultural rule” she refers to, of course, is attached not only to expectations about presentability—that a person and their clothing will be “reasonably” clean—but also about a certain level of enmeshment in the cultural pattern of buying and buying again; one of the affects this reinforces in the market is a wide array of clothing made with low-quality materials and exploitative labor practices. Martin’s private anxiety, then, is deeply woven with patterns that stabilize a cultural imperative toward perpetual replacement (in the name of offering the consumer “choice”) as well as an imperative toward keeping labor cheap and relatively anonymous (to U.S. consumers, that is).

More people took issue with the project before it began than once it was underway, and she noted in her journal on August 1 that the only critiques she received were from people who haven’t even seen her in the dress. As Martin put it in this journal entry, “if it looks like me, no one notices.” Martin concluded, therefore, that the dress blended seamlessly enough with her body and silhouette—that she had crafted it well enough that it looked ordinary enough on her—for its persistence to disappear in her everyday comings and goings.

On the other hand, Martin noted on her journal (October 18), in media interviews, and in conversation with me that the first question she got from almost every new viewer for the project was “Do you wash it?”—suggesting that once the project was described to people, some cognitive work was required to allow them to decide whether Martin is “normal.” Martin noted that her answer to this question was “Of course; every few days.”

Martin's project unfolded over a year and it is likely that this conversation happened differently in every instance. However, I would like to highlight the fact that this mini-conversation thread became reified for Martin as a conversational trope, crystallizing the anxiety that surfaces periodically about whether you're talking to someone weird. Perhaps it also crystallized anxiety for Martin, about whether she was perceived as clean and therefore socially acceptable, enmeshed in the *habitus* familiar to the people around her. These mini-conversations, too, served as disruptions in the performance that brought the stakes of performing—of representing or standing in for a question or idea—to the surface. In his study of conversational micro-practices, Leonard Clyde Hawes suggests that the ins and outs of conversation, “so seemingly innocuous and innocent of power...produce and consume ideologies of everyday living” (27).

The fact that this particular micro-conversation was repeated and remembered so specifically brings to the surface the ways that dialogue (dialogue about this project in particular) can point to our ideological affiliations, to what we don't admit controls us. Here, the social interchange is marked very specifically by distance (as in, how far away do I need to be from this potentially dirty dress?) rather than closeness engendered by the exchange. Given this conversational trope as a starting point, the dress and the performance separate Martin from people rather than the converse. The project aimed to confront cultural patterns of dress but it is at that very point of confrontation where its limits become apparent.

The project addressed other behavioral habits, ones that had a direct impact on the micro-events of Martin's day-to-day. I asked Martin if there were any concrete elements

of her identity or behavior that changed as a result of the project, and she mentioned one transformation in particular that was very concrete and practical: she adjusted some of her bodily habits in order to more consistently meet cultural standards of cleanliness and presentability. “Because if you’re trying to sort of be presentable, in our society, you can’t be covered with dirt and...there are things I do that cover me with dirt [like gardening, riding her bike, and playing outside with her son]. So I got really good at being fastidious. It wasn’t necessarily something that I wanted to practice but now I have practiced it.” Likewise, Martin had to bring herself to mend seams and replace buttons on a dress that during any other year she herself admits she might just pack up in a bag for Goodwill. The dress was made before the performance began, but it continued to be crafted throughout the year; the dress was not remade but repaired and maintained throughout the year of the project. Martin’s habits had to shift to accommodate the practices of mending and avoiding messes, small shifts that pushed the dress into her everyday in a different way.

The dress was ever-present though her feelings and impressions about it were persistently shifting—it also gained a shifting identity of its own. This relationship and shifting identity were the product of a slow transformation over time. On July 25, she noted “since there is no possibility of changing my outfit, the outfit I have on instantly becomes the ideal ‘look’ for any occasion.” On December 13, six months into the yearlong performance, “it has the beginnings of the look of a sad old creature, a workhorse past its prime, and wants to just be put out to pasture, but I keep demanding another day, and another, and another. I can’t think of any good way to thank it for all its

hard work.” At another point, she proposed that the dress had become a *part* of her as the year wore on. Connected so closely to her body, the dress recrafted her silhouette and became much a part of her self-presentation, something she drew attention to frequently enough that it gained word-of-mouth notoriety. In fact, it might be said that she had to draw attention to the dress in order to be *seen* as doing the project—that the dress was everyday enough that she had to enunciate that it existed in order to stay in performance time.

In media outlets in particular (the project gained more media attention as it drew toward a close) Martin was frequently referred to as “The Little Brown Dress Girl,” a moniker that renders her archetypal and is reminiscent of names for folk tale or fable characters—the crafted narrative precedes the person, and is melded with it. She continues on December 18, ambivalently: “The dress is probably more recognizable than me at this point. I’ll have to keep wearing it after the year is up, or no one will know who I am. Ha!” So there is something almost dangerous about the crafted object here in the performance. It was up to the performer to enunciate the dress-wearing as a performance, but then the object is so evocative that it takes over, snowballing in significance.<sup>12</sup>

The nature of the project, with its interventions on the mundane elements of life and its premium on reflection, required that Martin pay more attention to her own shifting thoughts, rationales, and preoccupations than those of her viewers, especially since she was noticed and commented upon so much less than she expected. She was herself a primary audience to her and the dress’s performance throughout each day. She was also a critic, persistently commenting on the cultural or personal value of her own project,

sometimes coming up with new or adjusted interpretations. Martin documented her project with a web journal; here, her reflections presented the stories she told herself about the performance for her own viewing and for any interested party. Over time she articulated an unfolding philosophical public stance on fashion, work, sustainability, consumption, and personal responsibility that the Brown Dress stood in for—while she also found a way to vent her otherwise private anxieties about the performance. Her journal frequently functioned as a public forum for Martin to air issues otherwise enclosed in minds or behind garments. On August 28 (toward the beginning of the project), she berated herself:

Just rereading these journal entries and I noticed how much I write about talking to people – is this whole project just a way for a shy girl to have an excuse to strike up a chat, and provide something witty for her to talk about? Why can't I just start a regular conversation like a normal person? Is this whole brown dress thing not actually about fashion and society, but some sort of weird opportunity for self-reflection for me?

She continued to be preoccupied with this issue throughout the project, characterizing part of her capstone dance performance as a way of narrating this concern that the performance was about her. “I called [part of the dance] Parlor Tricks because it was, like, it was feeling very fake to me. It was like, I wear this dress and that's all I am; I'm just a trick. You know. (*laughter*) I'm just doing this for the attention, you know.” Other kinds of self-consciousness came up throughout the year, bringing to the surface the ways that Martin body and her interlinked self-respect were on the line throughout the

performance: “I am forced to ask myself, is \*looking like a slob\* really the way to question fashion” (April 3)?<sup>13</sup> Two months away from the project’s end, the dress was becoming shabby, and she recognizes a fear (again, disruptive) that its state reflects poorly on her identity.



**Figure 1.3**  
**Images from November (Martin “The Brown Dress Project”)**

Her website marks a peculiar turn in her otherwise firmly time-centered project. Though many “audience members” followed her performance online for a good portion of the year, there is of course a built-in delay between the time of Martin’s writing and

the act of an interested party reading. The website acts as a record of her temporal reflections and the dress's transformations, and this is in fact how I experienced the performance (reading it, start to finish, at my own pace). In this format, delicate turns of thought and the exchange of conversation are pointed at but not captured totally. The viewer only has access to the small daily photo, not an enlargeable one, if she wants to know what the dress looks like on any given day of the project year.

Martin created a website page where she selected people's comments to share with the public. Throughout the year she gained a large, broad following and as a result her project gained currency in ways she did not expect. As the year began, most comments were from her more immediate circle of friends and family (along the lines of, "I'm glad to see this thing we talked about coming to fruition"), and as the year went on, their authors drift further and further away from Martin's personal network. She garnered comments that moved more in the direction of resonant personal stories or commentary that connected Martin's project with larger social themes. One day in June, around a month before the project wrapped up, the site was overwhelmed by 15,000 hits in one day, a number that overwhelmed her too.

Unlike her in-person audience, who were perhaps most notable in that they did not note the performance much at all, her online audience knew they were pointing their browsers to a performance, and perhaps as a result intervened with their own interpretations *as* audience members much more readily. In her June 26 journal entry, Martin suggested,

I think my little-brown-dress-for-a-year thing is very internet-friendly because it's so easy to summarize in one sentence, and the basic idea of paring down the wardrobe seems to translate well across many lines (age, language, politics—and it was strange to see myself applauded on one right-wing pro-Iraq-war site tended by a Christian lady – maybe she didn't notice I'm a third-wave feminist lefty lesbian mom? Oh well.)

With this sentiment, she at once recognizes and dismisses this particular endorsement, suggesting that she has some ambivalence about how the project aligns with people she does not align herself with.

A question arises: if an audience member tells a story about the performance or uses an interpretive lens that was unintended, is Martin (or the dress, for that matter) beholden to that interpretation? In conversation with Martin, I suggested that the comments frequently took the form of stories, and she responded: “I think the story comes up because people wanted to put themselves, put themselves into the story maybe. You know, they felt, they felt excited about what I was doing and they wanted to, I don't know, add a chapter.” What it means for her audience to “put themselves” into the project, is not straightforwardly positive, despite the fact that Martin set out to engage in discussions with people using the dress as a starting point. In some cases, their presence and their exchange with her did not feel like a gift.

In their conversations with me, both Alex Martin and Kristina Wong lingered on the ways that people on the periphery of their performances drained them, especially those who were geographically distant. For Wong these people were those who mailed

their unfinished knitting projects, and for Martin they were the members of her online audience. Martin was deeply ambivalent about these mostly faraway audience members. On one hand, her Internet audience was the source of conversations about consumerism and green living, storylines Martin did not expect to engage but which delighted her. On the other hand, she said that “the people online seemed to want something from me.” What did they want from her? Martin got the sense that people on the Internet expected too much, a kind of friendship that exceeded the bounds of the performance frame. She offered an example of one difficult online audience member: “There was this one woman who was writing to me throughout the project, kind of asking me more and more questions, and this is one where I just felt so guilty. I didn’t live near to her and she couldn’t come over and visit. And she just really wanted a friend. And I couldn’t do that. I (*laughter*) just couldn’t give her that.” Martin points to a tension—for her, one that produced guilt—inhered in recognizing humanity in an Internet contact without having the capacity to fulfill a normative understanding of friendship or community.

Perhaps in part because online viewers of the project were not beholden to the time component of the project as Martin was (and to a certain extent, as her in-person viewers were), this viewing experience brought out, oddly, more fraught time- and labor-intensive exchanges. In our conversation, Martin proposed a basic distinction between in-person and online exchanges: “I was supposed to make something for them, or share [with] them the pattern of the dress, or like—there was this transactional sort of thing to it. Whereas I think when I’m performing live [here, I think she’s referring to dance performance rather than her mundane year-long dress performance] I’m obviously

already giving so much already that people would say, ‘Thank you.’ Does that make sense? When I’m dancing for you, I’m really generous.” With this statement, she positions the online iteration of the performance as a troubling exchange based on obligation, and the dance iteration of the performance as a more “pure” and immediate gift, with fewer strings attached.

The project began on her birthday, to little fanfare, but ended with a large-scale public performance that Martin called “The Undressing.” As I proposed earlier, this event was the final disruption in a stretched out mundane experiment, and as such, it intentionally heightens the concerns of the project and draws attention to the stakes of performing in her female body. Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett proposes a distinction between low-density and high-density contexts for viewing (“Destination Culture” 7); this project shifted from the “low-density” everyday performance to the “high-density” space set aside for performance. In the dense space of dance performance Martin was able to extract particular reactions and conclusions from the diffuse “in situ” year-long project and privilege them. She staged it in a performance space at the Consolidated Works gallery space in Seattle.

In describing the process of designing the dance to me, she foregrounded the distinction between the live and mediated components of the project: “at that point in the game there was all of this flurry of Internet action and people were calling me and I was spending eight hours a day on the phone talking to people about the dress and I was feeling very on display and one-dimensional. And so there’s a big element of that in the performance.” The flattening-out and fakery that Martin was identifying in her public

and especially in her online persona was countered, in her view, in the real-life performance of the dance itself:



**Figure 1.4**  
**“The Undressing” (Gruhl)**

I had this really strong urge to destroy the boundary between myself and the audience and to destroy the power differentials. And so I was trying to speak directly to the audience and dance directly to them. Which is a really fun way to perform. And I think that was a reaction to my, um,

disillusionment with the Internet and the computers being between me and my audience. But I just had this, I had this political agenda to be as much on the level with my audience as possible.

Martin's dance performance, then, addressed the mediatized image of the Little Brown Dress Girl and sensualized her body as a celebration of her own agency in displaying and mediating her body, in making herself vulnerable. She gave shape to how this contained, immediate audience viewed her body and this self-made garment, at once very recognizable and totally ignorable. She relished the materiality of the performance and her last time wearing the material of the dress. At the end of the dance her partner brought a birthday cake on stage for her and Martin impulsively dove into the cake, sliding through it and coating the dress, visually and viscerally coating herself in the messiness of her now-completed yearlong experiment, and perhaps bringing to the surface a desire to relinquish the pressure of maintaining it for so long.

One could say that Martin, despite the fact that she was indulging in the excess of a year-long performance project, was actually quite frugal in her excess, deciding to find her project in just one dress. In this way she might be seen as subscribing to a rather traditional set of values for women to hold: if she marks wastefulness or fashion as something to avoid, she is performing along the lines of one model for a virtuous woman. As Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett has noted, radical potential has at many points through history been afforded to the "transvaluation of the outmoded" (12) that characterizes this performance. If Martin used this project to reach at these values, she aims to repurpose them.

After the project was complete, Martin returned to at least a degree of cultural normalcy when it comes to her wardrobe—she is free to spend the time to make her own clothes, she can embellish at will with a combination of fabrics, unique tights or cardigans or jewelry—and this freedom reflects her class position. In a journal post documenting her frustration that she was helpless to have anything useful to say about the production conditions of today’s clothing industry, Martin notes that her capacity to execute the performance itself is a function of her life situation: “The privilege to choose to wear the same dress every day for a year (as it gets increasingly battered and worn) would simply not be available to me if I had to wear a Subway uniform to work” (October 27). Also, in conversation with me, she invoked the problem of self-presentation in her response to her current (reinhabited) instincts to dress to impress:

And it’s so different now cause I’m still in a, still in a recycled wardrobe—I think I did buy some new shoes this year, one pair of new shoes; that’s pretty much it for new, new gear. So I am still mindful of that, but I’ve still shifted back to this thing where I’ll say, oh, today I have a meeting with a client, so I’ll, let me grab a nice jacket—and, you know, and you’re sort of costuming yourself all the time. And so it’s really interesting—I mean, I feel like I’ve basically shifted back into that way of dressing. And, you know, sometimes [I’m] ambivalent about it. Cause I don’t, you know, have that same touchpoint about it with my wardrobe.

Along with the Brown Dress itself, Martin crafted a year to embed herself in a series of ethical questions and concerns. Now, not being contained in the confines of a yearlong

project and subject to the Brown Dress itself, she finds it more difficult to engage them. Martin told me that she can still feel where the dress sat on her shoulders, but it takes more work to recall the embodied ways that the dress allowed her to step into transformed habits.

## **Massive Knit**

*We would like to provide a collective, connected, community of individuals to honor the late Jane Jacobs who passed away on April 25, 2006. Jane Jacobs was an activist, a community leader, a writer, an urban planner, and a hero to many people. One of her great feats was as the chairman of the Joint Committee to Stop the Lower Manhattan Expressway. This expressway would have run through Washington Square Park. We plan to gather in this park on the 23rd of May to memorialize her and her ideas. We want to convene as a community in a loving and subtle way, honoring the park as well as her memory. We plan to do this by knitting the park together.*

*Knitting is a solitary art form, often resulting in gifts for others. A knitting circle allows one to be social with this solitary art. A city, likewise, is a solitary place to live. There is so much crowding and destination in daily life that one often gets lost in their own world. Parks allow people to come together and be alone peacefully in their solitary life*

*and form temporary and permanent communities. Parks and knitting circles are both public and accessible: but private enough that one can have meaningful communication and a community within their confines. Using individual sensibilities.*

*We plan to create an open structure in the park. Connecting various elements of the park together such as trees, benches and other structures, we will connect a community and a memory. As people enter the park (the meeting spot is under the arch) they will be directed to a spot in the park to start knitting. People can arrive anytime starting at 5.30 p.m. and stay as long as they like. They should tie, knit, string together long thin pieces of material, and before leaving, tie the material off to a piece of the park, or another individual's yarn. By the end of the evening we should have a string of material connecting the park together. We will have connected to the park and to the other individuals as a community. ("Massive Knit," 2006)*

This text rationalized and promoted Massive Knit, which took place in May 2006. Once this post made it online links quickly spread through the ever-growing network occupied by crafters online in New York City and beyond (to me, through a few sources including Betsy Greer's Craftivism blog and Chicago knitter Franklin Habit's blog—neither blogger is a denizen of New York City but both are well-connected nodes on the online craft network). On the Massive Knit blog the anonymous organizers rationalized their project with the above description: it was to be a memorial event, craft circle, town

meeting, performance, and protest. (“Protest” most notably implied by the posters for the event, which featured a fist holding yarn and needles raised aloft). The project might derive humor from this image—the hardness of that raised fist contrasted with the softness of the yarn material—but it posits an activist energy all the same that I will come back to before the end here.

The Massive Knit organizers generated a loose, simple script to be executed the day of the event by whoever chose to participate. They partnered with a group of knitters called the Anarchist Knitting Mob, friends of friends, to seed the park performance with enough knitters to get things started.<sup>14</sup> Some of their ideas for “knitting the park together” included connecting two park benches, making a tree cozy, knitting around the park rails, or knitting some small squares of the chess boards that topped park tables.

The phrase “knitting the park together” is playful and it suggests a twofold objective: that participants were invited to materialize the phenomenon of the park itself, and that they were to do so in cooperation with others. Images document some of the different strategies that were taken to accomplish the “knit the park together” task. Some participants used actual knitting needles and created knitted fabric, while others braided, wove, or wrapped yarn around park structures. Some worked individually, and some worked collectively.

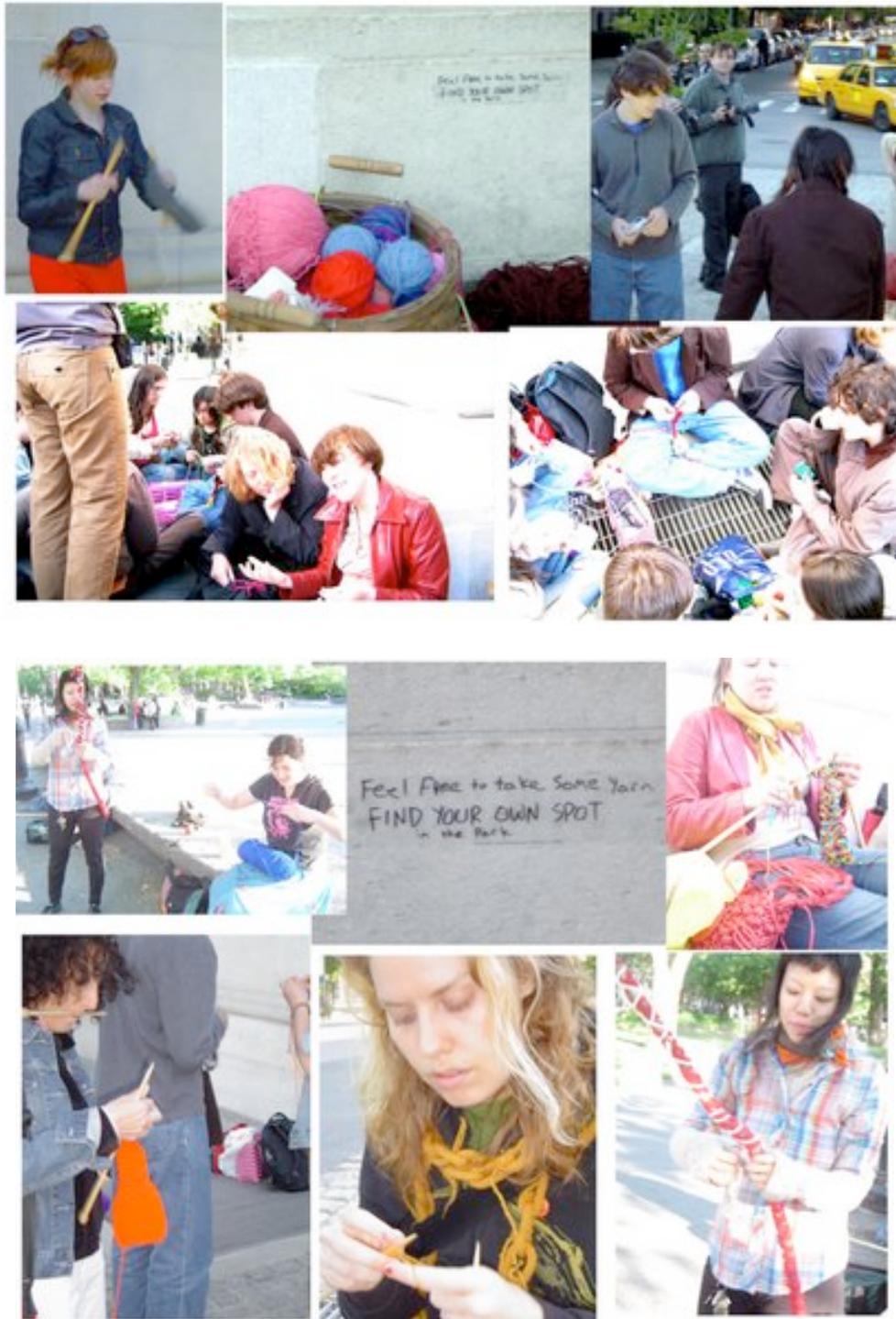


Figure 1.5

Images from the performance (Massive Knit)

The rationale on the website performs three labors I'd like to mention now—these labors are what give it its shape as a craft performance. First, Massive Knit makes a leap from participation to community. It dismisses the notion that the work of art should be presided over by an authority, presuming that community feeling will rise up out of the cooperative activity that the rationale proposes. In this way the instigators work in line with other participatory art projects that respond to a “perceived crisis in community” engendered by an all-encompassing capitalist Spectacle (in the sense that Guy Debord uses the term) which divides, mediates social relations, precludes dialogue, and subjugates (Bishop 12).

Second, by positing that something has been lost and defining its two central precepts (knitting and cities) as solitary life-modes, Massive Knit draws its power from a surprising juxtaposition of public and private activities (there is a kind of potential energy proposed in the image of knitters and knitting materials working their way into the park). Of course, both knitting and city life have always been deeply social, but by setting up a (somewhat false) binary between solitude and sociability in knitting and cities the Massive Knitters aim to generate a stir by making a spectacle (small s) of something hidden, “out of place.”

Third, it posits a possibility for contact and creativity through the performance of knitting, an affective and gendered kind of labor. Though they only address this obliquely, Massive Knit celebrates a woman who asserted her agenda and philosophy into a masculinized and male-dominated system of city planning, staving off a capitalist-minded planning project that would quite literally have driven through the gathering

spaces of Washington Square Park. Implicit, then, in the project is a metaphorical repetition of Jane Jacobs's pattern of labor, not the same work but one for this time and this place.

I spoke with two of the organizers roughly a year after the event. Just as none of the organizers were performers in the strict sense of the word, none of them were knitters either. They spoke with me about how the idea to use knitting to enact a memorial event for Jane Jacobs and the value of the park arose from their reading of Jacobs's writing—she used knitting as a loose metaphor for the social networks that made a city work. So the organizers determined that the best materials for an enacted memorial would be knitters and knitting. Neither organizer I spoke with could remember just where the idea came from, but believed the idea came out of collective discussion. As one said, it was the result of the approach of a group of “multi-threaded artists with ADD.”<sup>15</sup>

On the day of the event the organizers arrived early to set out yarn, needles, and a sign with instructions and ideas—and then simply watched people engage. Most striking to them was the group early on who decided to knit a wide band that would link together the large arch in the middle of the park with a nearby tree. Some participants knew each other, but most did not—they sat in a circle and each contributed pieces to the band, working and talking. Others scattered or worked in pairs, knitting wraps for trees, or simply looping yarn between benches, branches, and paving stones. The organizers were surprised that those who contributed to a group-created piece stuck around until the task was completed (in the case of the wide band this was a considerable time frame). What's notable here is that at the beginning of the event the organizers owned the concept and

the ideas it was designed to invoke, but the structure of the task and the rules of engagement were determined by participants as the event itself unfolded – it was an experiment in catalyzing an event simply by suggesting it. The organizers attributed participants’ acceptance of responsibility to see the object through to a working-out of the notion of self-governance discussed and propagated by Jane Jacobs.

In some ways the event was designed to recognize the multiple functions that parks play in people’s lives, and to draw attention to the myriad tiny ways that people navigate the space of the park itself. In her 1992 foreword to her best-known work, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, Jacobs notes her lifelong fascination with the “trickiness of city parks,” with the ways they continually open up to new discoveries and can provide unexpected points of contact with people. They can also confound or surprise those whose expectation of cities is that they are dirty, crowded, restless, and dominated by concrete. The use of yarn and knitting as the primary connective material encourages participants to select unusual pathways through the park rather than well-trod conventional ones, and to see the park as an ongoing *process* that requires embodied and social interaction (rather than as a mere assemblage of objects and plants).

Jacobs was an early proponent in city planning circles for “mixed-use” neighborhoods and public spaces, spaces where old buildings are repurposed rather than torn down and where living, working, gathering, playing, and selling happen in close proximity. She viewed cities like ecosystems, and noted in her writing that both natural and human-made ecosystems thrive on diversity—in the case of cities, diversity of function, of economies, and of social makeup. The Massive Knit event aimed to allow

people to engage with the multiple uses for parks. In this public performance of a feedback loop between people and the natural and human-made elements of the park itself, it does not trace the trajectories recorded by surveyors or city maps but the ones traversed by fingers and feet.

Because the event depended on the presence of bodies at work and play and seemed to have the objective of revealing a community of interest to itself (and to anyone else who viewed it), I see this event as a performance event. One organizer preferred not to think of the event as a performance when I suggested this framework, much preferring the idea that Massive Knit was a town meeting for knitters. He saw Massive Knit as an opportunity to help people collectively determine the concerns at hand, allowing for crossover and points of connection between individuals and groups that otherwise would not have gathered in the same place. The organizers did recognize, though, an important element of these connections – that, if they exist, they are composed of a *temporary* sense of community organized around a common task. We might also suggest that this sense of community is imaginary—the participants are knitting made-up connections through their participatory effort.

Massive Knit was performed with the awareness of its status as a temporary structure—like other ephemeral performances, the knitting that materially marked the “togetherness” of the park would be removed. These were publicly available, soft structures made with an awareness of their fragility and temporality. Some of the knitted tree cozies stayed in place weeks after the event. Others were taken in the evening and days following, some by participants. There was a park ranger nearby who thought the

event was great, and who reminded some participants that “they are always messing with public space in New York City.” Massive Knit could itself be taken as an exercise in messing with public space, in a more playful mode than the messing that city planners do.

Curator and art critic Nicolas Bourriard proposes that some art works “create free spaces and periods of times whose rhythms are not the same as those that organize everyday life, and the encourage an inter-human intercourse which is different to the ‘zones of communication’ that are forced upon us...the contemporary social context restricts opportunities for interhuman relations in that it creates spaces designed for that purpose...while [sweeping clean] the streets of our cities...of all relational dross” (161-2). Massive Knit was aimed at encouraging one of these temporary “free spaces,” and is resonant with Bourriard’s notion that relationality is foreclosed in part because the traces of human encounter are smoothed away from public thoroughfares. The knitting performed a temporary cluttering of the park (of course the “messing up” of the public space was designed not to persist for very long after the performance concluded), a commitment (though a low-stakes one) to the idea that traces of human relationship can and do impact public places.

However, the reception of such a performance is not *definitively* going to be taken as playful intervention of solitary/private action in collective/public space. In conversation with me, the organizers noted that there was one man present at the event, a representative from an undisclosed “save the park” organization, who was visibly upset during the entire event and policed the group, making sure that the knitters did not harm any of the living elements of the park, and that the knitted band circled but did not

actually touch the large arch centerpiece of the park. Though clearly the event was designed not to have a lasting physical impact on the park, the implication of this observer's reaction is that the symbolic power of such a performance does not have a straightforward set of outcomes. The intentions of the performers are disparate—their status as a temporary collective of intersecting interests allows participants to materialize a range of objectives—and their cooperative actions cannot be blithely codified as straightforwardly generous and genuine, despite the well-meant intents of the organizers and the warm fuzzy nature of the material in hand.

This performance probably wasn't necessary, but most performances are not. Like a person's knitting practice in our moment, this project is marked by excess. One of the organizers recognized that the nature of the event makes it "impossible to prove" whether the event had some kind of positive affect, or whether it met the organizers' goals of honoring Jacobs's memory or forging connections between knitters, activists, and other citizens. Certainly the idea that the event was a "protest" of some kind is questionable. It was unclear if the event addressed something on the table that needed to be protested or merely mirrored Jacobs's protest of city planners' attempts to put an expressway through the park in the 1960s. I borrow a question posed by Hans Ulrich Obrist in a discussion of participatory art projects: "Collaboration is the answer, but what is the question?" (qtd in Foster 158)

One could propose that this event represented an act of "Craftivism," as Jack Bratich and Heidi Brush do in their article "Craftivity Narratives." This term was coined by Betsy Greer (who blogs at [craftivism.com](http://craftivism.com)) and has been picked up by other crafters

who are interested in engaging or in doing “good” through craft. Another way of interpreting the status of this project as is as an attempt to claim and redefine the term “activist,” invoking nonviolent sit-ins while creating an impact on the space of protest, dismissing the notion that protest is inherently violent or destructive. However, at the very least, this project does valorize participation or collaborative effort (and the “self-evident” end of that effort, community) as an inherent good, worth pursuing for its own sake.

In her introduction to a volume examining participation in modern art creation, Claire Bishop notes that “one of the main impetuses behind participatory art has...been a restoration of the social bond through a collective understanding of meaning” (12). She notes that an easy connection between participatory art and political activity/opposition is misguided, particularly considering that participation can not be considered in and of itself an oppositional political act (as participatory creation can be used to mask a singular authorial presence or to forward corporation interests—consider the myriad advertising campaigns that attempt to “crowdsource” new logos, videos, and other marketing materials). Certainly the medium of knitting has the potential both to resist and reinforce normative relations of production and consumption—it is a reinvigorated medium given a metaphorical meaning here, but it persists in great part through patterns of excessive consumption on the part of its supporters. The Massive Knit organizers recognized themselves that though the event was meant to draw a self-selected, diffuse, and diverse group of people, participation was almost certainly delimited by which members of the public have ready access to the Internet, or by who shops at the yarn

shops where the organizers solicited donations and support. Like most performance events and like street life itself, participation in the project was from the start constricted by boundaries of access between people of different social or economic standings.

For me, the performance of Massive Knit most notably foregrounds and stands in a spectacular way for the collective *work* that it takes to generate and maintain open spaces and structures. To return to the words of Jane Jacobs, “to approach a city or even a city neighborhood as if it were capable of being given order by converting it into a disciplined work of art is to make the mistake of substituting art for life” (qtd in Husock). Curiously, Jacobs positions “the work of art” as a potentially oppressive category. In context, she was critiquing city planner Robert Moses’s efforts to create an expressway system through Lower Manhattan (and right through Washington Square Park) in the early 1960s, a plan that was eventually brought to a halt in large part through Jacobs’s activism and leadership. For Jacobs, substituting art for life in city planning means impressing upon a space an auteur’s viewpoint. It means mapping an optic (and in this case, particularly modernist) point of view onto a city that might more properly be viewed as a haptic landscape, occupied by “foot people” and not just “car people” (Jacobs). She promoted an understanding of cities as an ecosystem that thrives through the propagation of diversity and through procedures of on-the-ground discovery. Jacobs’s proposals support the notion that a top-down and singularized system for approaching cities is not possible, but that these spaces are in reality continually repurposed by the people, animals, things, and groups that occupy them. The Massive Knit event, as a performed response to the ideas and activist work of Jane Jacobs, is less a work of art

than a participatory craftwork. It aimed to highlight the importance of people's presence, engagement, and intentionality to give shape to public space and to make it meaningful.

### **Lisa Anne Auerbach's Body Count Mittens and Zabet Stewart's "Fuck Cancer" pattern**

If we look at performing craft as a way of picking up the capacity for doing something in the face of some kind of physical ailment or cultural problematic (as the Massive Knit performance in some ways does), the two patterns I discuss here dwell on the limitations of that desire. They privilege two very different outcomes (in one case, public-sphere discourse, and in the other, self-expression), and though I'd suggest that both approaches are flawed, they retain impact as procedures for inducing dialogue in large part because they place the weight of significance on media one would more readily "make light" of. Their communicative power is embedded in the performance of craft, performance in mediums that feminist scholar Sadie Plant notes have always "functioned as means of communication and information storage, long before anything was written down" (65).

Each of the communicative messages of these objects talk through an interplay between softness (a felt sensation commonly associated with craft) and forcefulness (a quality that might to most seem to be outside the repertory of craft). Each of these patterns works to confound standing expectations of craft objects (soft, safe, warm, heartwarming, nostalgic, cute) while not erasing the conventional function of a knitted

garment or a cross-stitch wall hanging; in fact, they enact their performance best when considered as objects that fill (and perhaps exceed) those more standard associations.

Lisa Anne Auerbach, a self-taught knitter who identifies both as a crafter and an artist, made her first pair of Body Count Mittens between March 23 and March 31, 2005 (Auerbach). One mitten bears on its back the date the mittens were started, along with the total American body count from the current Iraq war up to that date. Stitched into the pattern of the second mitten is the date the mittens are completed, along with the (no doubt) higher body count on that day. Unique among her projects, most of which incorporate knitted messages about politically charged topics into the fabric of intricately patterned sweaters, shawls, or scarves, the Body Count Mittens pattern was made public and so invited participation from anyone. She published the pattern on her own blog and also made it available to the listeners of a podcast called CraftSanity and in a book called *KnitKnit* (a collection of stories, biographies, and knitting projects).

In the United States as elsewhere, there is a long tradition of making garments for troops during wartime. During the world wars knitters were called upon, especially by the American Red Cross, to make socks, hats, helmet liners, sweaters, and other items—to the extent that one historian proposes that “simply carrying a knitting bag became a patriotic gesture” (Willis 21). Grassroots groups, who rationalize their efforts by citing this particular storyline of combined heritage, social action, and patriotism, have continued this tradition into more recent American wars. Rather than making clothes to warm the bodies of soldiers, these mittens are to be made “for the troops” in a different way. The mittens are a piece of clothing made to be a memorializing project.



**Figure 1.6**  
**Lisa Anne Auerbach's Body Count Mittens**  
**(Auerbach "Look How Far We've Come")**

One way of looking at the mittens is that they make light of the way body counts are reduced to statistics; by carefully stitching out pixels that make up numbers in a contrast-color yarn, the crafter runs the danger of parodying newspapers and other media at the expense of a lost awareness of the humanity of the soldiers themselves. (Missing, too, are the body counts of "enemy" or "allied" combatants alike. Auerbach points out in her pattern that accurate counts of Iraqi deaths are impossible to come by.) Another way of looking at the mittens, though, is more in line with the way that craft is like performance: that the crafter performs a memorializing act because the act of making these mittens makes it impossible to forget that people are dying while stitches pile on

top of each other. The mittens and the crafter that makes them also turn away from the notion that the best way to combine knitting and war is charity. In making the Body Count Mittens, the crafter chooses to take responsibility for the war effort in a different way while also referencing the historical practice of charitable knitting.

The pattern for these mittens is designed to be an open system. Auerbach's directions encourage a number of points where a knitter can adapt the pattern—however, this flexibility assumes a good deal of knitting knowledge from the knitter who makes them. As a radical kind of labor, this knitting pattern has an ambiguous status—it requires a skilled performer to craft them. It is also ambiguous because it is aware of its trivial nature.

The final step of the mitten-making instructions directs the crafter to “Wear history sadly and thoughtfully. Let the memories and unfathomable statistics keep you warm” (“Body Count Mittens” pattern). These instructions call into question the efficacy of performing a crafted response to the Iraq war as an American, while also spinning a narrative that a person enters into every time they put the mittens on. One can assume that any time the mittens get worn (an action that Auerbach recognizes is “morose”), after they are completed, and anytime they are seen and read, the real-time American (and non-American) Iraq war body count has changed (Auerbach). Thus, they call to mind not only the bodily presence of the crafter who made the mittens at a particular juncture of time but also the men and women, counted and uncounted, who died in Iraq. Also, they return to and reiterate the problematic conclusion that any performed response to the war that involves craft (including this one) might ultimately be an exercise in “keeping you

warm,” in providing you the fiction/feeling of impact rather than some kind of “real” impact. However, Auerbach makes them nonetheless and disseminates her pattern. In so doing she presences a desire to take responsibility and to act (ironically) in the face of the war and of the history of war.

In her introduction to the pattern, Auerbach notes that the pattern makes a good audience-seeking performance: “This makes an excellent project to knit in public. It’s small and portable, and the intricate-looking mittens attract attention and encourage conversation both about the knitting and the occupation/war” (Auerbach). It is in the making of the mittens, then, that the potential for dialogue comes to the surface; in the wearing the mittens are more likely to perform an impact on the wearer. Auerbach proposes that there might be positive impact when the performance folds out into a “dialogical performance” in Dwight Conquergood’s sense (“Performing” 10). Because of the diffuse nature of the pattern distribution process and the limitations of the web as an archiving site, it is impossible to tell how many people have made these mittens. However, it is the pattern itself, being passed from person to person and site to site, that dominates in the gathering place of the Internet, and the pattern can be read like a script for yielding these mittens and this discursive/ethical encounter.

If the Body Count Mittens call obliquely on the wartime tradition of making clothes for troops, the Fuck Cancer pattern flips the bird to conventional subject matter for embroidery patterns, which these days err on the side of sweet--they welcome guests into a home, capture the date of a wedding or a baby’s birth, or add to the texture of a bric-a-brac display. Typically, their value is relegated to the trivialized corners of home

adornment commodities, marked more often by nostalgia than measured by their “good taste.” Here, on the contrary, the pattern and instructions serve as a terse script to help the maker—any maker, in the privacy of their home—capture and stage their anger in response to the destructive power of cancer in the human body. The dramatic departure from conventional subject matter, however, does not erase the standard associations (and gendered associations in particular) a viewer might hold about needlework. Cross-stitch samplers are made to educate an amateur in a range of stitch patterns, to mark a rite of passage, or to embellish. This pattern dismisses these conventional functions but doesn’t necessarily escape all of them. It memorializes, transforming the act of making into a coping ritual.

The pattern is designed to be easily translated into mediums other than embroidery. The full instructions are as follows:

Print out the chart.

Get pissed off.

Embellish knitting, beading, or embroidery, and let people know how you really feel. (Stewart)

As with Lisa Anne Auerbach’s instructions, these are more like blocking and stage directions, although in this case these indications of mood and tone constitute all the words in the instructions—there are no medium-specific instructions. The pattern presumes that the maker has a sufficient knowledge of whatever craft medium will be employed to make the pattern, and doesn’t need any further instructions about how to start, in what manner to proceed, or where to finish. It is as though the creator wished to

avoid any breakdowns in accessibility due to the language of a specific medium while also assuming anyone who read it would know how to translate that sparse message into a skillset at hand, into a performable set of tasks. A crafter who stitches a time-intensive angry message like this one might be taking one of very few actions possible against cancer—an action of communicative making that allows her or him to count out a rite of rage and grief.



**Figure 1.7**  
**Chart for “Fuck Cancer” pattern (Stewart)**

Or, of course, it doesn’t need to be re-crafted at all; its stitches are laid out in a matrix in the image online and the crafted piece is already embedded in and emergent from the pattern on the screen it appears on. It performs on the viewer from there.

Zabet Stewart, the editor of *AntiCraft* and the pattern's creator, told me this story when I asked her where this pattern came from.

One of the people in our Stitch 'n Bitch, nicknamed "The Gogok" (Great Omnipotent Goddess of Knitting; she has been knitting longer than most of us had been alive), had been married for decades and decades to this really great, standup kind of man... Sadly, he had been a smoker for twenty-odd years, back in the days when cigarettes could be advertised as actually being healthy, and perhaps not directly because of that (though it certainly may have contributed), he was diagnosed with lung cancer. He was an optimist and a fighter, and things looked really good nearly a year later, but he contracted pneumonia in the winter and passed away very quickly after that.

...I don't know about other SNBs, but we're a feisty, slightly twisted, group of people. Renée and I decided to do our [next *AntiCraft*] issue in a way that the Gogok could appreciate. We wanted to make a memorial without being maudlin, we wanted to be respectful but still use our standard coping mechanism of inappropriate humor in the face of adversity. We didn't want to make our Gogok even more sad, after all! It also had to be a small issue because we had very little time. So Renée reverse-engineered (from memory!) a sock pattern she had seen the Gogok make for [her husband] during chemo, and I donated a "feed a small army" comfort-food recipe and came up with the chart that said the one thing we

were all thinking but no one had been saying.

Well, we all say it now, let me tell you. Since then, one of the knitters has battled a second wave of thyroid cancer, and another knitter's father was taken by lung cancer. Fuck cancer. FUCK IT. Cancer isn't fair. Cancer is an asshole. It should eat radioactive shit and die.<sup>16</sup>

As the editors of an online magazine, Stewart and Renée used their newly acquired platform to address (if not redress) a tragedy in their physical-space craft circle. In the quotation below, Stewart talks about her reasoning for combining craft and anger in this pattern primarily from of a logic of self-expression—creating this project gave her a chance to communicate how cancer makes her feel, to shout at cancer and undercut it even though this expression doesn't change cancer's crude power or the human body's vulnerability to it. This logic seems to disregard the differences between creating in different mediums. Stewart's pattern blends craft mediums without concern and when she discusses craft and anger she incorporates the language of art, craft, poetry, and performance. She invokes the notion of catharsis (a word used in discussions of classical Western tragedy as often as in modern psychoanalysis) to describe what can happen at the intersection between craft and anger, and notes that this project comes at least in part from an irresistible personal desire to captivate an audience. This project might be a fast-and-loose hybrid of a two-word *Prometheus Bound*-type narrative and an exhibitionist/confessional exercise.

I think craft (and crafty art and fine craft and fine art) and anger is a great mix because it can be extremely cathartic and therapeutic. I know that I

personally suffer from wanting to tell the whole freaking world when I'm  
angsty or in pain (I have more of an inner teen than an inner child), and  
really, how many more bad poets are needed?...Even so, no matter the  
medium, I enjoy sometimes being as blunt as a kick to the face, and other  
times creating layers of meaning. You can guess which one of those  
moods I was when I made that chart!

As the pattern was an exercise in self-expression, the chart and instructions  
themselves may be more the performance in question than any subsequent iterations  
made by crafters who found the pattern online. The responses that the pattern inspired  
were largely expressions of sympathy or gratitude, in the form of blog comments, emails,  
and discussion board threads; they also included stories from people who have also had  
loved ones die of cancer. The pattern promoted a back-and-forth between maker and  
viewer that allowed for storytelling, mutuality, and recognition. Whether anyone else  
visited The AntiCraft's website and then decided to craft this pattern, Stewart can not be  
sure. If crafters found the pattern and chose to adapt it for their own practice, they kept it  
to themselves or at least off the Internet. (Online, evidence does suggest that whether this  
pattern was repeated or not, the phrase it bears is resonant, as shown by the other  
embroidery patterns, screenprinted t-shirts, and bags that bear it. In those contexts, the  
project is monetized as a purchaseable kit or other commodified product. In the case of  
Stewart's pattern on AntiCraft, I'd propose that the pattern's free-ness contributed to its  
impact as a space of storytelling and memorializing.) If anyone did craft the pattern,  
perhaps they did so in a private attempt to look back at themselves and the pattern of their

own grief, carving out a space for vulgarity and humor and brevity to intervene in the overdetermined “stages” of mourning.

## **Conclusion**

The performances I’ve discussed here by no means represent a comprehensive map of craft/performance intersections. Here I have drawn a line out from the stage to the street to a park and to the web and found craft practices pushing these spaces into the realm of performance. Each of the projects, in their own ways, take a craft practice closely held by the performers and heighten them in ways that engage broad issues that hit close to the human body—depression and suicide, fashion, consumerism, ways of using and being in public space, war, and cancer—and allow the performers to linger on them, putting the careful made-ness of objects on display and rendering them communicative. What they communicate varies, but each crafts a message that is in some way mundane. With “mundane” I go to the word’s etymology and find “world” in Latin and Old French; that is, the communication in some way makes the world of the performer.

Each of these performances is vastly different in scope, structure, and subject, but I have aimed to discuss each performance by way of two primary concerns: the performers’ relationship to the crafted object and the making itself. It is here that these performances serve as fruitful sites of inquiry in the realm of theatre and performance studies. I posit that the craft objects in their made-ness or their being-made-ness are the

sites at which new thoughts, measurements of value, contacts, or opportunities for dialogue come to the surface.

On the other hand, it is also in the objects that the limitations of crafting dialogue and community become apparent as well. Whether it is because an object calls attention to the danger of transgressing a social norm or because it calls attention to a desire for the object to mean something important (a desire a single object can never live up to), in many ways the performers and audiences to all of these pieces expect too much of craft. However, these limitations are not reasons to dismiss the link between craft and performance. It is precisely because these performers are *willing* to rely on evocative handmade objects, small and otherwise trivial, a long time in the making and usually made behind closed doors, as a medium for communication that they are worthy of consideration. The interplay of a body at work and an object taking shape remains captivating—and opens out into thought—in part because it gives form to the persistent sense that we are seeing the culture-making power of the everyday in front of us.

## **Chapter 2: Performing Craft Circles**

In this chapter I hone in on a different kind of performance production: performance in and production of the female-driven social space of the craft circle. By “craft circle” I mean gatherings of crafters to knit, spin, weave, crochet, fold, or sew together. Some circles gather weekly, others monthly, and some once or three times and then not again for a year. Craft circles happen in all kinds of spaces: coffee shops, dining rooms, churches, malls, bus stops, front porches. Their proliferation and their popularity suggest that something compels crafters, most usually engaged in a solo or private practice, to perform craft together.

My focus here is two-parted. First, I attend to the way the bracketed-off time and space of the craft circle is an extension of individual craft practice. I draw in existing discourses about the form and function of leisure, especially as studies of women’s use of leisure time have served to open these discourses up in order to demonstrate the ways that an individual craft practice both conforms to and makes alternate uses of time set aside for work and other obligations. Second, I attend to the ties that are promoted in a craft circle—though the notion of “community” is broadly mobilized in discussions about the resurgence of craft in America, the ties I see being formed in craft circles have more to do with interface—a contingent, networked kind of contact performed in the present moment—rather than some kind of overdetermined, mythic definition of community.

Because crafters bring their individual practice into the social space of the craft circle, I will begin by discussing the particular ways that a craft leisure practice works to

facilitate achievement, satisfaction, and personal space for an individual crafter, in ways that exceed the limitations that many models understand to be the purview of leisure. I'll then discuss the social formation of the craft circle as an extension of that personal practice, a space that relies more heavily on action than talk and that facilitates loosely held affiliations and validates interface between crafters. Finally, I'll examine three case studies to attend to the kinds of ties they promote—ties to one another, ties to ideas, ties to broader societal structures—and the different labors their participants perform. A study of craft circles holds the potential for uncovering ways of being in free time that give satisfaction, achievement, and distinction.

This investigation ought to be of interest to performance scholars who are interested in the intersections between performance and leisure—both entail time and space set aside from the regular flow of the day, and both are fields of study that engage social and cultural constraints on participation while they are also tuned in to the potential for transformation. This study also finds contact with women's studies in the way it engages the role that craft can play in generating female-driven social spaces. Craft circles draw on historically feminized practices and both embrace the trivializing narrative in these histories (perhaps accounting for the popularity of the *Stitch n Bitch*) while they also find ways to contest these stereotypes.

Before I elaborate on the ways individual craft practice and craft-circle craft practice engage and activate leisure, I first want to draw attention to the fact that craft circles' status as a production-and-consumption phenomenon, and the fact that they are so often overwhelmingly composed of women, shapes the kinds of discourse and action

that are possible in these circles and delimits participation. These are not free-flowing, non-hierarchical spaces, but are subject to the ways the culture understands leisure, and especially feminized concepts of leisure. Here, I follow Bratich and Brush (2007) who note that contemporary knitting culture “blurs the boundaries between consumption and companionship” (11) and also warn that “even at the moment of affirming women’s...experience, we need to acknowledge how quickly it can be captured in the confining, gated enclosure of the cult of womanhood” (12). The contemporary craft movement’s broadly inclusive gesture belies the fact that many people are priced out or otherwise excluded from participation, and also runs the risk of perpetuating mythological limitations on what women do and are capable of—that they are most comfortable in affirming, intimate communities, for instance. I do not mean to propose that craft circles are something that “anyone” can step into. Rather, the kinds of leisure experiences I discuss here are entirely bound up in the practitioners’ ability to purchase craft materials and to mobilize free time for craft, as well as their movement in circles (craft or otherwise) that affirm the validity of consumption and accumulation to motor leisure. However, I do mean to challenge the presumption that craft circles facily replicate a dated outlook about what it means, for instance, to be a woman who socializes with other women. By foregrounding the performance of craft in these spaces, I suggest that the action of craft itself is constitutive of what people can be in the group. I’ll start by making some proposals about how craft is grounded in the everyday of women who practice it today.

## Craft as leisure time and personal space

Though this chapter deals with the social formation of the craft circle as a site to practice and play out the impact of crafting together on individual and group identity, it is worth first considering more broadly the way craft functions to shape leisure space. In solitary practice the very materials of craft bend to accommodate a practitioner's need to mobilize it as leisure. Craft is a leisure practice that typically involves easy-to-stop-and-start tasks and thereby fits well into available moments. This dynamic allows craft to step into the gaps between scheduled or repeating tasks, as in the case of someone who has a bus commute to and from work or has a lunch hour or a few minutes while she waits for her children to finish school. For some, crafting is something to do with fidgety fingers during lapses between "useful" blocks of time—that is, time that is purposed for some kind of paying work or home work.

I interviewed Sharon Dorsey, a crafter and fine artist who works three part time jobs at a time while also supporting two middle-school aged kids. She, for instance, picks up her crochet projects when she has nothing else to do and is feeling restless, or when she doesn't have time to engage a more intricate project like the art-object dolls she makes for exhibition and sale. In her case, craft time is not set apart in a framed block but it reflects moments where she gives herself over to a compulsion to stay busy, constituting a tested strategy for achieving calm and solitude. As she put it, "a craft is, um, something that I do to, to fill. To fill the gaps in between all that [work in fine art and with her kids] and to keep me busy. I like to be kept busy (*laughter*)...I do a lot of little

crafty things to calm myself. Like, crocheting is something that I do when I'm just sitting because I can get a good synergy—it's just a nice way of, um, to use that energy and in-between." Trish Hoskins, who owns Crafty Planet in Minneapolis, says that for her, crafting looks like "trying-to-grab time." She has two almost-full-time jobs and in order to craft when she can she stashes her materials in a mess in the back corner of her shop or in her bag so that she can work at her craft on the bus. Craft as a leisure endeavor is also intimately tied up with procedures for gift-giving. Craft is a surplus practice and because craft skill can be used to create customized objects for others, it is well-suited to meet cultural and psychological expectations for gift exchange and generosity—it can be rationalized at once as a satisfying way to be in free time and also as a "personal" gesture toward others. One handspinner told me that when she and her crafting companions make things, "our hands stay busy, and we have to give some away."

In some ways these aspects of interacting with craft as a leisure practice confirm stereotypical or problematic relationships between women and leisure (that free time has to be smashed into uncertain spare moments, that it has to do something for someone else, that other people's needs come first, that women are more anxious about wasting time than men), but they also point up the insufficiency of (male-centered) understandings of leisure that depend on a clear delineation between leisure and labor, home and work. Among others, Stanley Parker offers a significant intervention when he defines leisure in terms of its relationship to work: work and leisure can be separate spheres (neutral), work can spill into leisure (extension), leisure can serve as therapy (recuperative), or work can be a means to get to leisure (calculative) (7). Though he finds

contact between the spheres of work and leisure, his model presupposes a subject that works full-time, assumes that work as the dominant factor in a person's life, and embraces the notion that leisure is seen as a time taken up with activities, that are free and liberating, "chosen for their own sake" (10). In *Leisure and the Future*, Anthony James Veal sees leisure as "potentially a realm of freedom of self-determined activity" (121). He proposes that ours is a "society of leisure" with the non-work ethic in competition with the work ethic, moving us toward a society with less work and more leisure (3).

Broadly considered, these approaches presume a division between the space and time that constitutes "home" and "work" (a theoretical construct that many feminists, Arlie Russell Hochschild among them, have observed is not a working reality for many people), focus on the ways that leisure serve to promote healthy, happy, and otherwise normative citizens (Wearing 21), and usually use men as primary or even only subjects of study. Hochschild's key 1990 study *The Second Shift* proposes that women's efforts after they get home from paying work constitute another job altogether, refracting the boundaries between paying work and "non-work" leisure time. Her work demonstrates the widespread phenomenon of women fulfilling cultural expectations by performing the lion's share of home work whether they work for pay or not, and is one of the important texts that has helped to open up the discourse about the relationship between work and leisure time and space. Another scholar, J.R. Kelly, wrote a key text called *Leisure Identities and Interactions* in which he proposes that leisure is a process, not a category of time that is separate from work (7). His text proposes that leisure becomes "the stage on which we present our identities and receive feedback on our role identities" (93).

Though since the time of his writing a number of scholars have presented more nuanced work on this performance and feedback loop around leisure, his was an early text that opened up inquiry about leisure as a dynamic space with unfolding significance.

For those who craft for leisure, work flows into free time and free time flows into work. By work, I mean both straightforwardly paying work and also the kinds of home work and kinship work—that labor to generate, maintain, and nourish all kinds of kin ties and quasi-kin ties (Di Leonardo)—that in so many American households are the purview of women. Craft can be a site of free play at the same time it extends the work of relationships. Its “use value” is contingent on all kinds of categories of work and non-work activities but is not quite encompassed by any of them.

In thinking about craft as a leisure practice, I am indebted to insights from feminist theorists of leisure who propose interactionist models of inquiry, which tend to focus on personal agency and individualized processes of meaning-making. I also draw insight from approaches to leisure that foreground leisure spaces as sites of hegemony and resistance, sites that allow for reinforcement of hegemony but also assertion of subjectivity. Below, I’ll note three intersections explored by scholars invested in the relationships between leisure and gender: the ways that women’s leisure is constrained by their multiple simultaneous obligations, the ways leisure works to participate in and resist cultural presumptions and power relations (gendered or otherwise), and the ways the leisure practices can be thought of not just as time but space.

In an article that discusses the ways that the social relations around gender constrain women’s experiences of leisure, leisure theorist Susan Shaw argues that women

often feel that they are not in fact *entitled* to leisure (11). This feeling and the self-constraining behavior it engenders arises, in part, from the “ethic of care” investigated by number of feminist scholars including Carol Gilligan and Karla Henderson. The “ethic of care” connotes a web of responsibilities tinged with the tenor of a moral obligation, and when this is reified as a woman’s central or essential responsibility it can yield both a lack of leisure time and a presumption that caring activities (for which there is a never-ending need) come first. Henderson concludes, in her text *A Leisure of One’s Own*, that women can most readily take responsibility for their own empowerment in ways that separate them from their roles in relation to others (151). I draw on these points of view, but also go a step further to propose that the particular kind of leisure that craft engenders provides opportunities for women and others to engage creativity and even micro-transformations through performances of craft that take place *inside* other obligations. Craft is affective labor *and* it is leisure; in some ways it might be a response to that lack of entitlement Shaw describes. On the one hand, craft is just an extension of the caring labor and kinship labor expected of women, while on the other, it can be a way to challenge or expand the needs that this caring labor fills.

Feminist leisure theorist Betsy Wearing notes that leisure “is one of the areas of social life in which the cultural conflict over meanings, views of the world, and social habits have been fought and in which efforts have been made to repress and exclude ‘undesirable’ uses of free time and...to replace them with leisure patterns that are civilizing and profitable” (61). Certainly craft could be seen as a leisure practice that participates in the “repressing” side of that struggle. It is easy to explain as a useful,

practical, frugal way of spending time (even though, as I asserted in chapter 1, the performance of craft is so often not these things). The leisure-work of craft could be rationalized as a mobilization of the Protestant work ethic, as described by Max Weber, as a way of rendering one's life a whole-cloth dedication to productivity. However, leisure can also be a space, Wearing asserts, in which women can resist prevailing opinion and "enlarge their sense of self" (50). It can become a space for building identities that are not entirely prescribed by a woman's preexisting social relations. Wearing proposes that leisure for women might be more appropriately discussed as a kind of metaphorical and physical "personal space," "where women can explore their own desires and pleasures and perform acts which allow them to become women in their own right, to constitute diverse subjectivities and femininities which go beyond what women have been told they should be" (149). This crafting of personal space is not dependent on separateness from other responsibilities. Rather, it is *because* a crafter makes something physical that she can generate this space and justify it.

In her *Christian Science Monitor* article "A Tale of Two Needles," Maureen Egan discusses the way her knitting practice provides her with opportunities for self-expansion and escape *inside* the other responsibilities and tasks that dominate her day-to-day. She rationalizes her craft work as a way of multi-tasking in a way that helps her conform to the productive roles she occupies, while also generating space for herself.

I'm knitting, and I'm sitting, and I'm paying just enough attention to my kids so that I'm not guilty of neglect...When I am stuck in a waiting room, or locked in a carpool line, or trapped watching something insipid on TV

with my children, I might look glum. But as long as I have my knitting with me, I am more likely gleeful. I am supposedly wasting my time in those situations, yet for every row I finish, I snatch pleasure and satisfaction for myself. The knitting puts up a small but substantial barricade between me and the rest of the world. I'm available to my children in some ways while I knit, but my kids respect the act of knitting more than they seem to respect me. Without the knitting, I'd just be sitting, and to far too many people's way of thinking, that means I should be doing something for them.

What is important in all of this is the way that performing craft confounds a simple binary between work time and personal time. Instead, it permits people with the resources to craft the ability to carve out personal space while also allowing them to have their actions rationalized as reasonable or worth doing. When Egan proposes that she is able to "snatch pleasure and satisfaction" through her knitting, it sounds as though she feels that she is stealing something, sneaking away the surplus of her labor toward her own ends. When she proposes that she is able to "barricade" herself in a way that releases her to her craft, it becomes clear that (to reference a connection I made in chapter 1) Egan's performance of craft entails both making and faking, a negotiation that affords her something separate.

Egan's title "A Tale of Two Needles" is not accidental; she references the Dickensian character Madame Defarge, who is positioned in *A Tale of Two Cities* as a subversive and devious knitter. Defarge's knitting encodes the names of people who will die in the Revolution, so she knits placidly in public spaces and her knitwork participates

in instigating violence. Egan's reference to Defarge is oblique and probably more than a little playful. It implies that she sees some of these dynamics in her own knitting—perhaps she recognizes a tension between her mental life and the relations she is embedded in, and is able to settle some of those tensions through her knitting practice. Egan most certainly implies that at some level, she is doing something dangerous. Egan mobilizes her craft practice to generate personal space in home spaces and public spaces alike. Because it is possible to travel with these pick-up-put-down projects she can be transported. Her understanding of her kids' modes of relating to her knitting unsettles a straightforward reading of her motherly status as home authority and her caring labor as all-encompassing. However, she uses these sometimes troubling dynamics to her advantage by rendering her actions multiple and diversely productive and thus she is able to establish boundaries around herself.

### **Craft circles: objects, ties, and spaces**

It is in this rhythm of craft as a solitary leisure practice that craft circles emerge—an extension of, not a departure from—this individual practice of carving out space. I do not see these spaces as detached from the solo practice of craft; rather, craft circles bring that solo practice into a social context. Craft circles provide a repeating space of interface that justifies craft as worth doing.

Craft circles respond to this dynamic: it's one thing for a person to craft on her own while she is in between doing other things or fulfilling other roles (between tasks,

while watching TV, or riding the bus home from work), but when time is to be bracketed off for craft, the presence of other people becomes a way of rationalizing craft as an appropriate way to use one's time. To borrow a common piece of craft circle parlance, stitching isn't enough—bitching (a term that, when used in this context, aims to humorously reclaim historically denigrated female modes of interchange) has to be part of the gathering too. Bracketed-off time for craft—at least craft that isn't rationalized as paying work—is predicated on co-presence with others.

In these groups, though talk happens, the making-of-the-thing and the being-present to the craft practice of others is the prime activity. Far from being idle spaces of chatter or excuses to get together and gab, craft circles instead are thick with things to do. There is never *not* something to do in a craft circle. A craft circle requires affective participation by its participants, and this participation shifts from moment to moment—a crafter can sit quietly and work, act like she's working, watch another person work from the next chair or across the circle, and move nimbly between these categories of action. This density and flexibility of actions in a craft circle space is contiguous with craft's status as a solo leisure practice. In solo practice craft objects work to catalyze many kinds of intra- and interpersonal exchanges. In craft circles too it is the craft objects themselves that are put to work to forge contacts and connections, or to mitigate the impact of controversial or otherwise unsavory behavior with the very materials at hand—here, the craft projects help to redirect conversation, diffuse conflict, and reinclude peripheral participants.

I am thinking of a craft circle I participated with the day after Hurricane Katrina hit landfall. I sat around a table with seven middle-aged and older women in a needlepointing class. Their participation in the course, a relatively expensive session offered by a fancy fiber shop, implies that the participants occupied a comfortable financial position and middle- or upper-middle class status. The women rehearsed tiny stitches with miniscule needles as they struggled to talk together about a natural disaster, the significance of which was emerging but not yet quite clear. One woman hypothesized that her vacation to New Orleans, planned for that October, was probably ruined. I along with the others held my breath as we tried to determine how to respond to this statement. After a few moments one of the other women leaned over to the woman next to her to comment on her progress and to ask how she chose the pattern, and the conversation traveled on as though this disruption had not occurred—a troubling rupture I discuss a bit further below. I am also thinking of a knitting group, a group that met in a home and was comprised of the host's friends and friends of friends. One woman came alone and worked feverishly on a project at the corner of the table, rarely looking up. About a half hour into the group meeting time another woman made her way over to the focused knitter, asked her what she was working on, and asked her to show her how to work the cable pattern she was knitting. By the end of the group meeting she had tutored several women on the pattern, with each ad-hoc student actually getting a chance to hold the cablework and try it out on the original piece.

These examples demonstrate ways that the craft objects in progress that circulate as the prime activity of the group can be used to reinforce cultural patterns of

“appropriate” behavior (in the case of the needlepointing group, we all chose actions that allowed us to avoid controversy rather than engaging with a deeply classed issue), or they can be mobilized to engage and include people in the discursive rhythm of the room, providing an inroad to the role of teacher. In the case of the first group, the craft objects gave us a way out of dialogue and were mobilized to repress a moment of possible disruptive and even transformative discourse. In the second, the virtuostic craft work of a peripheral participant became the thing that in fact gave her distinction, status, and an entry point in the group. The three case studies I interact with below each demonstrate the capacity of craft objects to facilitate or quash engagement. In discussing them, I foreground the way the crafted objects (literally) at hand work to forge contacts despite or in part because of a lack of shared history on the part of the participants. The circles engender, among other things, in the first case, a temporary collaboration; in the second, affinity around material consumption and collection; in the third, a kind of previously unthinkable common space. Rather than a stable set of relationships that are progressing in a particular direction, what is being established is more of an enacted, embodied, ephemeral relationality that is not detached from or delimited by individual practice.

The craft circles I have participated in do not exhibit the overdetermined characteristics of community as it is typically defined—attachment, stability, unconditionality, core values, personal investment in or deep identification with the other people in the room. Raymond Williams notes that the word “community” is always “warmly persuasive” and “unlike all other terms of social organization...it seems never to be used unfavorably, and never to be given any positive opposing or distinguishing term”

(76). Zygmunt Bauman pushes Williams's insights further by observing that community is "always in the future" (3), a heavily desired ideal that people strive to achieve.

However, this warm veneer can be mobilized to mask procedures that exclude and homogenize. Bauman observes that notes that "unity needs to be *made* (14)" and that communities demand loyalty and seeks ways to dispose of difference in an effort to soothe anxieties about the precariousness of life (16). If crafters are said to constitute a community, it is easy to pigeonhole their gatherings as nostalgic or preservationist endeavors, or as emotional efforts at giving space for "natural" female relationships.

I bring this up not in an effort to take a term of reference away, but to open up another way of thinking about these social spaces that might be difficult to distinguish if community is unopposed. Instead of relying on sustained relationships, in craft circles unfamiliarity and shifts in participation are not just factors to mitigate but sites of opportunity. The ties that bind are "weak ties." Sociologist Mark Granovetter is interested in the ways information and knowledge spread and his argument about weak ties suggests that people who circulate in ways that cultivate lower-density contacts will be able to partake in a more useful range of knowledge and gain advantages that are simply impossible for those who circulate more singularly in contexts where they are densely tied to those around them (202). The people in the group fulfill a *role* in the network of identities that a crafter carries around with them. In the many craft get-togethers I have attended in the past several years, especially the ones that took place in public places, the terms of the knowledge I walked away from the group with were determined by the projects people brought to the table and the social and economic networks those projects

invoked. Here we have interface—a contingent, networked kind of contact—more than we have community. This is connected to the groundedness of craft circles in individual craft practice and problematizes, for instance, the easy gendered assumption that women require sustained relationships from the social formations they inhabit.

This is not to minimize the importance of *affect* in these gatherings. The events are full of the pleasure of common language and mutual recognition; they combine delight, frustration, and ambivalence about learning from one another with the more practical elements of knowledge exchange, description of projects and progress, and stories from life outside the circle. They also bring to the surface the sensual components of craft. By crafting together crafters see one another experience the materials they are working with, exchanging them to touch and examine and comment. They also often deal with and dwell deeply on the desires the members have for materials they don't have or wish to acquire in the future. These are spaces that affirm an impulse to indulge in consumption and accumulation as often as they affirm presence and attention to the materials at hand. Their status as affective participatory spaces mean that craft circles open up the potential for transformation through making and learning but they also encourage the replication of habits of consumption and patterns of taste.

In the remainder of this chapter I am going to discuss a few craft circles in order to pay attention to the kinds of ties they promote. In many ways, the craft circles I discuss operate quite differently from one another. However, I see each as grounded in an affective participation that folds together talk and action. They each engender female-

driven social spaces that reference other spaces and histories (sometimes ironically, sometimes nostalgically, sometimes as a way into relationships), move between public and private modes in different ways, and craft locally specific ways of folding participants into a get-together. I don't aim to generalize a meaning for craft circles, but to allow the specific thematics that occur in each space to resonate with the others. Taking a cue from ethnographer Kathleen Stewart, I aim here to invoke a "cultural poetics" of craft circles, privileging the rhythm of interactions and the stories participants tell as constitutive of the culture of craft in day-to-day America.<sup>17</sup> This means closely tracking with some of the seemingly "idle" chatter and quiet that flows in and out of these groups and proposing that this, alongside the embodied action of craft, is where we can see the relational patterns and cultural impact coming to the surface.

I'll introduce these case studies by discussing a temporary craft circle made up of just my friend Jacqui and me, formed so that we could collaborate on a quilt at my house. Another group, the Crafty Planet Craft n Chat, meets in a publicly accessible space attached to a shop that sells craft materials and consigned crafts. The last site I'll examine, Soup and Stitches, took place in the common room at University of Minnesota's Commonwealth Terrace Cooperative, a place that is neither truly public nor remotely private. In the first, my craft time with Jacqui allowed me to go to an in-between place in my own home, when I set aside (was distracted from?) my work of writing to physically make room for our cooperative craft work. In the second, participants in the Crafty Planet Craft n Chat brought people together in a space that quite frequently facilitated talk and action that put craft materials that had very recently been

commodities on the shelf to work. In the third, participants included spouses of international students living in a Cooperative but with very little common space. This craft circle encouraged participants to site personal creativity—an achievement not independent of but also not definitively fixed to familial obligations and relations—in the Common Room of the Cooperative, giving it significance as a place where something was accomplished individually and together.

I tell one story among many that could be told about each circle. The spaces, the starting relationships between participants, and the other norms of each craft circle determine what kinds of relationality are generated and what constitutes a useful use of time for that group. Jacqui and I had a goal of making a quilt together. We worked to produce a quilt imbued with a narrative about *community*, while we also labored to generate a kind of contact with the *past* imaginable if you spend time and money. The Craft n Chat circle, made up more often than not of people who were mostly strangers to each other and which apparently existed for no reason other than companionship while crafting, produced the attendees as *makers and buyers* in the same sphere. The Soup and Stitches circle that closes out the chapter had an overt teaching and learning focus (in fact, unlike the others, it was a kind of social-service programming for participants), and also worked to help participants to craft modes for navigating an unfamiliar terrain. It produced a cooperative group that can be identified as particularly *American*, even though its individual participants would not necessarily have claimed that identity.

Note that each of the categories of relationality can be read as categories that modulate individual behavior in ways that preserve the order of things. Bearing a

cooperative identity as community, makers/buyers, or Americans, in other words, gives crafters interface not just with the people in the circle and the larger imagined circle of crafters while also pointing to ties (and responsibilities) they have with moral entities and institutions that give society a sense of structure. As I discussed earlier in the chapter, the kinds of leisure spaces that craft opens up are connected to but not totally contained by social structures, relations, and obligations. In large part because these spaces are female-driven, each elides or otherwise blurs the boundaries between home and work, private and public, reiterating the ways that an individual craft practice traverses the boundaries of these designations. Each presences a set of norms about the relationship between production and consumption lived out by a crafter. And each demonstrates the limitations of talk in forging social or “community” space while placing the doing and feeling of craft in a central position.

### **Jacqui and me: Crafting contact and heritage**

My friend Jacqui and I made a quilt together. Jacqui likes to joke that when our collection of friends come together to make stuff, instead of crafting she eats chocolate. However, our mutual friend Beth was pregnant, and thanks to this happy event, Jacqui wanted to sew again. (The “again” here refers back to Jacqui’s first foray into sewing, which ended abruptly in junior high school when she stopped making clothes and started buying them.) She came up with an idea: at a baby shower, we brought a pile of fabrics and each guest chose one that reminded them of Beth. Each of these fabrics would be

included in a quilt that Jacqui and I would put together and give to mom and baby. After this sentimental, symbolic aspect of the assembly process (during which value and a narrative were imbued in the quilt which at this point was only imaginary) we then shifted to the cumbersome work of crafting the quilt itself (during certain parts of which—when we jammed the sewing machine or had to rip back a seam yet again from our quickly fraying fabric—we questioned the value of crafting a blanket even for a very good friend).

I am no expert. This was only my second quilt, but Jacqui deferred to my sensibility for which tasks needed to happen first. I instinctively took on the roles of planning ahead and delegating. For several weeks we met haphazardly, carving out several-hour stretches after work and between other commitments. We hastily piled my papers and files and notes to the margins of my office and cleared my big desk so that we could cut the fabric up together. Another time we loaded the quilt pieces up in our arms and carried them to Jacqui's house a few blocks away, as she had enough floor space to lay the whole thing out for us to look at and assess. We read and dismissed the unintelligible pattern we had planned to work from (selected because we liked the pretty picture and the large number of fabrics worked in to the quilt surface), instead deciding to make it up as we went along. We drifted in and out of conversation, and silences were filled pleasingly with the sounds of work and the sounds of outdoors drifting in through my open front door.

Throughout our talking and working, I enjoyed watching Jacqui grow more focused, as she was drawn in to the interdependent tasks of arranging scraps dynamically

and measuring fabric and compensating for our mistakes and generating strategies that were tailored for the task at hand. I didn't mean for this to be "fieldwork;" I was watching her for other reasons.<sup>18</sup> I had not seen my friend *at work* before, her laborious thinking-and-doing process made somewhat material by the way the patterned fabrics took up space on the table. I appreciated the way her hands engaged with the materials, as she discovered her own shortcuts designed to make this project work.

We noted aloud how the quilt project moved from beautiful to ugly to beautiful again—the original fabrics were lovely, but when they were washed and cut up and sewn together (only somewhat skillfully) they became a little unsavory to look at. It was only once they were "squared up," given smooth lines and neatened corners, that they didn't look amateurish and a little embarrassing but satisfied the eye again. Our work was in details, and we paused both to complain about them and to celebrate them. We traded jobs to try to avoid soreness across the big muscles of our backs or the tiny muscles in our wrists and pointer fingers. We talked about Jacqui's rotten job situation and how my sister's recent illness had affected me emotionally. We decided we liked quilting pretty well but we liked it better when doing it together—the project seemed to advance like magic, in leaps and bounds rather than tiny inevitable increments, when someone else was working diligently alongside. I could look over and see progress made in Jacqui's hands, when in my own hands I could only see the next thing that had to be done. In the moment when I was finishing up the last seam to complete the quilt top on my sewing machine and Jacqui was leaning forward, anticipating our first look at an admirable product, all of a sudden I *felt* for the first time (and I'd been *thinking* about crafters'

relationships to history for some time at that point) that I was acting out the reason that quilting circles are such a dominant feature on the American folk history landscape, why women quilting in groups (moving their chairs closer to one another as they work their way toward the center of the quilt) is a repeating pattern in our collective imagination. It was exciting.

In the next moment I was ambivalent about that flash-feeling, as the material conditions of the idyllic historical scene are very different than the scene that Jacqui and I created: two young women in a city apartment wielding a just-okay sewing machine, a dull rotary cutter, and bright designer cotton fabrics purchased with a credit card. The pattern we chose and then set aside was a reworked version of an Amish Coin Quilt pattern, adapted for use with large pieces of new fabrics rather than, as in a traditional Coin Quilt, scraps left over from other projects. I remain ambivalent. I don't entirely want to let that feeling go, even though I recognize that a claim to some kind of authentic contact with the heritage of the quilting craft is potentially a bit irresponsible. There is no reason our actions should give us access to authentic historical insight, *except* that it is among the commonplace, everyday linkages embedded in the mechanics of craft practice (measuring, sewing, hemming, creasing fabric, trimming thread) that crafters' lives bear a structural similarity to past practices and the nature of social ties themselves. Our leisure-work here was in miniscule adjustments and negotiations, as we were disciplined to the mechanics and limits of quilting. Though we did not move our chairs closer to each other we worked close-in with each other throughout.

We engaged in a kind of performance by forming this temporary craft circle, revealing ourselves to each other and ourselves as makers and collaborators while also repeating and reiterating our dependence on patterns of crafting that interpellate us as commodity consumers. For better or worse, we relied on spending power to make something old into something new. We were reliant for our starting point on a pattern that translated an Amish quilt-making technique through a procedure of making that is more familiar for people who buy large pieces of fabric when they start a project—and as a result the frugal practice that gave the Amish pattern its structure is left behind. The quilt project rendered us quite literally indebted (I think I'm still paying it off, actually) to the procedures for obtaining modern craft materials.

While we labored to produce the quilt and produce an artifact of community that operated according to the logic of capitalist consumerism, we also generated something that I afford a different kind of value: a space for interface, where it was less in the moments of direct discursive engagement and more in moments of working and watching Jacqui work that I found a different kind of knowledge or insight emerging. Not just an excuse to spend time together, our project kept us observing the micro-steps of quilting, and in seeing Jacqui submit to the procedures of the craft before us I got ideas about how to do it myself, how I wasn't doing it. It wasn't necessary to learn more about one another through talk, narrating our days for one another, though this happened too. The story of our project was in creating problems and then finding solutions individually and together. I remember, too, that we started with the modernized Coin Quilt pattern but then improvised from there—during these collaborative craft-together events, we found

ways to “reverse engineer” our pattern so that the process made sense to our hands and allowed us to make the most of fabric we had cut up inappropriately early on in the process. We were not frugal, but were at least compensating for early errors. We labored to cultivate habits, both ad-hoc and longer lasting, that reinforce patterns of taste and sell books about a quintessential American heritage craft, while we also worked to open up space for a new use of our friendship. Though perhaps our rationale for crafting together had something to do with “bonding” or cultivating a deeper relationship, the work of our small craft circle had more to do with coming into contact with the pleasure of being bodies at work in the same space.

The next study broadens out to examine a space of interface that accommodates many more people, is open to the public, and doesn’t entail collaboration. Like the circle-work that Jacqui and I engaged, the participants in this craft circle embrace the mutuality between craft production and consumption. Uniquely, though, because the Craft n Chat participants were not engaged in a common goal, it forged a commonality that was based in a different set of priorities.

### **Crafting after closing time at Crafty Planet’s Craft n Chat: Cultivating collectivity around buying and making**

There were about ten women in the room, Crafty Planet’s “Satellite Location” just one storefront over from the shop itself. It’s a cool, airy place with quilt tops tacked up on ice-cream colored walls. Summer sounds of cars and buses and kids playing drifted in through the screen door. We worked on quilts, scarves, blankets, stuffed animals, skirts,

and socks. Occasionally Trish, who owned the shop next door, would head through the curtained supply closet to the shop with one of the crafters in attendance, and who would return a few minutes later with a skein of yarn, a book, or an embroidery kit. Spirited conversations about local restaurants, new nephews, or recent weddings gave way to moments of quiet, rarely an awkward or uncomfortable mode as each person had a place to put her focus in the gaps between talk. After one stretch of quiet, someone asked, “What are you making?”<sup>19</sup>

A: A quilt—we’ll see if it’s the ugliest thing I’ve ever seen.

B: I saw the book in there (*gestures toward the store next door*) that you said this was patterned off of. I like it! I really like the pattern!

A: Isn’t it awesome?

B: Red and White—I just like it. I think I had a red and white quilt when I was a kid and I think—

A: It’s just sweet, you know.

B: Brings back something. I don’t know. Neat.

*(quiet)*

A: I want to get a hoop.

C: Oh you could do it by hand, all right! (*There is the laughter of recognition in the group. Hand quilting requires an embroidery hoop, and it would be a massive, time-consuming undertaking compared to machine quilting.*)

*(quiet)*

B: I recently got another quilt from my husband's grandmother, so you know, back in the twenties, and it's all hand done. It is amazing. I just...ahh. I guess what else are you going to do in the cornfields of Iowa? Didn't have a radio for a long time—no radio. I know. These were poor folk, poor farmers.

A: Not as much time to knit. (*laughter*)

B: Well, she did a little canning too and...you know, half a dozen other...yeah, it would be fun to go live in the woods somewhere, wouldn't it?

C: (*seems frustrated*) These needles. (*She holds them up—they are double points, used for knitting in the round.*)

J. I go back and forth between loving them and hating them. Sometimes it's like, oh! I can just keep going! I don't ever have to stop [because I don't have to move the needles from hand to hand]! Other times I'm just fighting them too much.

C: I really like doing them on the bus. It's really easy to do on the bus.

J. They're small and compact.

A: I like them on the bus too.

(*quiet*)

J. I'm going to need to start some new socks. I finished my first pair—they took forever. But I kind of like it a lot, so....

A: Socks are fun. The first one goes really quick and then you realize you have to knit another one.. *(She laughs.)* That's always where I get—starting that second one. One sock, unless you're a one-legged person.

J: I met a woman who is knitting booties, and she also knits on the bus and train and she lost one on the train so she is now knitting her third. *(A collective ohhhh! Everyone expresses agreement that this would be awful.)*

D: Sad.

C: Just terrible.

*(laughter, then quiet)*

A: Well, a young woman has just started riding the bus, and she knits, and she's proud, she just finished her first pair of socks. Well, I feel guilty sitting—I should be knitting on the bus but everything I'm knitting is too bulky to knit, to take with me so I keep thinking, I should get some of that sock yarn out.

J: So you just picked up a conversation with her?

A: Well, I noticed she was knitting and one day she sat next to me and was knitting her socks using that one circular needle with the Magic Loop *(a product available in-the-round knitting; it also serves as the name of a technique)* so I started asking her about that, 'cause I've done it on two circulars. So now, 'cause she gets on after I do, so she sits down next to me and we chat.

B: Isn't that what buses are for? You meet the best people on the bus.

J: While crocheting?

B: No, just whenever.

A: The 25 is a great bus.

C: I ride the 25!

A: I used to—I don't live downtown anymore—I did for three and a half years.

*(quiet)*

The conversation travels. It is expressly urban—one woman speaks wonderment about rural existence in a past long gone from the point of view of a city-dweller's present (contact with old practices, imagined or otherwise, is a novelty), and others move as easily between their mutual recognition of products and brands and techniques to their recognition of the virtue of that in-between space afforded by public transit. We happened upon that story about a woman meeting another knitter on the bus and developing a recurring mini-craft circle as lightly as the initial bus encounter itself happened. The conversation moves on. It moves to discussions about particular brands of yarn, patterns, fabric, and other products marketed to crafters, insider items that everyone in the room assumes the others know about and have seen. A quilt from the 1920s wouldn't seem to have anything to do with the Magic Loop knitting tool or with a sock knitted on a Twin Cities bus, except that these artifacts of craft are networked in this discursive pathway animated by talk, the embodied gestures of making, and moments of quiet. This particular craft circle gathers together women, largely strangers who have making in common, and in the gathering encourages them to recognize each other as

crafters with priorities in common. People hear what others have to say and graft in their own stories, charting a narrative path through the spaces of consumption, production, gift-giving, and the other kinds of exchange that shape the contemporary craft terrain. In this study, I'll discuss the ways that the craft circle supports and reinforces a continuous loop of making and buying through talk, gesture, and touch.

Crafty Planet advertises its Craft n Chat gatherings, which take place twice a month in their "Satellite" location next door. I attended meetings for six months in the first half of 2006, taking the bus to the north side of Minneapolis on two Tuesdays a month. Altogether, Trish and Matt Hoskins—the married couple who own and operate the business together—privilege humor in their characterizations of the Planet, and the relationships that come out of their exchanges in the shop that they afford the most value privilege humor as well, along with a sense of ease and commonality that slides between work and other components of everyday life. In conversation with me, Trish spoke to the relationships she has developed since opening the Planet:

I have people that I do pretty much consider to be friends now; I feel that I can be at work, and if I see something related to our common areas of interest, it's like goofy or funny or crazy, I can email them to show them. And these people have my day job [phone] number too, and those are mostly just people who, you know, over time they're coming to classes, and they're coming to Craft n Chat, and over time you just get to know them. And we always try to have a good rapport with everyone, but there are just people that you click with? And so I guess that would be one level

and the very top of that level would be people we actually go out [with] for drinks, and usually it's them who initiate it because I would just as soon go home and feed the cats after a long hard day.

Craft n Chat takes place at the end of a long day as well—the shop closes and then if Matt is around he clears out while Trish opens up the Satellite for whoever would like to make stuff and talk for a few hours. The quote above implies that the work of the craft circle crosses work and leisure for Trish (perhaps erring more on the side of work).

I usually spent a few minutes in the shop just before closing time, browsing the yarn and fabric selections alongside a few other Craft n Chatters before heading next door with my tote bag, tape recorder, and the occasional purchase (a few skeins of yarn, a tape measure, a new book of patterns). The recurring quality of the Craft n Chat also provided periodic opportunities for “stash enhancement.” The term “stash” is used commonly by crafters and refers to the materials they collect and save and buy and store at home. The term is an intentional play on the drug reference. Though this points up the ways that accumulation can bear the marks of addiction for crafters and the way that the repetition of Craft n Chat might function to facilitate dependence, the term is used lightly.

These gatherings were usually quite carefully timed, starting very close to the shop's closing time of 7 P.M. and ending as close to 9 P.M. as possible. Trish let us know one evening, a little sheepishly, that she sets the clock ahead a few minutes so people will be out the door in a timely fashion. The careful timing is a side effect of a number of work and business-related factors. Both Trish and Matt work day jobs and then open up the store after that first work day is done—and so the social component of the gatherings

is bounded and directed by their multiple moneymaking endeavors in more ways than one. The gatherings were open to the public, of course, but this openness belies the fact that they were subject to Trish's personal desire for private space and personal time as well. Crafters would drift in but leave all at once.

The friends she mentions in the excerpt above are examples "weak ties" in the sense that Mark Granovetter uses the idea. These are networks of associations based on some kind of common ground that allow social opportunities or "sharing" opportunities but which do not come with the same kinds of attachments that strong ties like family or more deep friends likely would. Likewise, the attendees of Craft n Chat were, with few exceptions, weakly tied if tied at all. The group was just a little bit different each time I came over the course of several months—a few people attended the group each time that I did, but other than Trish, these few people didn't constitute a core group that the more "peripheral" attendees would recognize themselves as outsiders to. Personal affiliations were looser here, perhaps, than in any group I participated in over the course of my research—there were more frequently more strangers in the room together here than in the other groups I worked with. Participants, as a result, happened upon points of contact with each other rather than seeking them out.

Throughout the gatherings, a repeating rhythm is the conversational return to the projects each person was producing, and a close reading of the project by the crafter and the person sitting next to them. These conversations validated micro-increments of progress, rewarding even small bits of movement on projects from moment to moment or meeting to meeting, and served as a point of contact and interface for two people who

shared these close-reading opportunities (whether they were on the same level of expertise on a particular technique or not didn't seem to matter):

A: It's coming together! [*pointing to another person's blanket-in-progress*] How many of these rows do you have to do?

B: Uh—six. So I'm a sixth of the way done! A bit more even! [*laughter*]

It's actually not as bad as I'd feared, but also not as easy as I'd hoped.

A: So then—where are you doing the...?

B: I'll sew them along here.

A: Ah! I see...

B: Yep.

Here, the object being produced becomes the point of contact, and what it generates as it is being crafted and closely read is a sense of making-in-common, of seeing work and having your work seen by people who “understand.” These are people, it would seem, who spend their time (and their money, on supplies and patterns) in the same way. Strangers or not, they find themselves circulating around the same objects and processes.

Indeed, the Craft n Chat gatherings often became opportunities for commiseration, allowing spaces where crafters could talk about the intricacies of making things that other people in their lives didn't necessarily understand or validate.

A: I think that people who don't craft don't get the work that goes into it.

B: And then, unless you knit for someone who does knit, they don't appreciate it.

I was riding the bus—and anyway, I was knitting a sock, and this guy said, “oh, that’s, that would be a cheap way to keep yourself in socks!” Do you know how long this takes, man? Not to mention that the yarn I was using was alpaca! It was like this really nice hand-dyed sock yarn, and I was like, dude, they’re going to be a twenty-dollar pair of socks! Don’t tell me it was cheap!

A: Yeah, and that’s the other thing, I think people don’t—and if you’re like making something and then there’s a flaw, you’re like ugh! You’re like, oh, no! Or you’re like—you get over it and say, design element. fine. But even if it is a flaw I think people, people don’t see...things...

C: [*She tells a story about getting her husband to examine her knitting for the flaw she made*] And he couldn’t find it, and I couldn’t believe it—I said, are you kidding me?

D: For example I’ve already made a mistake on this. But I’m not going to go back and fix it. (*laughter*)

B: Yeah, but what if you make that same mistake everywhere?

D: It’s just a little bit, it’s a little bit crooked. So I decided it wasn’t worth fixing.

E: Yeah, I don’t like to fix mistakes—

B: I made this sweater for my sister and there was a part of it where I purled instead of knit and so in one spot there’s this kind of odd-looking spot—she’s like, “what happened here?” I was like, “oh, it’s artistic.”

A: You said, “okay, put that down.” (*Laughter—the humor comes from the common recognition that the gift should have been met with appreciation, not critique of technique.*)

B: And it was on the back; it’s on the bottom, who cares. She said, “I care.”

E: She taught you how to knit.

B: She did.

E: She understands.

The implication is that the crafters at the gathering understood as well, and whether they shared that structure of value or not (is it “worth it” to take a whole month to knit a single pair of socks with a twenty-dollar skein of alpaca fiber? Disagreements might be hidden in a room full of laughter), the others “get it.” Commiseration points to the norms of that circulate in the group, values that become assumed. This conversational excerpt, for instance, points to an anti-utilitarian bent in the room, a (to some extent) shared expectation that a single skein of an expensive fiber is an acceptable luxury or that the effort expended to rip back several rows of stitchwork is worth it. Another value in circulation has to do with the value of observation. In these commiserative moments, it becomes clear that people who know what they are looking for (labor-intensive knitting, mistakes in fine materials) are insiders while others might not be worth crafting for or around. Each of these norms is connected to the notion I discussed earlier in the chapter, that craft practice is a procedure of carving out personal space and that consumption and the leisure practice of craft are intimately and often unquestioningly linked. Whether or

not an individual aligns herself with these values, norms that circulate discursively in the group, participation in the discursive forms of commiseration and mutual recognition becomes a point of entry into conversation as well as a point of entry into the structure of the circle. Participation also affirms that, to some extent, crafters around the circle are valued observers of and coequals in the crafting process.

Additionally, spending time in the group made me keenly aware of the norms about repetitive consumption; these crafters circulated not just as makers-in-common but buyers-in-common as well. Whenever I prepped a bag of projects to take to Craft n Chat (I usually brought at least two), I hesitated for a moment if I had not purchased the supplies for any given project at the Planet. For whatever reason, it seemed inappropriate to bring a craft project there if I hadn't bought the materials at Crafty Planet as well. Was I afraid that Trish would be offended (even though the stated goals of the group are just to make stuff and hang out), or was I worried that I wouldn't really be a part of the group if my projects weren't forwarding her business? Indeed, the concerns of the shop, the proximity of that site of commerce, heightened my awareness of the project and supply selection, as well as my awareness of the way that certain products and brands seemed to possess more cultural capital or sat more vibrantly on this group's radar. Should I bring a sock project? I should definitely not bring the sweater project that I filled out with yarn I purchased at Jo-Ann's Fabric. These decisions probably presenced my implicit awareness of the norms of the group, an important one being that though the group was for "anyone" it was really for people who supported (read: patronized) the Planet.

One week I came with nothing to work on at all, and ducked through the curtain with Trish into the shop to buy a “brand new” craft project based on sashiko, a traditional decorative-functional embroidery form from Japan. It had just arrived on Crafty Planet’s shelves earlier that day, and as one crafter put it, “It’s so cool and old and Japanese!” This interaction reveals one aspect of the appeal of a product like this. It is a prepackaged kit that allows you to engage start to finish with a project and implies contact with the craft habits of another time or place. By buying something new (a packaged version of something old), I got some attention as well.

Being this close to the shop while I was at Craft n Chat knitting and talking about my knitting also heightened my awareness of the *sensuality* of craft supplies in their existence as commodities, and the heavy dependence of the commercial construct of craft on public and private experiences of pleasure and desire in relationship to craft materials. One crafter says about a skein of alpaca yarn, “I fell in love with it, you know? I felt it, and I fell in love with it...”

This craft group (like many) discursively folds together pleasure, desire, and exchange—buying and savoring involve touching the products that were so recently on shelves, and it often opens up space for touching each other. Being a consumer of craft materials always involves knowing what’s in something, while knowing *how* it’s made might even gain a crafter distinction in the group. Gathering in a space zoned for commercial exchange positions products as having potential energy. What then matters is not just the present opportunity to unlock it by crafting with it but also the narrative about the product’s history that a crafter to some extent “buys into” when they buy the material.

Consumption is an inescapable reality. Consuming new things that they use to stretch their practice out into new territory is a large part of what produces crafters in this circle as makers. In more overt ways than in many other craft circles, here you have to *buy* to be a crafter. A common pattern in this group involved passing recent purchases or projects around so that we can feel them or gaze at them—sometimes the purchases were very recent, having been made just before the store closed. Often, the “What are you making?” question, that seed of so many craft circle interchanges, would intersect at Craft n Chat with the cousin question “What have you bought lately?” In the excerpt below, one person’s recent purchase humorously served to point to (though not really to problematize) her compulsion to buy and to another person’s desire to possess that same thing.

A: You got that last week!

B: I got *The World of Knitted Toys*—

A: *The World of Knitted Toys*, yes!

B: —and I just bought this one [*indicates another book with knitted toy patterns*]. Because I’m...sick.

(*laughter*)

C: Have you started...?

B: I haven’t started anything from that one. I have said I’m gonna make the beaver [pattern] first. I have all these grand plans—I just downloaded a bunch of diaper soaker patterns because my brother—my stepbrother—they’re gonna use cloth diapers, thought I’d make some of those for them.

C: Someone from a class [*that had been offered at the Planet some weeks earlier*] was making a zillion of those.

J: Diaper soakers?

C: They're basically like to go on the outside of a cloth diaper. Calling them a soaker is kind of a misnomer because they're not meant to soak anything but they're just kind of...meant to go over a diaper. They do soak up a little.

A: Just a little barrier. (*laughter*)

C: [To stop] leakage.

B: So I thought, well, I'll make some of those for them.

(*A few moments of quiet*)

A: (*looking through B's book*) I think I'll make a little monkey (*once she buys the book, we assume*).

A: Those little animals are something else.

B: Trying to knit from my stash before...

J: How's it going?

A: Well, I'm using this (*gestures to the yarn in her hand*). I reorganized my stash this weekend—one of my New Year's Resolutions was to finish everything I'd started, and I thought after Christmas I'd gotten back everything out that I'd started until I started digging through my stash and found three more projects (*laughter*), two pairs of socks and a sweater.

*(laughter, and a groan – these unfinished projects are recognized as a burden!)*

The fact that we were so close to the shop draws attention to a crafter's sometimes passionate and sometimes ambivalent relationship to the things she accumulates, and the ways that other crafters link to that negotiation. Craft materials as commodities were a constant point of reference. These objects-in-conversation bring about affective exchanges, which people thrill to (if they are new, or soft, or cute, like the pattern book for knitted animals or my sashiko embroidery kit) or empathetically groan at (if they are old and forgotten, no longer of interest like the unfinished projects at the bottom of the craft basket).

The Craft n Chat craft circle functions as a point of reference, opening up space and permission to rationalize, tease out, and plan all these projects and purchases. A space that privileges personal choice, Craft n Chat reinscribes choice as a right, silencing any concern there might be about whether so many choices are necessary for what could be the make-do practice of craft—but it also promotes personal acts of decision that might generate achievement or satisfaction for the crafters who attend. One woman, a semi-regular, talked to me at length about her unlikely process of becoming a knitter and beginning to come to the Craft n Chat circle, and here I see some of the implications of choice coming through in a way that allows for personal empowerment and transformation.

I was putting myself into a position to do something I had no idea how to do—it just—it didn't work. But I'm also very hard headed—I figured it

out, finally. I decided I was gonna learn, so I was gonna learn. That was the first thing. But once I did it sorta—I don't know—it mesmerizes me. I get to do creative things like, okay, I get to choose the yarn, the colors the pattern—put it all together so it's not, it's not like, the pattern exactly—I don't follow recipes either when I cook, you know? But at least when you follow the rules for a while you can see where you can start breaking the rules. And that's, that's very me too. I'll learn from a book, but then dangit, I'll go put my stamp on it. Whatever it may be. I don't know, there's something about it.

And then I started coming here, to these groups, and (*laughter*) that was...I'm usually the oldest one in the room, but I see all these young twenty-somethings and say, oh my gosh, that's what you're going through right now? I remember that, that wasn't so bad. You know, [craft is] a young person's thing these days. At least, that's what I'm seeing. None of my friends have any idea what I'm doing or why I'm doing it. My old girlfriends. My husband is even...“what are you thinking here? This is not like you!” So.

Craft became a way to confound the ways that she saw other people seeing her. The people with whom she bore close ties identified her too closely with her career choices for her liking. By knitting and talking about herself as a knitter, she aimed to narratively and gesturally reconcile a duality she saw in her person. By engaging her free time to knit, she could be creative and be analytical at the same time. The significance of

a social gathering like Craft n Chat is that it created space to mobilize a set of creative actions that may not be accessible in the other passageways she navigates in everyday life. It filled a role in her life, providing an opportunity to interface with crafters (who, according to her, are largely “young” people that she might not otherwise come into contact with) and tell a new story about herself. The Craft n Chat circle sets aside time for this kind of interface, contact with other people who might also be determined to find a way to distinguish themselves through craft, who also take pleasure in yarn and choice and adapting a pattern, and who would appreciate her story. In this making-contact, a crafter might be compelled to make more and accumulate more—while also gaining opportunities to learn and empathize. At the Crafty Planet Craft n Chat, we have a formation that propels forward a repeating pattern of buying and making but which also, at least in the case of this crafter, allowed for an opportunity to engage a resistant definition of her self.

### **Soup and Stitches: Quilting in a common space**

A brief article in the University of Minnesota’s student newspaper—something crafty going on right on campus!—inspired me to take one of the longest campus bus routes and spend a rainy April afternoon in 2006 in the University of Minnesota Commonwealth Terrace Cooperative’s (CTC) Fireplace Room for the open house and unveiling of resident-made quilt wall hangings during the first round of the Soup and Stitches program. Soup and Stitches was tucked into The Fireplace Room, a small warm

room in CTC's main building; there were about 30 people crammed in and talking with punch and napkins full of snacks in hand. Three quilted wall hangings adorned the walls, their colors vibrant against the painted concrete block. A woman named Jamie Tiedemann introduced the program and then a woman named Kaoru Kinoshita introduced the quilters, and then each resident who had worked on the project stood up to show-and-tell their panel in the collectively made quilt. Some offered straightforward literal descriptions of the contents of their panels and others dwelt on the symbolism of this animal or that landscape. Some were softspoken, using few words, while others waxed enthusiastic. Some spoke about the friendships they and their children had developed over the afternoons sewing together in the same room, friends that they had not and would not have met outside of the group. An ethnically diverse group, they variously located "home" in Asia, Latin America, the Caribbean, and Eastern Europe. In conversation with participants and organizers after the presentation, I was surprised to discover that the event was sponsored by the Aurora Center, the University's main mechanism for responding to incidents of domestic violence on campus.

Later I spoke with Jamie Tiedemann, the Executive Director of University of Minnesota's Aurora Center, Lynn Cooper, the teacher from Minneapolis's Textile Center who facilitated the sessions, and Kaoru Kinoshita, a Japanese-born international student who lives at CTC with her husband and two young children, who volunteers at the Aurora Center, and who initiated the undertaking that became the Soup and Stitches project. According to Jamie, the impetus for the Soup and Stitches program was a marked increase in the number of domestic violence calls the police were receiving from

residents at CTC. The police were confounded and frequently had difficulty communicating with those were engaged in conflict because of their language differences. The barrier of language, Jamie said, was exacerbated by the isolation experienced by many spouses of students in residence there. The vast majority of the students who live in international housing are men who have wives and often children, and many of these women spend their days in their homes with little to no social contact. Of the Soup and Stitches participants, Jamie told me that “these are educated women, some of them doctors or veterinarians in their home countries,” who were not able to take jobs outside of their U.S. home because of the regulations around their husbands’ student visas. Whatever their class status in their home countries, their status in the U.S. and as spouses of students was more liminal, uncertain. From conversation with them, Jamie suggested that the women in particular felt disconnected, bored, and useless. Into this context Jamie and Kaoru decided to bring women together around a craft circle.

Soup and Stitches was not the first or last piece of programming designed to bring residents together. With her friend Sylvia, Kaoru Kinoshita started a cross-cultural discussion group as a way to bring people into the same place for conversation, and as they developed a steady attending group, Kaoru began to feel the time and place was ripe for people to come into the room and *do* something together too. In other words, she decided that the efficacy of “just talking” was insufficient in part because of language differences but also because not all of the possible attendees demonstrated a comfort with talk. She aimed to promote a space for talk and action and in so doing, to carve out a participatory, affective common space that did not exclude them.

Kaoru thoughts bridged with discussions with the volunteer and program staff at the Aurora Center, and Jamie remembered that when she was a child her mother and her grandmother talked about people who used to have soup-and-stitches gatherings. They structured a program around these two ideas, guessing at an iteration of a historical construct no one involved had experienced themselves and which they only had a secondhand story about. Here was the idea: anyone who wanted to could come together in a common room to learn to make a quilt. Then each person (it wound up being 18 women altogether) would create a quilt square and at each meeting a different person would volunteer to bring a soup reminiscent of their home country.

Jamie and Kaoru labored, then, to manufacture a craft circle that might promote a sense of togetherness and validation and that referenced a history that might anchor the participants in a common space. The Americanized heritage they aimed to produce in setting up this craft circle was hybridized with and apparently nourished by signs of Home Cultures. Kaoru said that “people were really craving something that [would] connect them.” This something, a common space crafted by the group (and specifically an American one that leans on the mythological qualities of American patchwork), was to unfold amid the performance of craft.

It is important to note that this is a space structured by women but, unlike the other groups I have talked about in this chapter, the Soup and Stitches circle was explicitly framed as an educational opportunity and was structured as a group of leaders and followers. In turn, *my* way in to this craft circle is through the narration of these women who ran it. By volunteering to make soup and by creating a quilted representation

of their nation, participants were encouraged to craft an exhibition of, a shorthand for, their own heritage—and the hope is that perhaps they would see themselves as co-laborers in organizing the project. Additionally, this gesture presumes that participants, by providing food hospitality to the others, will get a sense that they have something to offer the group and may feel a sense of empowerment. After the Soup and Stitches event, other programs emerged along with a planning team made up of residents. They executed a scrapbooking event around the same model several months later, and a year after that they took up a revitalization and garden project in the small park-like area at the cooperative. Each time the planning team brought in an expert to teach the group, thereby giving each circle a more visibly top-down structure than other circles I have talked about here and observed elsewhere. This may have delimited the kinds of interactions that could take place in the room, but it may also have been one of the components that powered and permitted participation. While it may be difficult to justify a weekly commitment to a craft circle or discussion group to oneself or to family, it is easy to justify participating in a free learning opportunity with free childcare and a potluck no more than a few hundred yards from the front door.

Kaoru shared with me her insights about the dynamics at Commonwealth Terrace Cooperative, and how her place in it has developed.

CTC is a very unusual community for a number of reasons—about 80 percent of the residents are international. Another interesting aspect is that its management has been unstable for many years. Since I moved in in 2002 there have been 5 or 6 different management, some of them

individuals...and it's been very shaky in terms of governance and management. And people are feeling sort of, you know, doubtful of what is going on in management...and it's there's so much sense of skepticism and also, um, uh, lack of interest because it's just so complicated. Things keep changing, and no one really, um, no one can really explain the whole picture because, um, you know, students move in and graduate and move out; that, you know, keeps happening. And also there is a time limit that residents can live in CTC for—seven years, up to seven years. So there aren't many people who can really tell us what has been going on for, you know, in a longer term.

So all we know is always snapshots. At this point, this happened. And then this happened. It's very um...if you really want to understand this community, you get really frustrated, because no one really knows anything, you know, no one knows the whole picture. And that's um, that's been a feeling that many of us have had. However, since we, Sylvia and I, have started the cross-cultural discussion group, people started to look at us and start participating in this. Because they were looking for something like...this. Before we started this program, there was nothing going on because there was this program coordinator, this full-time person, [who] was terminated. And she did all the seminars and summer parties and Christmas parties, but there was none going on in this community [anymore].

In Kaoru's view, the "cooperative" element of CTC seemed largely to have lost its relevance. "Maybe in the 70s people wanted to be a part of a cooperative," Kaoru said, but there seemed now to be less interest in the inner workings of that organizational structure. This may have been at least in part a function of a frustrating lack of a shared, accessible body of knowledge. The idealistic structure of a cooperative was belied by a lack of access to common resources and mechanisms for civic engagement in a "community" whose entire population turns over relatively frequently. The inconsistencies and abrupt changes in CTC's leadership alongside the frequent arrival and departure of residents meant, in Kaoru's view, that the organization had no memory or long-term sensibility to speak of: "We learned to look at the present moment, what we need now, and do it now... We don't have a huge future planned... We have kids who are craving some programs, excitement, so... we do what we need now using what we have right now." I used the word "ownership" to describe the way many residents became active in planning events for themselves and their families, and Kaoru liked this word: "I think ownership is the very good word that describe our passion, and also our persistence to keep doing this in spite of the, you know, the challenges, management and governance level. We just keep doing programs that give residents, you know, even short-term fun and enjoyment. Ownership is the good one."

Of course, part-ownership is a central characteristic of a housing cooperative. In this arrangement residents both own and don't own the public and private spaces they occupy. But the process of working together to generate creative opportunities and social circles constitutes ownership of a different kind altogether: ownership in a space rather

than ownership of a place. Where a cooperative didn't allow an experience of ownership and pleasure in common activities, a common craft space—self-organized, self-consciously short-term and temporary with an awareness of what separates participants and what makes them different—did.

According to Jamie, “the creative process [during Soup and Stitches] was a process of validation.” In the craft circle, women would go back and forth between working on their own squares to getting second opinions on the work they were doing to commenting on what they saw that others were doing. This was facilitated by the fact that there were a limited number of sewing machines in the room, so one person's chair was never theirs for the entire session. The quilters moved from chair to chair, offering input, trading tools, and sharing their own work. Lynn Cooper, the teacher for the project, framed the social time of the gathering in terms of a perpetually changing relationship between talk and action:

We're all wary. So you have to build the sense of trust and a sense of interpersonal relationships....and then as you go along [as the teacher] it's more and more letting go—it's funny because I talk for the first three hours of the time, then every class after that is less and less time that I talk and more and more time that people are just—with the Soup and Stitches project there was one forty-five minute period where no one said anything because they were all so intently concentrating on what they were doing. And this was after most weeks where they were all “blablabla”! But

you know that's part of the community—it's not necessarily constant interaction, it's working side by side as well as...interface.

Lynn is describing what many artists and creative people have described as “flow,” a theory the way that certain kinds of gatherings and certain kinds of work allows a concentration that seems to escape the boundaries of time, and may even allow the personal boundaries that give rise to wariness and distrust to stretch and loosen.

Psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi elaborates on the concept of flow especially in his work *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*. In an interview he proposed that flow is an experience everyone has at some point when they are engaged in a task that is difficult enough to engender great focus, and in which “ego falls away. Your whole being is involved, and you're using your skills to the utmost” (qtd in Geirland). The experience of flow here was dependent on the generative social space that permitted an open relationship between talk and quiet as well as a personal commitment to the labor-intensive work that was being done, and it depended, importantly, on serendipity—in this space, stretches of time when everyone simultaneously had the urge to put their heads down and work.

Unlike the other groups I have talked about in this chapter, the Soup and Stitches circle was established more overtly from the outset as a space for learning new skills and for sharing, and set up with a group of leaders and followers in mind. Lynn's observations are a reminder that any craft circle on a certain level bears just the illusion of being self-organized or nonhierarchical, and that the concept of an organically emerging circle might be valuable rhetorically but in actuality they require work to

generate—they operate more or less on the faith that that participants will write themselves in to the organization of the circle, choosing to identify with the group. The wariness that Lynn alluded to at the beginning of the excerpt above points to one aspect of what is uncertain—what kinds of ties will develop in the group? Interface, in this context, can not be accidental. It requires an intentional hand in crafting an environment that will open up space for a seemingly organic blend of silence, sharing, watching, commenting, working, taking breaks, and asking. Interface, a networked kind of contact that allows participants to seek and share resources while also engaging affectively with the others, is a labor, not a given reality.

The organizers of this circle had to navigate the ordinary motive quite carefully. The planning team decided early on that they would address the issue of domestic violence only indirectly. Jamie told me that her forefront question to each person was “Why are you here?”, and that she tried to allow the issues the Aurora Center was concerned with to come up if they seemed relevant to the participants when she introduced herself and her job. Follow-up questions included “what do you miss [about your home]?” or “what do you wish you had here [at CTC]?” In her conversation with me, Jamie reinforced several times that by and large the women did not realize that domestic violence is so common in the US, and that many of them don’t have a cultural precedent for taking action amid the experience or discovery of home violence. Kaoru, as a CTC resident with more specific knowledge of the ethnic diversity at CTC, came to some culture-specific conclusions about awareness and the stakes of acting on violence.

We didn't explicitly talk about these issues while we were doing projects. I was, as a coordinator, running around the room, and I didn't have time to sit down to talk to the participants. Jamie was the one who was trying to introduce those ideas to the participants. And they seemed to be really interested in, you know, relationship violence and stalking issues. Not because they were the one who was victimized, but they just didn't think that...um, those were the issues that we need to pay attention to. And later on they might have realized that some of them, ah, some of their friends might have been victims of violence or whatever,...especially for Asians. They looked surprised that there were those issues that they have to think about. But for Europeans, it looked more common. They didn't think it was a new idea to them. But for Asians, for sure, especially for Chinese-speaking people—probably because they don't have a chance to expose themselves to outside world, outside CTC—they didn't know that in US, this is being an issue. They didn't know that they have to look at those behaviors were—violence, or hitting, or beating—as, um, something that—they just didn't think about it before, it sounded like. Only recently back in their home country, back in China or Taiwan, past couple of years, they started to have services for victim-survivors.

So we provided space that, ah, they can, they can share information provided by the Aurora Center—but it was not the place or space that they can disclose something that they were experiencing—it wasn't taken that,

as that place. It was more superficial, it was more [an] information-session type of opportunity for them. However, later on, we—the Aurora Center got referrals and requests from, through CTC—and I believe there were a couple of them.

Around the motivating issue for the project—confronting and creating awareness of domestic violence—the Fireplace Room’s status as both a public and a private place comes into clearer focus. The flow of talk and action engendered by craft gatherings, which permits a participant to choose when to speak and when to be quiet, means that the Fireplace Room could function both as a private space for considered reflection and inward-facing work, and also a public space for affective back-and-forth discourse. The blend of talk and action, in addition to the embodied rhythm of moving around the room and rearranging spatial relationships, also served to diffuse a potential overarching didacticism that would have marked the events more strongly as “outreach” or “programming” than “gatherings”—what the *participants* were producing and generating (the self-organized component of a craft circle) had to be made more important than what brought the *organizers* into the room.

Kaoru pointed to some of the cross-cultural implications of the different programs, and the distinct benefits that the craft gatherings offered (she has a special sensitivity to the Asian groups in residence).

Asian people, people from Asian background, don’t like to come [to the cross-cultural discussion group] because, I would assume, um, it’s because they are not from a culture [where] people discuss. They are not

discussion people. Like [for] myself, it's a new experience to discuss issues with somebody. I think that's one of the reasons. We don't have Korean people, we don't have Chinese people in the discussion group. But we have a lot of European people, and also a lot of Latin American people. European people like to discuss anything. They just bring any issues to this group and, you know, they just keep talking. And Latin American people like to get together; even if they don't have issues, they just keep, you know, keep talking. Something that I learned, you know, for Asians, discussion group is not the best opportunity for them to get—get connected.

But Soup and Stitches—it's different. People use hands, people use visual images—so we had...a woman from India, we had women from China, Taiwan—and it was different interactiveness. Scrapbooking, too—a lot of us brought family pictures to organize with scrapbooking. And we had a lot of Chinese people—and probably scrapbooking is still new in their country, or something that they wanted to do for a long time, I don't know what it is—but a lot of Chinese and Taiwanese people brought pictures.

The range of projects engendered multiple modes of dialogue (privileging images, textures, the actions of sewing, and bodies rather than just talk) necessary to keep this particular group resilient and sustainable.

Kaoru and I talked about the Americanness of both quilting and scrapbooking practices. Introducing these projects to a group of women who had only lived in the U.S. for a short time presented the uniquely U.S.-American logic of both crafts and also the class-based patterns inhaled in contemporary scrapbooking practice in particular. The scrapbooking industry, more than other craft industries in the U.S., has developed a heavily branded, deeply coded (and increasingly expensive) array of products, including tools, adornments, stamps, papers, and albums. Scrapbooking shops often feature common workspaces full of broad tables with plenty of space afforded to each seating position. All this space accommodates not only the heirlooms and photographs that make up the content of future scrapbook pages but also the specialty papers and equipment that are figured as “necessities” for the kind of history-writing that takes place in scrapbook albums. Though all crafts, to some extent, price many people out of participation, scrapbooking cultivates a particularly narrow band of participants.

Kaoru suggested that the participants were excited to learn quilting in part because it was “so American.” They seemed to find pride in the notion of making something American and working on it together. The quilt combined the connotations of an American-style patchwork process, the diverse locales that constituted “home” for participants, and the visual representation of diversity in the quilts themselves—not to mention affording participants the chance to gain sewing skills. Over and against the experience of *Soup and Stitches*, though, the scrapbooking project was “a totally American experience” and a persistent reminder to her of the physical resources the U.S.

economy commands and the packaged and spectacular products that take up the most space in markets and imaginations.

I think in Japan we do albums, we have photo albums, and we have little stickers. Very simple thing. We don't have the big multimillion dollar company like Stamps—Stamping Up? (*With this question she seeks confirmation from me that she has the name right. She does*) And you know, other brands. But it seems like those are very popular in U.S. right now, and that's what we learned since we needed to know about the scrapbooking project. So a lot of the participants found that it was fun. And it's like instant-type of scrapbooking because it has stickers, it has stamps—you don't really have to think if you don't want to. If you want to use your originality then you can cut pieces and do original things. But if you don't want to think you can just use whatever material is provided by the company. So I found it was very—it reflects [the] current US lifestyle of cooking too. You use a lot of processed food for cooking. For example, they [Americans] use canned vegetables, or canned sauce—a lot of cans. If it's not canned it's frozen.

Kaoru identifies American scrapbooking over and against Japanese practices and in concert with other observable habits of American everyday life, reduced to a grouping of common denominators or archetypes of contemporary U.S. society—prepackaged, dominated by big company brands, instant. When she says it was a “totally American experience,” I take Kaoru to mean a totalizing one, unadulterated, an experience which

interpellates the crafters in the room at least temporarily in a capitalist/American pattern of producing and consuming when they take up and inhabit this American mode of scrapbooking. Though the project took place in the U.S., Kaoru's interpretation from the viewpoint of a Japanese person (who certainly may be erasing the totalizing aspects of her home culture in her narrative) works to shake the centrality of the U.S. preoccupation with mass-produced materials and overzealous supply-stockpiling. Kaoru's observations suggest that while both patchwork quilting and scrapbooking are uniquely American craft forms, the *kind* of American cooperative that formed during the quilting project was more thoughtful and less totalizing.

Kaoru also freely offered speculation about how class and commercial concerns, initially peculiar to the U.S., find their way to other countries.

There are so much middle-class people, um, you know, growing number of middle-class people—and I have never been to China, but I would assume there is so much consumerism and materialism; you know, people look for cool things and fashionable things that come from the West. So I'm sure they found the scrapbooking, you know, excellent opportunity to find those materials. I am sure it's hard to find them in China, I guess.

Kaoru's observations suggest that the opportunities represented by the two craft projects had divergent impacts: one generated a new skill for each participant and the other intersected with an ethic of accumulation that lingers wherever consumer products find new markets. She concluded that the scrapbooking events promoted less social good, less ethical interactions, and less artfulness altogether.

To be honest, in the scrapbooking project, participants got really greedy. And they just jumped into the box of materials and they grabbed things (*she laughs*), you know, sort of um...mis—abused all the resources. (*laughter*) You know, [the] nice stickers are all gone; nice, you know, background sheets are all gone by the time, you know, second round of people went in. So it was very interesting. Instant materials go very quickly. And I don't know how much...um, how much sense of art stayed with them. It was more for, you know, materialistic desire. (*laughter*) The quilt project was much better than the scrapbooking because...you have to cut your own design out of this, out of a lot of different fabrics, and it's all your hand that makes your design happen. So that was [the] more artistic experience, I recall.

During the scrapbooking project, each participant made her own album pages to take back home, while in the quilting project, they had each contributed a piece of a craftwork that would remain in the common room. It is Kaoru's combination of the ideas of "instant materials" and their quick disappearance that interests me most here. The materials were here and then gone, used up in throes of self-interest. The quilts that the women made, she says, took on the tenor of art--they were hung on the walls to replace the unremarkable print-reproductions that had hung there previously, and the women learned the quilting skill from someone who identified as a textile artist rather than "just" being a crafter. Kaoru proposes that a more "artful" experience was the one that felt less materialistic to her—and also the one that left its mark on the common space.

Kaoru noted that in the discussion group and in Soup and Stitches gatherings, the groups don't like to set an agenda but they discuss "whatever available." Conversation will move to the cheapest place to get your children a haircut, or which bus goes to the closest grocery store. As this craft circle played out, participants worked together to craft both inside and outside gathering points for adults and kids, generated by the people who occupied them. At Commonwealth Terrace Cooperative, the transformation of public space into useful space—and into a self-organized common space—is a negotiation that facilitates survival. With limited English language access, a priority on the immediate needs of self and family, and a sometimes debilitating excess of private time, these women found ways to pool their resources and initiate an expansive group ethic—a cooperative based on a different kind of ownership—from their otherwise private concerns.

## **Conclusion**

While these craft circles open up social spaces that perpetuate consumption and accumulation, they also give participants opportunities to learn and teach, to practice generosity, or set aside the time to complete a project and achieve something. Each circle uses and in fact relies on a level of unfamiliarity among participants to allow for the gaining of new knowledge, for serendipitous exchanges, and for the firming-up of a leisure space that keeps the social ties in the room obligation-light. At the same time, each circle presences the ideas and structures that participants are obliged to. As

especially feminist scholars of leisure have observed, leisure and work are not separate spheres, and as this study has proposed, the leisure-work of craft is not divorced from but is also not entirely subject to the relations and obligations that colonize crafters' lives. Craft embeds crafters in habits of consumption and accumulation under the guise of providing them with lots of "choices," but this does not foreclose on the possibility that some kinds of choice in mobilizing craft can be really transformative or personal space-making. And these craft circles, all female-driven iterations of social space motored by the feminized crafts close to hand, presence a blend of play and work that generates the potential for personal space in a way that folds out into and intersects with the personal space of others.

Participants in craft circles perform craft for one another, and in doing so, they engage in a discursive and performed social formation that reiterates the potency of craft (especially as a creative practice). Craft circles rely on the objects of craft to motor this interface and engagement; the materials for craft keep crafters producing and consuming and the actions of craft always have people moving. Sometimes they lean in to the work someone else is doing for insight or to help solve a problem, sometimes they can tell a story or listen, or they can get up and move around and look with their eyes and their hands, or they can sit back and stitch, knot, repeat, or knit, purl, repeat. By crafting together, maybe it proves that craft, made up of these tiny actions, is worthwhile.

### **Chapter 3: Crafting Entrepreneurship**

In my discussion of craft circles in the previous chapter, I focused among other things on the relationship between consumption and socialization around craft. Making and buying are deeply linked, and more than occasionally a crafter comes to the realization that their work might *sell* as well. So in this chapter I focus on crafter entrepreneurs, the crafters who decide they'd like to try making money at what they make. By extension, I will focus on the other kinds of exchanges they make that circulate around selling: making together, giving, buying, and trading.

My question is not necessarily whether craft entrepreneurship is a revolutionary or world-changing endeavor (whether crafters can stitch their way to a better world or whether buying crafts might take oppressive multinational operations down a peg), but whether craft exchanges can help us—crafters, buyers, or scholars—think differently about the idea of exchange. In the broader culture “the market” is often taken as monolithic, with an agency of its own and a self-replicating logic, as an entity that will correct itself if it is improperly steered, and in which relationships between participants fade from view in favor of attention to market shares, buying trends, and gross domestic products. In this view of economy, there are a few people with the resources and power to impact and innovate in the system, but most people just function to support and continue it. In this optic view, the transaction is a given, not a site of inquiry itself. Craft entrepreneurship practices provide an opportunity to examine some of the finer detail of the picture of exchange practices in the U.S., because craft exchanges unfold along lines

of networks and through relationships, and because they ride the tensions between society-centric rationales and self-interested ones.

In their article “An Ethics of the Local” the writing duo J.K. Gibson-Graham remind their reader that attending to non-mainstream exchange practices can help to generate a “rich narrative of a highly differentiated economy [that] could undermine the capitalocentric imaginary; and it could also function as part of the imaginative infrastructure for cultivating alternative economic subjects and practices” (9). Craft entrepreneurs participate in reinforcing the assumptions and representational practices of capitalist commerce but also in cultivating other ways of exchanging too. These other ways, in my observation, come out of the ways that crafter entrepreneurs learn and establish their “business practices” through the act of performing them. Rather than operating out of the logic of startup capital and broad business plans, crafter entrepreneurs engage in processes of trial and error, starting (for instance) by giving things away and then trying to sell them and then maybe giving them away again. They start from and return to embodied practices, the things that they craft.

The boundaries between business and hobby are more often than not unclear, and crafter entrepreneurs labor to stay nimble based on their needs and desires. Often, crafter entrepreneurs operate from a starting point of pursuing aims that are *different* than what they see as mainstream commercial practices, whether that be an aim of not answering to the mind-numbing and arbitrary directives of a boss, an aim of minimizing negative impact to the environment, or an aim of finding an audience for craft objects that would test the resolve of risk-averse distributors of mass-produced goods. By privileging these

views, grounded in the performance of craft exchange, we can see more clearly that exchange engages emotions, bodies, and identities in a process of becoming. And though I don't see crafters as necessarily engaged in concrete act of solidarity, it is in part the very fact that the proliferation of crafter entrepreneurs is rationalized as a "movement" that the performance of craft is visible in the first place as a site of inquiry into the diversity and detail of exchange that can be considered *economic*.

Imagining something more diverse opens up a lot of questions. When do craft exchanges reinforce typical understandings of commerce and commodities—and when do they resist these definitions? Can an attempt to make money from a feminized practice (and in feminized sites like craft fairs) lead to a good life for oneself or for others? (Alternatively, can this moneymaking effort be a trap, replicating some of the problematic relations that arise out of categorizing certain activities as "women's work"?) Can any of the aspects of craft selling (branding, taste-bound subject matter, the focus on the personality and style of the individual crafter) be seen as resistant to the normative rhythm of commerce, especially as these are so easily rationalized within the dominant view of modern economic relations as essentially capitalist, self-interested, and competitive? Conversely, can any of the aspects that one would expect to be generous and "community-building" about craft entrepreneurship actually wind up foreclosing on opportunities for inclusion or wind up reinforcing boundaries based on taste? And lastly, what does paying attention to the embodied performance of making, buying, and selling crafts tell us about these questions? This chapter takes as its task responses to at least some of these questions; the main labor of this chapter is to set up a rationale for

attending to the ways that craft exchange can be productive of subjectivity, relationships, and learning.

This study may be of interest to performance scholars who investigate the self- and community-constituting acts of everyday life, as it aims to privilege the individual “craft actor” as an agent in confirming and contesting through their decisions of how to sell and what to buy. Additionally, I believe this line of thinking could be of use to crafter entrepreneurs themselves, particularly those who make an effort to cite an ethical imperative (whether that imperative be ecological, feminist, or activist-resistant in derivation) in the DNA of their making and selling practices. I am not an economist; my point of view is as an observer of and participant in the processes and case studies that I describe here. As a student of performance on stage and in everyday spaces, I fix my focus on the people who are making things, the objects they make, and the spaces they make them in. Rather than focusing on the flow of capital and the circuitry of commodities from place to place, my interest is in the rationales, knowledges, and philosophies that crop up in the making itself and in the performance of exchange—micropractices rather than macro ones. I am interested in the boundaries and faultlines between the categories of production and consumption; the way consumption gets rationalized in the craft sphere as a generative, creative, or possibility-making act, and the ways that producers of objects highlight or hide the narratives and conditions of the component materials in the things they make.

And I am interested in the ways that links between people—between crafters who learn from each other, between a maker and a buyer in geographically disparate places,

between crafters or buyers and objects—replicate and/or revise broader cultural patterns of exchange. These liminal moments are quite potentially moments of connection—to sales, to new knowledge, or to other people. For instance, some of the things you “ought” to work out in private—like how to promote your work, or whether something is actually for sale in the first place—get worked out while selling on the street or at a craft fair. Like making itself, the role of “seller” and the commoditization of objects are processes.<sup>20</sup>

Here I am not going to situate the contemporary craft terrain as a space where the priorities of commerce are deflected—in fact, crafters continually reassert the importance of commerce as the site where craft can have an impact on the broader culture. The annual Buy Handmade for the Holidays campaign (at [www.buyhandmade.org](http://www.buyhandmade.org) since 2006) is just one example of many efforts to emphasize consuming crafts as a collectively efficacious ethical approach to changing consumption patterns—a way, if you will, to “vote” for new habits with your dollar. Among crafters, the effort to make money from what you do is valorized. Additionally, buying and selling crafts is figured as individually and culturally necessary. As one attendee at Craft Congress (a 2007 gathering of craft fair planners) put it, “if we can’t have jobs where we make money, this movement isn’t sustainable.” I’m also increasingly seeing rationales in books and online for the experience of a crafter entrepreneur being “as good”—meaning as helpful in professionalizing—as an MBA degree; this of course is as much an exercise in legitimation as in drumming up revenue.<sup>21</sup> The craft “movement” does not reject the intimate link between earning power and agency. The contemporary craft movement

posits that there is a generative power in making craft work into “real work”—that is, into labor you get paid for. Though on the surface this is clearly an empowering gesture, at another level it runs the danger of promising liberation through this kind of work, presuming a straight line between payment and value, and reinforcing hierarchies between paid and unpaid labor.

Craft entrepreneurship performs interventions into the market that belie its solidity as a self-perpetuating system with inevitable outcomes while also participating, visibly and invisibly, in that system. Craft, by privileging the affective components of exchange (bringing to the fore matters of how an object feels, how it makes you feel, the maker and the story an object is attached to, the story of why someone bought it, the background of the materials, the history of the craft practice itself), provides an opportunity to zoom in on how people feel and think about and relate to exchange and in so doing realize the myriad ways that buying, selling, and other exchanges are subjectivity-producing.

In light of these questions and considerations I’m going to move into this chapter with two stories. The first comes out of a craft circle of the kind I discussed in the previous chapter, and the second comes from an interview I conducted with a crafter that a number of my first contacts in Columbus said that I *had* to meet.

### **Elizabeth and AmyD: Complicating the transaction**

Elisabeth hosted a handspinning group get-together in her home in south Minneapolis. She served us—an eclectic group of older women and college girls, most of whom had the resources to own spinning wheels—chocolate bread and mascarpone cheese and tea and bustled us into a room dotted with folding chairs and spinning wheels. Our work room was also her small in-home shop, which during one meeting consisted of piles of boxes full of spun and dyed yarn but upon my next visit stood proudly on stocked shelves. She was arranging her home to be a site for selling. Though she also sold her products at events like the Shepherd's Harvest Sheep and Wool Festival and eventually wanted to sell them online, she was setting up this room (until recently her daughter's bedroom) to bring in potential customers. For now, her customers consisted mostly friends and friends of friends. She sold her handspun yarn, handmade knitting needles, and drop spindles (perhaps the most basic tool for spinning wool) that she had made out of dowel rods and America Online CDs she had gotten in the mail which were otherwise headed for the trash. She had put a price tag on the shawl she had made and worn for her wedding, and one of her guests expressed some shock that she would let go of such a thing—ostensibly a keepsake that would interminably mark that happy occasion—especially by selling it. “When am I going to wear it?” Elisabeth pointed out.

At the same meeting where she proudly displayed her products on the newly installed shelves that surrounded us, she said that she was fed up with me coming to these spinning guild meetings and just sitting there knitting. She insisted on teaching me to spin. She brought me one of her rough-and-ready drop spindles and some roving from a sheep named Nancy and demonstrated the way you attach the roving, set the spindle

whirling, and let gravity take the spindle while you pinch and release the roving between your fingers in such a way that it stretches and spins out into yarn—without breaking the tenuous grip the wool fibers hold on each other and letting the spindle fly off onto the ground to stab you in the foot. Just writing about these steps makes my stomach hurt. Spinning is a complex, physically engaging (for me also a frustrating and mentally wearying) process that belies the notion that the drop spindle method is a “simple” way to make yarn. Elisabeth was patient with me, repeating the steps placidly while the other women in the room teased me a little about my clumsiness and assured me conciliatorily that the meager yarn I produced looked like a “designer” product. A few aggravating hours later, I was too hooked on spinning to quit and Elisabeth sheepishly suggested to me that I buy a drop spindle and some roving to practice at home. Of course I took her up on it. She had given me a gift of knowledge, served as my teacher, embarrassed me in front of my spinning betters, and then—almost accidentally—sold me her wares.

Somewhat without realizing it and somewhat on purpose, Elisabeth folded together a gift exchange, knowledge exchange, monetary exchange, and object exchange into a crafted performance of commerce that operates within and transforms her personal space. She gave me a gift that turned out really to be for her. She chose one way to act out the idea of business and drew me into that performance. The exchange was not only about getting money in her hands and a product into mine. First it was about getting my body involved in the rationale for the gathering itself, forcing me to receive a gift and engage the complex embodied skill she was offering. Then it became about me having the chance to take that gift home and keep practicing. In the end it was *all* about selling a

craft through what turned out to be a drawn-out and unguarded process. It was also about there being a story that would endure long after the sale was over.



**Figure 3.1**  
**Elisabeth's America Online Drop Spindle**

AmyD is a crafter who works out of her home in a northern suburb of Columbus, Ohio. Her business began slowly as she grew dissatisfied with her day job and started being asked here and there to make things for payment—aprons or skirts or shirts—and as she “realized there was a craft scene—I knew there was one in other places, but didn’t know there was one here [in Columbus]” (Dalrymple interview). She sold her first items under the auspices of an “official” business at a small independent craft fair she helped organize once she found her way into the scene; the fair took place in an old movie

theatre owned by her brother, wares on boards across the seats so that shoppers quite literally had to climb their way from seller to seller.

I have purchased a number of AmyD's wares, and each transaction, whether I've given money directly to her or made a purchase at a consignment shop where her crafts are placed, has been colored by reluctance and even embarrassment on her part. She has a hard time asking me to pay a certain amount of money for the skirt or coffee sleeve or pin, so we go through a conversation interposed with awkward silences before we settle on a price. Amy is not playing the part of the meek woman who doesn't think her crafts are worth my money; something quite different is at work. She viscerally and rhetorically refuses to allow the craft-for-money transaction to be a given, always registering it as surprising or even abnormal. It hasn't been *easy* for me to buy things from AmyD in the way that it's easy to make a purchase at a place like Target or Amazon.com. When I shop in those spaces, the items for sale are labeled with prices and there is an unspoken agreement about how the exchange of commodities for money will go down. I am comfortable with the bodily/cognitive *habitus* of lining disparate products up on a conveyor belt and swiping my credit card; if one-click purchasing was unsettling for me at any point it stopped being so some time ago. However, when I'm at Amy's house and she refuses to tell me how much something costs, we both have to come in contact with our own imaginary units of monetary measurement and value equivalence, which are only the same in theory. Her surprise that I am buying something from her makes me pause; she makes the exchange get in the way, performing and pointing to the labor that we do to make this happen.



**Figure 3.2**  
**An AmyD skirt (madebyamyd.com)**

Once the transaction is done, though, after money changes hands and by agreement the item is mine, something shifts. If she sees me at the craft shop Wholly Craft! or in the park or at an art event and I'm not wearing one of her creations, she asks me where it is and quizzes me about how long it's been since I've worn it. If she sees me wearing a skirt she made she walks up to me with her arms outstretched and then adjusts the skirt, tugging and wiggling it into place while assuring me that I look great. She performs an unsettling of these transactions, foregrounding the labor that goes into the normalized activities of buying and selling and owning. The clothes are neither entirely

hers nor entirely mine (and when I'm wearing her skirt and she sees me, my body is for a few seconds on the line too). She reminds me that the exchange exposes something about each of our selves.

Both of these stories point to openings for inquiry into our expectations of how production and consumption work, to what Miranda Joseph would call “sites of weakness, of contradiction and crisis, in the circuits of capital... Those sites are in us, in our desires and discontents” (174). Joseph, in her larger endeavor of explicating the otherwise unstudied relationship between community and capital, points out that the economy is not somewhere else but it is here wherever “we” are, that it is not an autonomous entity but is embedded and produced in our spaces (and, in turn, enacts labors of production on those spaces). In making and selling Elisabeth and AmyD create spaces for exchange that test the boundaries of an exchange transaction, stretching that exchange out over a period of time and rendering it a site of exploration and relationship-building. Neither person takes the transaction at face value. We were all aware that we were crafting these relationships all the time. In the first, Elisabeth crafts opportunity from waste—with otherwise wasted artifacts of web commerce (the America Online CDs doomed for the trash in many households), wasted heirloom-potential objects (a wedding shawl which would otherwise sit in a memory box or storage box), and wasted time (my status as a non-spinner purposed for both production and consumption). In the second, AmyD unsmooths and recrafts the exchange process in such a way that it is impossible to ignore the already-constructedness of that process itself, while also purposing the transaction in a way that had a hold on both of us long after the exchange “should have

been” complete. In each, the *home* is figured as a site of power and also as a fluid space where the significance and value of objects are open for redetermination. In both situations, we were doing something else until we were buying and selling—monetary exchange rose up not from an imperative to buy but from the fact that these home spaces had been arranged not only to facilitate not just family interchange or social interaction but commerce. Both stories serve as reminders that the origins of the very notion of economy come from private spaces (the management of the household is embedded in the etymology of the word “economy”) and also that women are responsible for such a vast amount of production and consumption power—exchanges that take myriad forms and that make up lives and culture.

In the next section of this chapter I am going to address three theoretical frameworks about labor, economics, and community that inform the way I think about what is possible from craft entrepreneurship and craft buying. J.K. Gibson-Graham, a writing duo who work under one pseudonym, and their collaborators have been instrumental in encouraging me to think about craft exchanges as an exercise in ethics (a continual process of doing and thinking and feeling), and to work to foreground the kinds of alternative “bottom line” priorities held by crafter entrepreneurs that can participate in diversifying the economic landscape in the U.S. Michael Hardt’s discussion of the primacy of affective labor (caring kinds of labor, labors that aim to engender feeling in the laborer and recipient) promotes an understanding of labors like craft as in danger of being exploited by capital while also being well positioned to undermine it from below,

while other scholars such as Arlie Hochschild and Micaela di Leonardo have indicated for me the significance of the myriad forms of immaterial emotional labor engaged in all kinds of public/private/home/work spaces and point toward the emotional tenor of the acts of transaction that constitute craft exchange. Lastly, Miranda Joseph theorizes community as supplemental to capital (that is, mutually dependent on it and operating in support of it), and Joseph's thinking serves as a corrective to an uncritically celebratory point of view on the connectedness of craft buyers and sellers. Together, these outlooks address the kinds of agency that crafter entrepreneurs have in self-determination but also keep in mind the limitations on their capacity for action that are determined by existing structures, communities, and cultural expectations.

### **Toward an ethic of crafter entrepreneurship**

I follow J.K. Gibson-Graham in searching for ways to see exchange (and specifically craft exchange) as an ethical space, where ethics can be defined as “the continual exercising, in the face of the need to decide, of a choice to be/act/think a certain way. Ethics involves the embodied practices that bring principles into action” (“Postcapitalist Politics” xxviii). Gibson-Graham's larger project involves finding ways to articulate and act on existing and potential noncapitalist efforts, and they attend to ethics as a commitment to transforming thought processes and self-conceptions in order to move toward new and innovative and potentially empowering options. The application that I see for Gibson-Graham's conception of ethics for crafters is that it intersects deeply

with the embodied elements of making and exchanging crafts. Making crafts is in the first place a series of decisions, and each of those decisions might be viewed as an opportunity to do something innovative, generous, risky. It's out of the making that the "what if" of craft entrepreneurship arises. Thinking, doing, and feeling are on a tightly circulating loop in craft. In other words, the stage of craft generates an ethical space where transformation is possible, and where performing gestures can bring ideas into tangible reality. Crafters can act out ethical systems (and remake and reformulate them) when they choose materials, when they decide what they're going to make and for whom, when they decide to sell or give away, when they set prices, when they start and inhabit a brand "identity," when they decide to label themselves a crafter or designer or professional or hobbyist or something else, and when they interact with other crafters. Key to economic transformation are procedures which provide the maker opportunities to reorganize their priorities and define the terms of their work. Craft-making provides a maker opportunities, for instance, to link together critiques and affirmations of existing entities or institutions within one piece, or to foreground the history of materials. This is a process that can and should take place starting in the spaces that crafters maintain, in their homes and web presences. These are not spaces that are separate from economy but rather are the spaces where economic possibility is felt, thought, decided upon, and enacted.

In "Feminising the Economy: Metaphors, Strategies, Politics," J.K. Gibson-Graham and Jenny Cameron ask their reader to consider what happens when different kinds of comparative strategies are employed to assess the success of a commercial

endeavor, rather than those strategies that depend most heavily on a financial bottom line—what happens, for instance, if the criteria for measuring the efficacy of a business is their environmental impact, or the extent to which they empower their employees and other people to pursue their personal betterment? What happens then is that processes which may not at first seem economically focused (especially those practices which are, for myriad social and cultural reasons, construed as typically feminine) are opened up for consideration as economic practices. What we get, Gibson-Graham and Cameron say, is “a picture of a diverse economic landscape made up of all sorts of capitalist and non-capitalist enterprises” (“Feminising” 15). Gibson-Graham, then, have contributed here an attention to the ways that crafters are perpetually engaged in constructing the ways that they might engage ethically with their exchanges, and also the ways that different systems for measuring and assessing success can yield a more diverse picture of what craft exchange can do.

One of the ways that this diversification might be possible is when crafters find ways to position procedures other than monetary commerce as the primary motors for exchange. For instance, in her interview for the film *Handmade Nation*, Olympia, Washington paper-cut crafter Nikki McClure discussed the audience for her work as a “nice side effect” of the fact that people usually buy her pieces to give as gifts. Because most of her work is eventually owned by someone who did not originally purchase it, the people who like what she does wind up selecting her new audiences for her. Her crafts are “like a spore, sent out into the world in a way that I couldn’t do myself” (qtd in Levine, 2009). In this conception, McClure recognizes her indebtedness to the gift-giving

act, in fact rationalizing that act as the preeminent one in the chain of transactions that involve the objects she crafts. She recognizes the interdependence of bought-and-sold commerce with other economies, and moreover, unlike a company like Hallmark that discursively works to position itself as the inevitable “very best” choice in personalizing a gift exchange, she instead frames this interdependence as something that is not entirely in her control. She notes the unpredictable decisions of others she transacts with as a serendipitous reality rather than something to be mitigated through marketing efforts and demographic analysis and in doing so McClure contributes to a proposition that craft has potential as an ethical and diversifying practice.

Diverse modes of exchange persist in all kinds of craft-centered spaces. I asked one person, someone I saw frequently traveling in a wheelchair on sidewalks, alleyways, and at busstops, about the beadwork they were doing outside a coffeeshop on a busy corner in the Columbus Short North arts district. They revealed to me quite forthrightly that they wanted to sell their work, but as a person who did not have the resources or money to start a “legitimate” business, their best option for making sales was to craft on a street corner where the sight might inspire curiosity in a passerby and get a conversation started that might lead to a sale. This person recognized their lack of legitimacy as in fact an asset, giving them flexibility to redefine the terms of each exchange at each turn. Here, I began to see the ways crafter entrepreneurs can circumvent the rules or set their own in public and private spaces and that the performance of craft itself can be a breeding ground for both financial and relational exchanges. Even in more “conventional” commerce settings such as a yarn shop, I’ve observed spontaneous gift-giving practices,

such as an impromptu knitting lesson in which a staffer unspooled an unpaid-for ball of yarn from the shelf. In this case, a gift-giving performance of craft takes primacy over the idea that the objects on the shelf must be purchased in order to be used. (Of course, this gesture works in interplay with the status of the shop as a commodity-seller as it represents at least in part an act of faith that the learner will make a purchase.)

The diverse modes of exchange that are engaged in craft can in fact be the site at which the enactment of an ethical point of view must be brought to bear. Physical and virtual social networks, gatherings, and even monetized sites of exchange become spaces for exchanges of a different sort—not without consequence for crafter entrepreneurs. One maker-seller, a bookmaker and letterpresser, expressed to me a concern that when she sold her products at independent fairs, she did not do as well as expected because would-be customers were examining her wares for her technique so that they could try to reproduce the results at home—this, instead of making a purchase. The populist energy of craft, the trope that anyone can do it themselves, contains an undercurrent of a threat that people will take ideas without buying—that they’ll in effect *steal* something from her. Though to a certain extent it is inevitable that crafters will get ideas from other crafters, this operating reality overlaps with the category of theft, potentially building suspicion and deception into what is popularly characterized as a friendly, personable, and personal transaction. How crafters respond to this challenge is a matter of ethics—it engages thought, feeling, and doing.

Another ethical negotiation occurs in instances where one party in the exchange has a different expectation of what the exchange ought to look like than the other. What

if, for example, a crafter entrepreneur is riding the line between categories of “hobbyist” and “professional,” and a buyer wants to define the transaction in a way the entrepreneur doesn’t like? Jennifer (who sells her work on Etsy under the moniker *laughingrat*) has been asked on occasion to split a skein of yarn in half for a buyer who wanted to spend less and get exactly what they wanted. The implication here is that the seller can freely keep on “handmaking” the object into the shape and size that the customer desires. This is not necessarily an unreasonable assumption to make of a hobbyist or a friend, but Jennifer isn’t sure if she wants this to be a reasonable assumption to make of her.

Jennifer is discovering what it means to stand up for herself—“not in a mean way,” she assures me—as a person who operates her own business. She doesn’t assume that I will take her desire to “stand up for herself” as a straightforward good, and she qualifies it. This might be a product of the fact that this interchange brings to the surface questions of power in monetary exchange. At present, Jennifer’s sales processes converge somewhere between gift exchange and commodity exchange; her hybrid process is stuttering and improvised. As Lewis Hyde suggests, “the artist who sells his own creations must develop a more subjective feel for the two economies [market economy and gift economy] and his own rituals for both keeping them apart and bringing them together” (45). Jennifer is in the process of deciding when and where she wants to set demarcation lines in this store-project that she would like to make a living from but is nowhere near able to do. This is an ethical endeavor, as she is engaged in an active process of thinking and doing economy.

## Craft as affective labor

In his article “Affective Labor,” Michael Hardt asserts that culture and economies increasingly emphasize and depend upon affective labor. Affective labor is work that is meant to produce a particular *feeling* or *sensation* in the recipient (and, too, in the laborer), and engages interactive and responsive systems of production. Caring kinds of labor fit into this category, and craft can too. Consider the prevailing logic that crafts are cozy, gentle, time-intensive, made to fit a wearer or gift-recipient, full of personal and human energy. Hardt argues that because affective labor is so highly valued within the global capitalist economy, it has the potential of being exploited by capitalism. (On the subject of value, it is worth noting that pay scales and dollars spent do not necessarily serve as a good predictor of the way affective labor is valued considering the wage disparities in the spectrum of “service professions” or the disparity between the labor-and-material cost of a knitted object versus the price tag that can be put on it.)

Hardt proposes that because affective labor is afforded the value of being “productive of the soul” (97)—that is, productive of that which makes us human— affective labor is also well positioned to impact the procedures of capital (whether that be through subverting or reinforcing them). Affective labor’s interactive and human-contact imperative means that “what affective labor produces are social networks, forms of community, biopower.” What is being produced through affective labor is not just things but people and people-in-relationships. Biopower is indeed understood as the power to make life and produce subjects. “In those networks of culture and communication,

collective subjectivities are produced and sociality is produced—even if those subjectivities and that sociality are directly exploitable by capital” (96-7). He expands on Foucault’s definition of biopower to articulate the potential of a “biopower from below” (10), and he encourages the reader to consider affective labor’s “potential for subversion and autonomous constitution” (90) precisely *because* it holds such a strong position and is productive of capital.

Hardt’s work is connected to a broader effort of rationalizing and explicating the relationship between affective labor and capital. For my project, it is significant that Hardt’s theory is related to feminist approaches to opening up for inquiry previously trivialized or ignored forms of labor (such as domestic labor and caring labor) and to exploring the tensions of whether these kinds of labor were related to, outside, separate from, or inside systems of capital (Weeks 235). These tensions are especially hard to negotiate with affective forms of labor, because their impact is difficult to measure. Micaela di Leonardo points out in her study on kinship work that the cultivation and maintenance of relationships, often a complex network of familial and non-familial ties, that has at many times and places become a primary labor for women and is like and unlike other kinds of affective or caring labor. This kind of labor, she asserts, is characterized by “close relations between altruism and self-interest” (452) because women who engage in kin labor both do the work of producing the family (which is useful not just for the family but for the broader system of capital) but also open up space for women to find power, status, and relationship in their kin and quasi-kin networks. Arlie Hochschild, in her investigations of women in service professions, discussed the

deeply social components of emotion and the way that people (particularly women in service professions) cultivate the skills of emoting in ways that help them do their jobs. She notes that these “emotion workers” have to engage in both “surface acting” (the manipulation of the face and body that presences a certain emotional state to the viewer) and “deep acting” (actually laboring to change their interior emotional lives in such a way that helps them meet the needs of and cope with their job) (*Managed Heart* 33). These perspectives are useful for our study here because they point to ways to talk about affective labor, that subject-producing kind of work, not only as productive of individuals but also people-in-networks, and because crafters who sell their work are obliged to presence/perform in the sale of their work the kinds of emotional energy that they, it is presumed, invest when they make it.

A number of crafters I have met use the very affective procedures and mechanisms of the exchange of their crafts to promote generosity or to open up the ways we buy and sell for inquiry. Take for instance sewer and paper-crafter Emily Westenhauser, who strategically deploys her craft labor in ways that give her opportunities to share knowledge, offer encouragement, and promote collaboration. She has talked with me about the pleasure she takes in tabling at craft fairs next to someone who has never done a fair before. In addition to the opportunity to sell her own wares she takes the chance to engage that person in conversation and maybe offer them some assistance and support. She connects her role as a crafter entrepreneur with another one of her paying jobs, another affective one—that of teacher.

Hardt's concept of affective labor is important not just because it implies that crafters can use the emotional aspects of craft exchange to and de-alienate makers and buyers and generate relations that are somewhat outside the limits set by capital (and thereby foster a health or vitality for people who engage with it), but also because it serves as a reminder that craft participates in forwarding the procedures by which capitalism continues to structure life in the United States. Rob Walker, in discussing the transactional relationship between makers and buyers, gestures at the contact of craft with affective labor while also proposing that performing craft exchange as a buyer in contemporary contexts can *feel* itself like a work of the spirit or soul. "Buying something from an indie craft artist can result in a buyer-seller connection, but it can also make consumption itself feel like a creative act. This is the crucial element fueling the craft boom: people show up at the fairs, the shops, and the websites. And they spend money" ("Buyer Be Aware"). The craft exchange, then, can foster the illusion of creative engagement and also the illusion of connection—and as this is an increasingly evident feature of the broader commodity landscape, the craft exchange can then participate in a larger narrative that meaning or "something personal" can and must be bought.

This crafting of consumption as a creative act carries over into the making of craft objects too. A *New York Times* article published in the middle of the 2008 holiday season was titled "For Craft Sales, the Recession is a Help." The author Claire Cain Miller quoted a craft shop manager who theorized that "a lot of people are doing a do-it-yourself Christmas, because of the economic downturn but also wanting to make their lives more sustainable, making stuff as opposed to buying more stuff." For this logic to

work, the materials that crafters *buy* to make things can't be considered "more stuff." Rather, they are more like some kind of pre-stuff that the maker then transforms into something handmade and meaningful—and that somehow, also renders life more "sustainable"—through a mutually dependent processes of consumption, production, and imagination. One of the things that must be imagined, here, is a situation where the conditions of production and consumption for those craft materials don't really matter. Craft's status as affective labor can be mobilized to mask its ability to reinforce these disconnects.

Olivera Bratich runs Wholly Craft!, a craft consignment shop in the Clintonville neighborhood of Columbus. In an interview for AmyD's website, Olivera proposes that it is in fact by setting up shop inside existing narratives and consumption patterns that change might happen:

I think there's something inherently political about practicing creativity in a culture that promotes conformity. Also, when you bring in the business end, we're all involved in creating a system of small-scale production in the middle of an out-of-control hyper-capitalist economy. Our work is turning the traditional model of capitalism on its head—yes, we're making money for our efforts, but we're cooperating and building communities, not crushing each other in a quest to become the next billionaire global superpower. As crafty business people, we're trying to take exploitation out of the equation.

Olivera highlights the political ramifications of trying to shift something from the inside, presumes a cooperative outlook, and explicitly references the destructive components of the prevailing economic system that she believes crafter entrepreneurs are responding to. Though her narrative is perhaps overly optimistic about the good intentions of crafter entrepreneurs (for instance, competition and controversy are as present in the “system of small-scale production” as they are in the broader culture of capitalism), it is the notion of trying to replicate the system with critical differences that is significant here. In conversation with me, Olivera addressed her ambivalence about the fact that her way of addressing mass production and exploitation was centered around buying and selling. As she said, “I’ve become this capitalist” (O. Bratich). Her joking resignation to this status performs a partial inversion of her assertion that she wants to live in an alternative relationship with conventional economic relations, pointing up the reality that Olivera has to craft an entity that negotiates the contradictions between capitalism and community. In her shop, Olivera is engaged not only in selling the affective objects of crafts but is engaged in an affective labor of her own, that labor of performing the proprietress of a community-supporting space, all the while positioning herself as a generous, knowledgeable hub for the local craft community. AmyD calls her Columbus’s Godfather of Craft, a humorous designation that playfully bends gender designation and highlights her role as an authority and anchor in an arena rendered familia/familial (perhaps suggesting also that she is not just taken up with the labor in her shop but also the effort of cultivating and maintaining quasi-kin ties within an affective community). Her performance is deeply invested in negotiating the boundaries between

this affective effort, an ongoing process that embeds her in a locality and makes her connections to others emotional as well as fiscally beneficial, and the production of a capitalist effort, something she views as a phenomenon to be mitigated.

The next section talks a little more about the “we” that Olivera refers to—the community of craft-minded people and craft entrepreneurs.

### **Craft in the relationship between community and capital**

*The Handmade Marketplace: How to Sell your Crafts Locally, Globally, and Online* is one of many popular books published in the past several years that provide information and tips for people who would like to try their hand at selling their craft work. In one chapter, author and crafter entrepreneur Kari Chapin highlights the idea that participating in the “craft community” is an indispensable component of being successful in selling your crafts. “These days, you can join a crafting community anywhere in the world, thanks to the Internet...Just sharing your crafts and your knowledge builds community. Asking questions, participating in online discussions, and engaging folks with your love of creating all build community” (ch 5 p 2). She proposes, then, that the exchanges I talked about at the beginning of the chapter have power as a community-builder. She goes on to point out that “joining together with other crafters who have something in common with you is a great way to promote your work and market yourself. Being a part of and actively engaging in a crafting community...will be invaluable to your business, and networking with these folks will truly benefit what you’re doing” (ch

5 p 2). She even warns that “neglecting to get involved [in the active craft community] can hurt your business” (ch 5 p 3). So for Chapin, the end result of participating in the craft community both in-person and especially online is promotion and then financial benefit. In fact, community involvement is effectively a prerequisite for any measure of success.

I am reminded of Miranda Joseph’s argument that community and capital are enmeshed together in a supplemental relationship (xxxii)—meaning that that each shores up and facilitates the other. They are mutually dependent. She says in fact that “capital is the very medium in which community is enacted,” and that capital requires the social formations of communities to circulate in our time—so it generates them (13). Joseph’s larger project is to dismantle some of the quick assumptions by groups of many diverse affiliations that community is an unequivocal good. Community, she argues, is predicated on drawing boundaries: “Many scholars and activists [have] observed that communities seem inevitably to be constituted in relation to internal and external enemies and that those defining others are then elided, excluded, or actively repressed” (xix). The image of the “craft community” as inclusive, for instance, or appealing to a broad aesthetic, gets called into question when you remember its intermingling with capital. Despite the rhetoric that craft is something that anybody can do, access to the “community resources” that fuel the contemporary craft movement like blogs or social media or lessons at craft shops is dependent on access to technological and financial resources. Similarly, the ability to sell craftwork is dependent on finding an “audience” or community of support for that work, and thereby is subject to procedures of promotion and branding and to the

tastes and trends that are triggered in the broader culture.

I see at least two applications for Joseph's framework in an examination of craft entrepreneurship. Joseph proposes that the discourse of community engages a "romantic narrative" that poses it as the other of modernity and capitalism, "locating community in a long-lost past for which we yearn nostalgically from our current fallen state of alienation, bureaucratization, rationality" (1). It is easy to rationalize craft culture in this same way as well. The craft community is defined as much by what it is not as by what it is. Also, it helps to serve as a reminder that the notion of a "craft community" is as much a discursive and symbolic construct as anything else. To identify oneself as a member of a craft community is to interpellate oneself into a desired social imaginary that, among other things, keeps craft feeling legitimate.

It would be equally problematic to dismiss the notion of community altogether, not least because crafters (entrepreneurs and non-sellers alike) rely on contact and interface. Rather than it might be more productive to see crafters as embedded in a network of affective links that rely on affinity and on exchange of all sorts that puts them in contact with new people and new objects. Craft is absolutely dependent on links and exchanges to thrive in lives and in culture, whether through buying materials, setting up local partnerships, giving and receiving gifts, donating to charitable causes, seeking out education or trades in person or online, or doing things somewhere in between these categories. Ulla-Maaria Mutanen goes by the moniker Hobby Princess online, and in one blog entry she proposed that "learning, recognition, and reciprocity motivate crafter exchange at least as much as economic profit." She goes on to say that "links determine

the crafter value of an object. Crafters value objects that can teach them something.” In other words, for a crafter, Mutanen proposes that the primary question in any given exchange might be, what else that is out there will this connect me to?

In light of these frameworks I will spend the rest of the chapter discussing independent craft fairs as a collection of focused sites for observing the various interchanges that circulate around the acts of buying and selling crafts. Craft fairs have captured the fascination of crafters and buyers and those who are interested in the notion of a resurgence in craft and local commerce. They function as (among many other things) on-the-ground participatory sites where craft entrepreneurs can test their ideas and learn and change strategies quickly, where attendees can participate in presenting and affirming the craft “movement” to itself, and where many kinds of exchanges are necessary to formulate craft commerce. Here, I present an exploration of different modes of exchange and labors of definition that happen at craft fairs.

### **Outlaws and renegades: the mechanics of the independent craft fair**

In the summer and fall of 2006 I helped to organize and implement the second annual Craftin’ Outlaws fair in Columbus. This fair was the catalyst for many important links for me as a crafter and a researcher alike, as in the process of helping with the planning and running of the fair I met AmyD, Olivera Bratich, Emily Westenhauser, Sharon Dorsey, and several other crafters that I have referenced throughout these writings.

The first time I sat down for a drink with founding organizer Liz Rosino and her co-planner Megan, conversation swerved rapidly back and forth between patently practical details and large-scale concerns. They didn't know how many visitors they had had last year and they knew they wanted to make sure to keep track of those who walk through their doors this year—Liz made plans to purchase a “clicker thing.” Megan, an illustrator with no previous marketing experience, had done some online research about making publicity materials and came away with advice to “keep it white and keep it clean,” but she knew (however vaguely) that she wanted to do something very different—she wound up coming up with a motif that combined a tattoo aesthetic and rockabilly designs. They struggled with conceptualizing a motto that didn't depend too heavily on their personal aesthetic sensibilities. Megan first came up with “Wares for Rockers and Rebels,” which suited her, but Liz, the founder and central organizer of the fair, deemed this too exclusive. (They wound up with “Unique and Original Handmade Wares” in the end, keeping all indications that the producers and consumers the event served were cultural outliers in the title of the event alone while de-emphasizing the out-there-ness of the craft objects that would be for sale.) They were having some difficulty finding places to hang posters and were hesitant to approach too many businesses, who might, they feared, view the event as competition. They were caught up in a battle with the club owner who was hosting their event because this event is less categorizable than most. Liz suggested this event qualified as entertainment, which made money for the club, and the club owner maintained that they were renting the space because they were not going to draw in business for him. Another, less immediate, battle existed online with the

organizers of Renegade Craft Fair (started in Chicago in 2003, and now also featuring events in San Francisco, L.A., Austin, and Brooklyn), who wrote a derogatory comment on the craftster.org message board when Liz announced her event there. Liz reported that the Renegade folks had posted comments suggesting that Craftin' Outlaws were just another copycat of Renegade, the original alternative. As Liz put it, "we [and the Renegade organizers] are officially enemies."<sup>22</sup> These conversations in the middle of 2006 may have marked a moment before which organizers may not have thought the idea that multiple events like this in different cities could actually benefit their own events. Rather, the perspective of the Renegade organizers seemed to be that they were in competition with other similar events and the perspective of the Craftin' Outlaws organizers was that they had to defend themselves.

The work of Craftin' Outlaws was, among other things, a work of reinvention and distinction. This initial meeting crystallized some of the organizing concerns of the event: that it not feel "learned," that it strike the right balance between feeling edgy and welcoming, that it be taken seriously. The craft fairs that have sprung up in cities around the U.S. as an accompaniment to other increasingly prevalent modes of craft commerce are characterized as "alternative," "independent," or (as in one publication) "revitalized local" (Riffe) events. Each of these characterizations bear the marks of cultural values. There is an appeal to being a part of something "alternative" and of course the word "independent" is deeply embedded with ideas of what it means to be an American individual. Even the moniker "local" has gained a kind of activist currency in the past few years as American consumers have trended toward increased concern about the

ethical standards of multinational business practices and the environmental impact engendered when purchase products have to travel. Emily Westenhauser has observed in the years she has traveled to sell at craft fairs that she often has been passed over for consideration by buyers *because* she has traveled from out of town, and many buyers see these events as a unique chance to find something from their own town.

The independent craft fairs that are my subject here manifest a simultaneous fixation on separateness and legitimacy. Independent craft fairs like Craftin’ Outlaws and others springing up around the United States seem to rely heavily on language like “the first of its kind in Ohio” or “not your granny’s craft fair.” The names of the craft fairs themselves—Renegade Craft Fair, Craftin’ Outlaws, Crafty Bastards, the Indie Craft Experience, Bazaar Bizarre, Strange Folk Festival, the Urban Craft Uprising, Crafty Wonderland—fulfill a branding mandate to foreground the desire that is being met by the fair, and more often than not that desire has to do with difference, transformation, or rule-breaking. The legitimacy of these events is posited in their departure from previous phenomena, in their status as twisted versions of what you expect from craft. These events sometimes purposefully and sometimes unintentionally sidestep or revise the history of craft fairs in America, identifying themselves over and against “cheesy” or “old lady” events which are apparently things of the past, thus confirming their status as relevant. Likewise, comparison to longstanding events, like farmer’s markets or community festivals, is infrequent. So at the center of these events is an interest in change and transformation, but they also run the deep risk of sidelining other

social/commercial spaces to which they owe a debt – not to mention manifesting a slapdash ageism that sidelines elderly women in the process of branding and defining.

Craft fairs temporarily transform existing spaces, whether that space be an emptied-out pool in Brooklyn, a public park in Chicago, a furniture warehouse in Pittsburgh, or a music club or movie theatre in Columbus. Space is important—the original purpose for that space remains intact, but is overlaid temporarily with the texture of craft, each crafter operating independently but relying on and contending with the others to achieve a critical mass for success. This temporary transformation is resonant with the notion that craft itself is a process of redefining and repurposing, so the purchase and appeal of craft finds a manifestation even in the way space is used. At the craft fair organized by AmyD that I mentioned at the beginning of the chapter, a small event that took place with boards laid across the seats at an old movie theater in Columbus, the space forced participant/spectator/purchasers to get their bodies involved in an unexpected (and inconvenient) way in the act of browsing, and in Amy’s description, forged a kind of happy solidarity among the attendees. In this site and in others, the makers and buyers may have had the felt and embodied experience of crafting the event itself, making do with their circumstances together. This is an economic space that is not a closed system, but a dynamic space for interaction.



**Figure 3.3**  
**Images from Craftin' Outlaws 2006 (craftinoutlaws.com)**

The space where a fair takes place can also foreclose on contact and connection. One crafter started selling at the Linden/Pearl Alley Market, a downtown Columbus farmer's market where a few crafters set up tables open during the weekdays in the summer. One would-be customer asked, "Why would I buy a scarf from you? I can go to Wal-Mart and get one for two bucks." She registered the emotional impact of such a statement; she felt had to find a way to manage her befuddlement and anger that someone would ask her this while still managing to leave as good an impression as possible. She stammered out something to the effect of, "Well, I made this one by hand from really good materials." This interchange compelled her to draw lines. She also told me that this kind of question would never be asked at a craft fair like Craftin' Outlaws, where attendees know the "value" of the crafts they are looking at and considering buying, and moved her toward a decision not to sell in this market again. She attributed this line of questioning to the "typical" 9-5 downtown worker, coming in from the suburbs and not expecting to see something worth spending money on at an event like this. In this narrative, this crafter draws a boundary line that presumes a kind of understanding and craft-sensitive outlook that doesn't extend past the Highway 270 loop around urban Columbus. To return briefly to the framework Miranda Joseph lays out, crafters participate in reinforcing the boundaries around the craft community, and in this case those boundaries are rendered geographical.

Craft fairs are transactional, participatory, social performance spaces, and in the cities they serve they frequently get a great deal of attention in media outlets. They are also most frequently spaces structured by and occupied most densely by women; in some

ways independent craft fairs are the most visible evidence that the kinds of craft work that have been historically performed by women (and dismissed as trivial) are positioned to have an impact. In part, these events rely on the idea that by participating in the exchanges of a craft fair, you enter into, produce, and make more robust an important civic community—and the way of participating as a denizen of this craft space is to buy and to engage in the other exchanges that this temporary event offers.

In a study of the performative aspects of a community street fair, Jeffrey Mason contends that “those who produce a street fair as a social space discretely mask its commercial function” by foregrounding the community-centered planning processes, the ways that the fair is a celebration of the town, and the personal connections visitors have with people manning booths or offering games and exhibits. Through the event of the fair, Mason suggests, the community “presents and affirms itself” to itself (307). Likewise, a craft fair is narrated not only as a place to buy and sell but as a social space and a civic space, affirming that a community of people who care about craft exists—and by participating in the events of the day, you are helping that community to be more real and more present to itself. Of course, it is also a place to buy and sell. The success of the event is ultimately predicated on number of people in the door and how many sales any given crafter made, and in my experiences discussing craft fairs with vendors they “all talk” after shows, and what they talk about was whether the fair allowed them to make money.

All of the transactions that take place are important—there isn’t just buying and selling but also teaching, game-playing, looking, trading, giving away, gifting, and

introducing. Participant/spectators shift between roles – they participate most directly by buying, but it is important that they engage in a sustained way with the other modes of transaction in order for the event to feel successful. It is unusual for an attendee at a craft fair to spend time visiting each table. Rather, they (ideally, if the thoroughfares aren't too congested) travel down the middle of the path between rows of tables and zoom in when they find something of interest.

Crafters (experienced ones in particular) work to manage this tendency by pushing their wares out into the front boundaries of their allotted space. Arrangement of goods is in fact one of the primary skills cultivated by crafter entrepreneurs and is widely, deeply discussed on online discussion venues like blogs and boards. Most often crafters sit behind their table, engaging to various degrees with the people who walk by or stop in, sometimes doing a small pick-up-put-down craft. It seems that standing at the front and at the ready strikes the crafter as a little too forward, potentially a little intimidating. There seems to be a hesitancy to act the part of eager salesperson, getting objects in peoples' hands or to doing anything that might look like pressure-selling. More often than this, if I don't see a crafter behind her table, I see her wandering from table to table, talking to other crafters and attendees, making connections and pointing at her own table across the room. So I see two prevalent positions: the sometimes-literalized crafter behind the table and the up-on-her-feet crafter-connector.

Usually crafters bring someone along to help run the table, to assist with load-in and setup, and to relieve them when they need a bathroom break or when they want to do the wandering I referred to in the previous paragraph. Many crafters I have talked to have

noted the importance of picking the right person to fill this role. More than one has used the term “slave labor” when referring to the fact that they lasso their mothers into helping for the day. An affectively astute maneuver, one goes ahead and assumes the crafter’s mother will be a good advocate for the craft goods on the table—not to mention it makes a good story. Emily, a mosaic and braided-rug crafter I met at St Paul’s Craftstravaganza in 2006, confessed to me that she thinks her mother is a better salesperson than she is, maybe because her mother was more “confident” in her products than she is herself. I speculate this might have more to do with the crafters’ imperative not to be *too forward* about selling, a dynamic a crafter’s mother might not be subject to in the same way. One husband-and-wife crafting team discussed with me that at one fair they noticed that *he* was making a whole lot more of the jewelry sales than *she* was. They only speculated that it was because women were making the bulk of craft fair jewelry purchases and they were (perhaps literally) attracted to the novelty of buying jewelry at a craft fair from a man, but they put that speculation to use for themselves. They noted, adjusted, and changed their strategy. He now does the larger share of the on-the-ground sales while she performs a different labor of either making jewelry behind the table or moving from place to place, connecting with crafters they know and others they don’t know.

The work of many vendors is pasted-together, ad-hoc. Craft fairs function for many vendors as spontaneous rehearsals of what it means to be in business. They improvise and revise their techniques on the spot as they make links with potential buyers. In a podcast for local news website and discussion board Columbus Underground, Olivera Bratich encouraged people who were interested to consider signing

up to sell crafts at a summer craft fair series called Artisan Sundays “if you want to try out having your own business” (qtd in Evans).

At this kind of event, a seller can present her- or himself as a craft entrepreneur with very little setup or prior planning. Indeed, not much more is needed but the objects for sale on the table. At one event, Pittsburgh’s Handmade Arcade in 2007, I bought the second-to-last wooden-and-fabric-frame lamp one vendor was selling—he had brought seventeen to sell and sold out within hours. I waxed enthusiastic about his work, said I would love to buy more, and asked if he had a business card. He did not. A website? Not yet. A mailing list? His face softened. “That probably would have been a good idea.” As I walked away, he called me back, wielding a Sharpie and the suggestion that he write his name and email address on the bottom of my lamp. I consented, and now in my bedroom sits some material evidence of that moment of illumination.

That seller was confronted with unexpected sales success. Other sellers spend the hours of craft fairs recalibrating their measures for success in light of a poor sales day. One collage and fabric crafter wasn’t selling very much of her work at the Twin Cities’ Craftstravaganza in the summer of 2006, and by the time she spoke to me late in the afternoon she said that her goals had shifted and her strategies had changed—at this point, she was most interested in making connections. Her approach was to ask other vendors to barter with her so that she could get to know what they were doing and so that they would see her work too. In this effort she was aiming to do two things: to take home a “piece” of someone else, and to decrease her own inventory. At a certain point she made a decision to abandon her vendor booth, crafts in hand, and instead of occupying

the position of seller, she decided to use the things she made for exchanges of a different kind. A capital circulation in its own right though an attenuated one, she aimed to make some kind of exchange and take home some kind of surplus, even if that was just some kind of craft network connection. I have no way of knowing if any of these connections were enduring. She gave me a lacy cuff bracelet for talking with her, for providing “food for thought;” a trace of our conversation that only I got to take home.

Toward the end of one busy holiday craft fair season in Columbus, I spoke with several crafters who held up bandaged hands from behind their tables, bedecked with crafted wares, and told me they felt like automatons, one-woman sweatshops. At many times the life of a crafter entrepreneur repeats the physical gestures of the global capitalist market—comparing oneself to a sweatshop gets at how it *feels* to be a crafter entrepreneur at the most wonderful (and most lucrative) time of the year in capitalist America. She is, if only temporarily, a slave to her own pursuits at the sewing machine, the craft table, or the needles. Crafter entrepreneurs who have a strong-selling product at fairs wind up making the same item over and over and as a byproduct they get bored, frustrated or even injured. They often don’t have time to generate innovative work because they have to fulfill demand for the products they have made that have already gained a following. The multiple roles the crafter entrepreneur has to occupy include production, marketing, and distribution, and the production calendar itself gets more densely compressed at certain times of the year. As production masses it takes a toll on the body and, at least momentarily, on the identity of the maker.

## Conclusion: The Craft Economy as “Good News”?

At the third Craftin’ Outlaws event in Columbus in the fall of 2007, I picked up what can only be described as a tract pamphlet from one of the tables). The front page proclaims the warning/call “Meet Your Maker! An Etsy.com Intervention.” A picture of an enthroned figure, dressed in flowing robes and knitting a long stretch of fabric, sends the joke home—it aims to point readers toward a place where they can find many creators. The pamphlet follows the pattern of a comic-book-style gospel tract—it is printed in just a few colors, is small enough to fit in your palm, and tells the story of a person headed down a disastrous path until she “saw the light.” I opened up the cover and discovered the protagonist, a young woman who is “searching for that perfect gift in all the wrong places.” She crouches in the aisle of a mega-mart and sighs, she worries about where and how the product she is holding was manufactured, and she is “herded like a sheep” to the checkout line where she is dismissed by a rude, off-putting clerk. The spectre of Death, cloaked in the iconic vest of a Wal-Mart welcomer, reaches out to the protagonist—but just in time she is able to escape his clutches.

On the next page she is portrayed gliding through clouds toward a glittering gateway/screen titled etsy.com. As the text points out, “At etsy.com, you’ll find a veritable **treasure trove** of unique handmade items, a **community of friends** who share do-it-yourself ideas and tips, and a **grassroots marketplace** where you can buy and sell directly from thousands of local and international artists!”<sup>23</sup> The third spread evidences a rapid and surprising change in tone. The first image shows a number of crafters, denizens

of the Etsy Heaven, making things while chanting in unison, “Join us! Join us!” The next image portrays a row of bug-eyed people (the comic’s protagonist included) with creepy smiles plastered across their faces. They say, “Thanks, etsy.com!” One clutches a puppet, though the reader has the sense that someone outside the frame is pulling the characters’ strings. Above the image is the text that provides the clearest action point (or, to use the language of American evangelicalism, the “come to Jesus” moment) of the pamphlet: “Log on for a free membership today, and spare yourself further **torture** and **despair** at the hands of **mass production!**” When you close the tract, the back cover sums up the message: “Let etsy.com show you the path to handmade salvation.”

The tract is one of a series of commissioned marketing tools; the staff at Etsy’s headquarters in Brooklyn picks a different seller every quarter and pays them to create posters, handouts, and giveaways. This pamphlet was distributed in public places especially around the New York headquarters, was given to Etsy sellers to distribute at craft fairs like Craftin’ Outlaws, and was even sold via a special shop on the Etsy site (labs.etsy.com) to anyone who wanted to invest a few dollars in spreading the word.

I’d like to highlight a few ideas this tract assumes and communicates. First, it promotes Etsy at Etsy’s own expense—Etsy is the answer, and it’s also the joke. The tract imitates and replicates the logic of a recognizable Christian evangelical tool toward comical ends. At the same time it forwards the Gospel of Etsy, many of the images undermine the good news by suggesting that converts can become homogenized, brainwashed, and scammed, even as they are making or buying things to get away from the dangers of a culture dominated by mass production. The tract suggests that it is

possible to sell something earnestly (in this case, the handmade marketplace of etsy.com itself) and also slam it for its pretenses. It also demonstrates an uncertainty about what it means to be *faithful* to something, or whether it is desirable to adhere to an institution's (or a community's) value structure in the first place. Characterized by ambivalence, its symbolic logic is sloppy. On the cover the maker is a luminous God and by the end of the booklet the maker is the jittery-eyed, homogenized convert. Here is evangelism that is (at least in theory) separated from the restraints of loyalty and obedience.



Figure 3.4  
Selected pages from the Etsy tract (MDuzyJ)

Second, this tract participates in a movement toward critiquing that increasingly easy target: recognizable big-box stores like Wal-Mart, Best Buy, or Target. Certainly there is virtue in calling into question corporate interests that obscure from public view their own unethical practices in pursuit of a better bottom line while promoting low prices as the best definition of value. However, characterizing workers on the cashier lines of companies like Wal-Mart as the stupid, ugly antithesis of personal handmade commerce implicates those who work in such jobs as the face of the oppressive practices in question, and runs the danger of perpetuating stereotypes about working-class individuals (as unenlightened, wasteful, ugly, unconcerned with their impact on others and the world). If it is so easy to see the spectre of Death in a Wal-Mart welcome jacket, it is easy to replicate habits of being that dehumanize, categorize, and foreclose on dialogue.

I end this chapter on craft entrepreneurs (and transition to the next chapter on the virtual craft sphere, the landscape on which Etsy looms large) with this investigation of craft as modern-moment Good News in part because it calls attention to the hope and cynicism that run in parallel streams in the contemporary craft environment, as well as the varying ways that crafter entrepreneurs identify with the “movement.” In promoting one’s own craft, crafter entrepreneurs to a greater or lesser extent are living out an “alternative” to more mainstream outlets for commerce and adhering to other avenues that claim to be better, more community-focused, more life-giving (remember that these tracts were largely passed out by Etsy sellers). One of the implications may be that, by recognizing and making a spectacle out of some level of discomfort with unity or

homogenization, crafters might be trying to hold themselves separate from the totalizing aspects of the idea that there is a “craft community.”

In this chapter I’ve aimed not necessarily to characterize the resurgence of craft making, buying, and selling in the U.S. as a set of revolutionary or radical acts but as acts that (almost in spite of themselves) open up a broader picture of economic practice at the same time as they open up opportunities for crafters to try their hand at the identity of crafter entrepreneur. This broader picture includes all kinds of activities that link crafters and people and that put power for culture-making and identity-building in their hands. Not all crafters who sell things see themselves as heading up their own business, and not all crafters who try to sell things make money from what they do. Opportunity is a process and not a fixed one at that. But in crafting, buying, and selling craft, people who are compelled to identify in some way as a part of the “craft movement” work out and work toward their desires for physical evidence of the potential for a creative life, for some level of freedom from the restraints of capital, and for contact with one another.

The next chapter will deal more directly with two attempts to engender that kind of contact with other people in the “movement” online.

## **Chapter 4: Taking Craft Action Online**

*“Crafters are natural organizers.”*

--Garth Johnson, blogger at *Extreme Craft*, in “Down the Tubes: In Search of Internet Craft”<sup>24</sup>

In the previous chapter I discussed the ways craft exchange might provide a more diverse picture of what exchange relationships might look like, and examined the local craft fair as a space that teaches crafters how to be entrepreneurs and rehearses its status as an iteration of the “craft movement.” In this chapter, I focus on the way that crafters use the Internet in ways that open opportunities for crafters to convene around feminized modes of engagement toward experiments in crafting civic space. The online spaces I examine in this chapter, Crafters United and Craft Congress, translate the craft bazaar and the craft chat to Web space to try to accomplish something worthwhile in ways that do not leave localities behind but that would not have been possible in the same scope if they had been contained by physical geography. They both worked to elevate their efforts from simple cooperative effort to civic craft action through their attempts to draw together crafters from a diffuse range of localities into a somewhat “organized,” durational community—not to mention their attempts to use these actions, trivialized but writ large, to forward the visibility and prominence of craft as something that can make an impact on American society, markets, and everyday life.

The Internet links together a range of self- and community-performance spaces that are intimately twined into the everyday of many Americans, and crafters are no exception. The internet has facilitated a number of social forms (blogs, articles, discussion boards, craft circle-style listservs, tutorials, online magazines, videos, wikis, social media encounters, archives of projects by individuals and craft collectives, podcasts, pattern-sharing forums, and shops, as well as other emergent forms and hybrid versions of these) that have allowed crafters to gather, learn, promote, brand, sell, buy, trade, steal, modify, watch, listen, and engage in other kinds of exchanges. Rather than functioning as a separate site of inquiry, sites on the Internet interact in multiple ways and with the everyday of many crafters and the reader will note that the previous three chapters have moved me back and forth between online and physical spaces. Craft websites serve as reference points that come up in dialogue, as sites for initial and ongoing education, and even as readier sources of local news and information than many localized, physical-space sources.

I take as a given the notion that online spaces are spaces where crafters perform and reckon with notions of identity and ways of narrating their selves and their practice. Instead of elucidating the performances of self that crafters are engaged with online, a task that has been taken up by a wide range of performance and cultural studies scholars, I focus here on two efforts to *do* something with craft. This chapter highlights the *collective* performing and presencing—a mediated crafting—of spaces for encounter, gathering, exchange, and action. These do-something efforts, collective online craft-actions, were aimed at accomplishing something that would benefit a “worthy cause” in

the short term—in one case the recovery efforts of the Red Cross, and in the other, the selling efforts of crafter entrepreneurs—while also aiming at a more enduring impact for the craft “movement.”

This is where I’d suggest that these efforts aim to leap beyond the realm of just doing something together into the realm of experimenting with the possibility of a civic space for crafters online. These efforts aimed at two very different definitions of civic participation—respectively engaging philanthropy and a kind of business association to benefit people who occupy a range of positions on the spectrum of “business.” They aim to take responsibility for a community and forge a kind of ongoing procedure for acting together. Crafters United, in an effort to engage crafters’ hopes to do good in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, aimed to demonstrate that the “indie craft community” can “make a difference” (Crafters United) and Craft Congress, by aiming to organize a space for information-sharing between crafter entrepreneurs in different cities in the U.S., was working to “establish some real-life relationships and address the challenges that we all face” (Forouzan interview). To take as a starting point the assertion from Garth Johnson at the top of the chapter, these spaces comply with a standpoint that the act of *organizing* is native to crafters and that crafters benefit from convening to raise money, discussion points, and awareness with a broader, more diffuse collective of an assumed like-minded community of interest. These kinds of craft-action performance are unique to the Internet because the Internet allows for engagement and involvement from many kinds of “real life” physical spaces (homes, workplaces, cellphones in cars and other

transit spaces). They are unique to craft culture because crafters are continually, aggressively rooted in their embodied practice and in their geographical localities.

Though these civic action spaces and the social relations they promote are most certainly subsumed and contained by capital interests, the social value of Crafters United and Craft Congress (and other spaces like them) is not totally reducible to these interests. They also extend and magnify crafters' propensities for organizing and patterning into arenas that empower and inform other crafters and that facilitate collaboration. The online places for these efforts were Etsy and Yahoo! Groups, and like many sites online that allow participants to generate content (including social networks or blog, discussion board, or video hosts) these sites also forward corporate interests, relying on online participants to drive website traffic. However, they also become spaces that explore the possibilities for sharing ideas, techniques, and shortcuts with others over long distances (thereby claiming a "surplus" on all this labor for individuals or for others). In very pragmatic ways, the durational civic efforts of Crafters United and Craft Congress functioned as social shortcuts to civic impact, complying with the assumption that organizing makes things easier.

### **Toward an idea of an online civic space for craft**

Before I launch into the case studies that will be the focus here, I want to discuss in a little more detail what I mean by experiments toward a virtual civic space for crafters, as well as what it might mean to "get organized" in these contexts. My

understanding of civic space and the civic action that is possible in those spaces takes into account the *ideals* set out by scholars and planners—that is, what civic space *should* be—and also the ways scholars (particularly feminist scholars) have observed social, cultural, and historic constructs that have constrained civic participation (constraints that operate, among other ways, in a gendered fashion).

The Project for Public Spaces, an organization that consults with cities to promote and redesign their public gathering spaces, suggests that a good civic space will promote connection opportunities for denizens of a city, promote a sense of local character and specificity, contribute to “community health,” and provide opportunities for groups to interact with different groups as well as with their leaders (“What is a Great Civic Space?”). Paul Edwards argues that even privately owned, commercially-centered spaces like malls can *become* spaces that allow for civic engagement as long as they “encourage...social justice and the mixing of diverse people and uses.” Political theorist Ian Hargreaves proposes that civic space can give “citizens [the ability to] freely act together to consolidate and express their freedoms, to solve problems, to provide services to each other, or simply to enjoy each other’s company.” He goes on to note that they are able to provide an arena to act on the “morally acceptable” desires that people have to help others (qtd in Rose 1405). A scholar who goes by the moniker curiouscatherine online proposes that the Web is in fact ready to serve as a “civic space that allows us to join multiple communities together into a decision-making unit and interact accordingly” because it is already a “co-productive space,” allowing for participants who are already a part of existing online networks that are working together to forward the interests of

individuals and groups. Taken together, these perspectives highlight a number of positive effects that occupants of civic space can endeavor toward and that are useful for the inquiries on the table here: they can serve a diverse group of people and a broad mixture of uses, they don't necessarily have to adhere to some ideal of being publicly-held or totally divorced from commercial interests, they are spaces of expression and creative action, and they can engage people together in pushing further the things that they are already doing in those spaces.

While these perspectives are laudable and they are definitely linked to the originary motivations of the Crafters United and Craft Congress projects, they minimize awareness of the structures that limit full participation in civic spaces. The scholars I introduce below take to task the representational practices that limit views of what is possible in public/civic space to typically male kinds of activities. One component of feminist scholarship has constituted an investigation of the fact that civic and other public spaces have been designed with the assumption that their occupants will be male. Elizabeth Wilson, a feminist cultural studies researcher, unpacks the necessarily male-gendered *flâneur*, who is free to wander and watch, the image of whom has abided as a quintessential occupant of public space. She proposes that, historically, many gathering spaces have been designed for this figure, commodified spaces that set people (men) up to engage with but also impress one another, while also serving as “a homeland for these individuals without a home,” (63) “organized for the convenience, rest, and recreation of men, not women” (65). Janet Wolff examines intersections between art and culture from a feminist perspective, and in an article titled “Feminism and Modernism” she asserts that

by the late 19<sup>th</sup> century the public sphere ideologically excluded women, with the trivialized exception of their position as the primary consumers for the household. She notes that men and women have had very different experiences of “modern” private and public spaces (57) in part because, as she points out, this limited legitimate participation in public space rendered women “invisible in the continuing preoccupation with the ‘real’ concerns of public life” (58). Nancy Fraser is a feminist critical theorist who uses her article “Rethinking the Public Sphere” to point out that despite the typical understanding of the public sphere as liberated, rationale, and male-driven, female forms of talk and action complicate the boundaries between private activity and public/civic engagement. Among other things, she notes that in the nineteenth century U.S. women “creatively used the heretofore quintessentially ‘private’ idioms of domesticity and motherhood precisely as a springboard for public activity” (115), and this among other observations helps to refract the male-centered image.

Though many of the material realities of women’s involvement in public space have shifted since the historical moments which these studies investigate, these perspectives open up for view the possibility that female-centered or feminized activities might serve as a converging point for civic activity too. If, as Janet Wolff notes, shopping and consumption are arenas that women historically have permission to operate in—to the extent that an image of women shopping to socialize is a cliché—Crafters United organized around an online shopping and largely female entrepreneurial space to constitute the grounds for a civic effort. And, if as Nancy Fraser has noted, the notion of the public sphere is problematically singular and discounts the discursive forms typically

attributed to or assigned to women, Craft Congress labored to extend the impact of these multiple discursive threads, shared in modes that some might characterize as feminine, in ways that could function as communal resources for crafters in localities around the U.S. These spaces also participate in striving for the kinds of highminded affects about engagement in civic space outlined by the Project for Public Spaces and others—they address their participants as citizen-occupants of something bigger than themselves.

### **Civic space: dependent on localities, temporary experiments**

I do not mean to further the mythologizing of online space as a replacement for physical spaces that Howard Rheingold, an early theorist of online social spaces, engaged in his book *The Virtual Community*, where he proposed that “we’re replacing the old drug store soda fountains and the town square, where community used to happen in the physical world” (135). These online craft spaces do not signal an evacuation of physical spaces, nor do they fill a vacuum that previously efficacious “real life” spaces have left. On the contrary, as will become evident in these case studies, they function when crafters foreground their geographical locality (the Craft Congress planning process was all about knowing where participants come from) or bring their embodied physical practice to bear (Crafters United, an online craft bazaar, aimed to animate the charitable potential in the physical objects that crafters make). Additionally, these spaces (and online craft spaces in general) often serve to recirculate crafters to local spaces of contact. In other words, when they engage online in social relations, crafters often also find ways of engaging with their

local craft circles and sites of commerce. I'll speak below about ways that Craft Congress fostered this recirculation process, perhaps its most enduring impact.

Importantly, these are *temporary* points of civic contact. After Richard Schechner's conception of performance, participants gather, perform, and disperse (168). Performances of "doing good" online are participatory and ephemeral. The two case studies I examine here functioned as short-term sites of coalescence for crafters and both aimed to accomplish something "civic." I find it to be significant that these efforts are temporary because the online arena fosters experiments with the viability of these forms to bring people together and to engage in action. I am struck by the ways the very platforms that draw online participants have changed since 2005 and 2006-7 when these craft actions took place. Crafters United formed online while Hurricane Katrina took shape in the Atlantic. This online organization attempted to make a space for generous response to the destruction of the hurricane while retaining a loyalty to the identity of "crafter." Though the craft action itself was wildly successful in terms of dollars raised, and it may have played a part in the rising prominence of the online craft marketplace Etsy, it did not manage to foster an enduring network through the webzine and discussion board the organizers maintained. The online discussion group Craft Congress formed to plan a summit, scheduled for late March 2007 in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, on the future of independent craft fairs throughout the United States, and while the online planning process itself became a forum for sharing ideas and experiences and the event got a great deal of attention in the blogosphere, it was aimed at an attempt (one that I do not think was successful) to shape common values and has not continued as an event. Though both

efforts prompted their participants to consider how and whether these civic efforts made them “leaders” in the craft arena, this leadership was for all intents and purposes time-limited and contained in the event itself.

### **Crafters United: Crafting a relief effort**

Craft Revolution is an online organization run by five women whose hometowns range over the eastern third of the United States. The organization calls itself an “indie-friendly” editorial webzine aimed at supporting and promoting crafters and their businesses. (Here, “indie” is taken to mean operating independently of a larger structure like a corporation and likely headed up by just one person.) The editors organized an online charity auction in the immediate aftermath of Hurricane Katrina in August and September 2005, and within a very short period of time raised a large amount of money—\$25,000 rather than the anticipated \$1,000—for the Red Cross relief effort.

The plan: crafters would donate handmade wares to be sold from a centralized online locale, and if enough people found out about it and either donated goods or made purchases, the auction would gain momentum and they would see results quickly. The five women of Craft Revolution would maintain the auction effort, starting all the communications about the auction and posting all items for sale, handling all the technical components of the financial interchange and making the donation to the Red Cross. The auction was organized in partnership with etsy.com, which at the time had been open for business online for about two months. Etsy donated the “shop” space

(craftrevolution.etsy.com) for the sale. The membership on etsy.com doubled during the month after Hurricane Katrina and has increased steadily since. Though there are probably multiple reasons for this jump in participation, the charitable effort of Crafters United was at least for me the first of myriad times *I* visited the Etsy website. The Crafters United sales constituted approximately 10% of all Etsy sales during 2005.<sup>25</sup>

News about the auction spread quickly, through platforms predating the widespread use of social networking tools like Facebook and Twitter—these forums included discussion boards, blogs, business and personal websites. From my vantage point online, I watched as this project moved from simply being an idea that a few women had into a full-scale, surprisingly successful handcraft charity auction. Within days crafters donated hundreds and then thousands of handmade objects—purses, jewelry, yarn, pins, stuffed animals, screenprinted clothing. These handmade objects had to be translated through the application of monetary value in order to support the Red Cross in the aftermath of Katrina in the US South, support that is reified as “doing good” in the face of tragedy.

Because most relief organizations (during Hurricane Katrina and at other times) urge people not to donate physical objects like blankets, clothing, or food, in order for crafters to be involved *as* crafters they had to make money. Crafts travel heavy but money travels light. The traces of the craft contributions remained present, though, in the virtual gathering point of the Crafters United website. The organizers retained a running tally of all the handcrafters who contributed. Those who made purchases, notably, could not be listed by name (and thereby be given some credit for the auction’s success)

because of the privacy restrictions of the PayPal interface that Etsy uses to complete financial transactions. As a function of the technical interfaces that Crafters United used and the rationale for the effort in the first place (to let the “craft community make a difference”), the crafted contributions retained primacy. Even now in 2011 I can look at the names and websites of the crafter-contributors on the now dormant Crafters United Etsy site by viewing the sales history.

Especially in the auction’s earliest days, one could find the crafted objects on the auction selling for surprisingly low prices, often including free shipping. I can only infer that in the first week or so of the efforts, organizers and participants were not sure how successful the drive would be, whether it would ever reach critical mass, and so took steps to ensure their products would be purchased and allow their contribution to have an impact. They aimed to make it very easy to participate as a maker, a buyer, or a promoter of the effort. A person could, therefore, perform an act of generosity by donating to the Red Cross through an “indie” construct with grassroots appeal while also purchasing handmade objects in some cases well below the cost of materials – fostering what Andrea Hemetsberger calls “a marriage of altruism and self-interest” (14) that happens online. According to Hemetsberger’s analysis, the phenomenon of online cooperation (in her study, between coders who contribute to open-source software) far exceeds the ability of any individual to have a large impact, but at the same time allows some exceptional contributors to gain distinction, what one of her subjects called “fame and glory” (26), within an online network.

I conducted a group interview with four of the five Craft Revolution organizers via a Yahoo! Messenger instant message conversation in November 2005, once the effort was winding down. One organizer hypothesized about purchaser intentions:

I think a lot of people donated to CU simply because they were achieving so many goals at once: they were supporting those who had suffered a terrible tragedy, they were supporting handmade goods- and those who were shopping were also getting a special treasure in return.<sup>26</sup>

One could read the Crafters United charity auction as doing one of the things the Internet does best: bringing individuals together loosely and temporarily, providing a response to both social and individualized needs, as well as collecting physical reminders of the individual and group effort. Individual benefit – a crafter donates one of her goods with her name and contact information attached to the object’s Etsy listing, then gains more traffic to her own virtual store as a response to generosity – shows no immediate conflict with societal benefit here.

And more than functioning as the circuitry for the drive’s efficacy, the craft objects are rhetorically charged with significance. An object of both gift and commodity exchange at the same time, the craft objects promote a blurred, relativized understanding of who and what bears responsibility for the effort. Its success is contingent on both gift and monetary exchange, maker/sellers and giver/buyers alike. One of the organizers noted, “It really blurs the lines of existing communities and allows EVERYONE to help.”

For the organizers, the charity drive created an opportunity for the craft “community” to perform itself for itself, promoting recognition of a collective entity that

may not previously have been visible (in the excerpt below, note that the person denoted as “A” refers to the participants as “independent designers;” I read this language choice as an additional effort to rationalize the crafter entrepreneurs participating in the drive as legitimate and professional):

A: i think the biggest change (emotionally) for me is that I really feel like we have solidified a community / instead of being 'independent designers' we all became an 'independent design community' if that makes sense

J: that's really interesting. I'd love to hear more about that idea.

A: working towards a common goal really gives you a sense of 'belonging' / i had many, many people comment on how excited they were to 'be a part of this'

J: and is this for you four/five specifically, or for the larger community too?

B: and, just like craft revolution itself, the fund became a team effort

J: it seems like it was clear that there was something strong to be A PART OF.

A: with everyone providing an integral part of the whole thing

B: well / I think this helped us all to realize that there \*was\* that something. / that we did have a powerful community.

A: i was just flipping through the thread about this on the switchboards [a discussion board for crafter entrepreneurs] and i found a post i'd made / with a screen shot of my inbox and a quote / that seems somewhat

appropriate here / "Every time I open my email, I stop and think that the \*impact\* of the generosity of everyone in this community could knock the wind out of you!!"

J: this community just needed something large to do together?

B: I think so, yes.

A: i agree / the common goal showed what was really there all along / here's another good quote for you jessie / it's from B, in the midst of all of the 'madness' of that sleepless first few days / "I just keep looking at my kids and thanking God that I'm not watching them die from lack of food, water, shelter. This is the very LEAST I can do. And, it keeps my mind from dwelling on what those poor people are going through right now. Honestly, this is helping ME keep my sanity through this."

This excerpt brings to the surface not just the enactment of communal power but also the *desire* for an efficacious community. The organizers rationalize this effort as performed evidence that the community itself not only exists, but exists as a caring efficacious entity.

The ad-hoc nature of the auction and the uncertainty of success meant that the organizers were unprepared for the deluge of donations that arrived via their email inboxes over the course of just a few days. They tapped anyone they could grab on short notice—mostly families and friends in the various cities where they lived, and their coordination efforts happened online. The organizers rationalized their participation and people's willingness to participate in this way:

A: speaking as someone who lives in hurricane alley and who has been affected by them two years in a row now / I couldn't sit around and [sic] watch the people who had helped us so much the year before lose everything / I really believe that when a disaster like this happens, people have a need to help because it puts their world 'back to rights' so to speak; it helps them cope with the tragedy and to feel 'okay' with going on with their lives.

B: seeing the news reports and the photos of new Orleans was just heartbreaking – we had to do something

The drive allowed for a certain kind of agency, in the fact of intense destruction that made a broad swath of people feel impotent, not just those who were immediately affected. It gained a unique currency and timeliness because it made some kind of action, and creative action at that, possible when otherwise people would just watch the news and feel ineffectual. It was also thoroughly dependent on an ease of participation, engendering a sense of some kind of proximity to those dealing with the trauma brought on when Katrina hit landfall. Some of the feeling directed broadly at the Hurricane Katrina victim-survivors was diverted into positive feeling toward the support effort.

If giving was in part a sign of the givers' deep wells of need to contribute, this need was performed in the deluge of donations:

C: yes! the fundraiser took off amazingly fast. / our first goal was to raise 1K in a week / we did that in a matter of hours / it was really incredible how quickly people jumped on board / to donate and support the effort

J: and there were just what, four of you working on making this thing happen?

C : at first, yes / but then we quickly realized that we needed help / so we asked for volunteers

A: yes! A LOT of help!

C: nicole was one who helped early on

J: what kinds of things needed done?

C: listing items in the shop / answering emails

A: donations were pouring in at about 10 per minute

C: were big ones

A: and sales were going about as quickly / so help processing both was really important

C: also, we asked for people to spread the word / on blogs / in newsletters / at work / wherever they could get the message out

A: the community was amazing

J: right, that's just what I was going to ask next. I found out about it on a discussio (sic) board

C: that was a big factor in how quickly the word spread

A: they responded to that request with an absolutely [sic] AMAZING outpouring of links

C: we wouldn't have been nearly as successful if it weren't for how quickly / people rallied behind the cause and helped to spread the word / i think

the general consensus was that / people felt so helpless / that they wanted to be a part of something bigger / that was helping people / because on their own, they felt like / they were just one person

J: do you mean, people felt like they had nothing to offer, but that this was something they could offer? (referring to the issue of helplessness)

A: yes!

C: more like, they knew they would be helping to make a bigger impact / if they contributed through us / does that make sense?

A: so many donations came in with notes that said, "i couldn't figure out how to help. thank you for doing this!"

For these organizers, the donators' needs, the recipient's needs, and the organizers' own needs for help to harness the overwhelming amount of work were indistinguishable from one another. These diverging needs folded in on one another and mutually constructed their memories of the first several days of the effort.

The organizers recognized a few kinks within their community-mobilization effort, but these were framed either as too minor to have an impact on the whole project, or as a door of opportunity that they could step into:

J: were there any problems? I mean, other than sleep deprivation and severe dents in your coffee budgets.

C: oh, we all got grumpy sometimes! Lol / but we managed to realize that there wasn't time for that / also / there were some people who donated / and who didn't follow up / and ship their items / but really,

A: as well as those who donated for sheer personal glory

C: there was a bare minimum of that

B: lol

A: and drove us nuts with wanting recognition

C: mostly, people were genuine

J: like to promote their own pages and get more sales?

B: yeah

A: but they were few and far between

B: but really, there were HUNDREDS of donations / so it was an extremely low percentage

C: extremely

B: far less than 1%

These and other kinks in the system (on a few occasions, technologies like email, photo-editing, and the payment interface as PayPal served as a hindrance for some people to participate) were dismissed by the organizers as humorous and temporary bothers—bad apples not potent enough to spoil the bunch, or as opportunities to engage both their creativity and their generosity.

Craft Revolution, the webzine whose editors started Crafters United, has had questionable staying power. In summer 2009 I visited the site and reached a splashpage that said that the website was under construction. Though in conversation with me the organizers expressed a sense that they had become “leaders” in the American independent craft scene through this effort, it does not appear to be a sustained

leadership. Any solidarity engendered by this charitable effort, then, was diffused at the end of the project; it was a durational performance. If success is measured by the sheer endurance of the community gathering space, Crafters United failed to maintain a united civic community.

Etsy.com, though, has evidenced a great deal of staying power and has grown exponentially in membership and scope over the past six years. Etsy and the “teams” that form on Etsy continue to support and sponsor charitable efforts, and a term that is often invoked during any call for help is “Etsians.” A play, of course, on the word “citizen,” the term invokes the duties and responsibilities that fall to someone who gleans the benefits of a particular kind of space. In other words, if Etsy functions as a stand-in for civic space, this assertion presumes that the people who live participate in and around it can be mobilized when others are in need. I first noticed the term sometime in early 2007. The term “Etsian” is frequently used on the site itself when Etsy’s newsletter writers want to feature the story of an Etsy user. In this application, the term elicits a sense of belonging and mutuality, investing a username with personhood and warmth. Offsite it is used as a way of calling people to recognize themselves as denizens of Etsyland, usually to come to the aid of another Etsian or to get on board with a project or contest. Most recently, a team formed in the immediate aftermath of the earthquake and tsunami that ravaged Japan. The Etsians for Disaster Relief aim to provide a forum for crafters to collect opportunities to donate to relief efforts or for Etsy sellers to note percentages of their sales being donated to organizations involved in these efforts.

In other arenas, crafters are using Twitter, Facebook, and the blogosphere to seek support for Japan relief projects that take as a departure point a Japanese legend, which proposes that a person who folds 1,000 paper cranes will be granted a wish for recovery from illness or injury. Susan Fujiki (at the Twitter handle @cranesforjapan) folded cranes and accepted PayPal donations for them until she had collected \$1,000 for the Red Cross relief effort. I bought one. Shortly after I made my online purchase I saw an update to Susan's Twitter feed saying that her project was up to \$620 in donations, providing me almost instant quantifiable feedback on the position of my contribution. A partnership between DoSomething.org and an organization called Students Rebuild initiated Paper Cranes for Japan on Facebook. They asked people to fold paper cranes and to post pictures of the cranes they made on Facebook and in turn they committed \$2 for each crane (up to \$200,000) to be donated to the Red Cross. Each of these efforts, including the Etsians for Disaster Relief effort, are more de-centered than Crafters United. It may be that the web platforms that are broadly used in 2011 are more amenable to *singular* online performances of craft than those available in 2005—and that as a result these paper crane efforts operate more as an online craft meme than as an engaged, temporary civic space for crafters to occupy. These efforts do not engage the notion of mobilizing a community as Crafters United aimed to do, but they do continue to constitute an affective spectacle in response to recovery efforts.

I note these other efforts because I see them as, for whatever reason, more acceptable modes of engagement for crafters in the present day. They are even more immediate, flexible, nimble responses to tragic global events than Crafters United was.

Similarly, they aim to purpose craft practices for a broader cause, laboring to legitimize craft as a “good.” Craft Revolution, though named with tongue ever so slightly in cheek, did have spectacular and transformation-centered goals. It labored to bring a community into sustained awareness of itself as exceptional, and saw this as a “good” too.

The other online civic effort I will discuss in this chapter, pointed at a different kind of civic participation, was also named in a tongue-in-cheek manner, and its name also implies a set of highminded goals. In this case, these goals were negotiated in a more sustained, direct, on-the-ground mode than the short-term action of Crafters United, and its participants were more self-conscious about the implications of having these goals in the first place.

### **Craft Congress: Imagining a nationwide collective**

A group of craft fair organizers in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania instigated Craft Congress, a gathering of fair planners and organizers. The event itself was held in late March 2007, but planning started in an online forum in July 2006. The event began as an unfolding discussion on a Yahoo! Groups board with the aim of inviting leaders in the craft arena and craft fair organizers to collaboratively participate in planning the event. I was invited shortly after the board opened by Liz Rosino (the invitation process for the board was open rather than top-down), and I participated as one of the Craftin’ Outlaws organizers though I made my researcher presence known right away too. For nearly a year the Craft Congress discussion board was a space in which about 70 craft fair

organizers self-consciously centralized discussion about what had been, to that point, a locally-driven phenomenon.

The Craft Congress discussion board functioned as a planning site, but before planning could begin, and throughout the life of the board, it became important for the group to perform a process of clarification. What constitutes this “community?” Who is invited to this discussion board? Which events are we talking about? Does your presence here indicate that you are some kind of leader in the craft community? (There was some anxiety about this issue, as these crafter organizers seemed unwilling to assert that their craft-fair organizational efforts equated with authority.) Who can attend the Congress? What makes these “independent” craft fair events different from flea markets, “traditional” craft fairs, exhibits, or juried shows? These questions were asked, repeated, revised, and reanswered over the course of the year preceding the in-person gathering. Though the board was intended as a space of brainstorming for a discussion that would happen in the flesh, this effort of definition happened online, repeatedly. A unique online discussion, it was a meeting point for a group that not only encouraged but depended upon its participants asserting their geographic location and local affiliations.

The board also became a place to reassert the importance of the independent craft fair event itself. As a result, the board seems to have freed organizers to air anxieties central to the craft business world. The word “independent” operates as a signifier for separate, unique, and opposed in one way or another to the mainstream. One of the first extended discussions on the board addressed the increasing corporate attention DIY

communities have been receiving. Members struggle through articulations of their ideas and concerns in this not-quite open forum.

I've been approached by mega corporations who wanted to sponsor [my fair] and had to mull over the pros and cons of what that means, what it could mean for the future of my event and why is that they want to be involved—I decided in the end I would like to keep my independent marketplace free from there [sic] grips even if it means loosing [sic] out on thousands of dollars....anyone else feel this way, or am I alone in this one? I guess I could be more specific and say I am specifically not interested in any sponsorship by mega corporations and mass media networks for my craft fair. Hope the tone of this isn't translating too harsh... Just some thoughts-

The members of the board later more directly discussed one such “mega” corporation, Toyota, who sponsored a series of craft fair events which toured the U.S. during 2006 as a promotion for a new car, the Yaris. The motto for the events was “DIY-Drive It Yourself.” Many organizers considered this reworking of their “independent” movement ironic at best.

One of the point people for the Yaris tour who was a member of the discussion board caveated her involvement by saying, “I'm not actually working with Toyota,” but with a small company who partnered on the tour. She also pointed out that car companies make much of contemporary life possible: “I mean you & I can't go build a car from scratch in our backyard.” She also conceded that “I mean, I guess I

could/should have done some research on Toyota's philosophy, working conditions, labor ages, etc." This line of reasoning points, somewhat knowingly and somewhat unknowingly, to the complicated class presumptions that shape how many Americans expect to live—the ready assumption that life necessitates car ownership, and the ambivalent reduction of ethical reflection on mass vs. individual production to a list of criteria. In part, this crafter engaged in the performance of what Erving Goffman called “saving face,” but she also labored to complicate the previous contributor's straightforward rejection of contact with the corporate interest that had its sights set on the independent craft fair. The issue of corporate involvement, of course, was not entirely resolved on the discussion board. At one point further discussion was informally tabled until the in-person event in Pittsburgh; the question of corporate involvement warranted a whole session on the schedule, confirming that the issue was one of broad concern to the group.

The organizing principle of the discussion board meant that anyone could voice their opinion and contribute topics for the conference, suggestions about how to spend the in-person time in Pittsburgh. Members included both individuals who have organized fairs for five years running and those who have hosted events for the first time during the life of the board. Discussion shifts abruptly between anxieties, idea-sharing, event announcement, and requests for guidance. Advice sharing and commiseration go hand in hand, in part because organizers only have only recently other people and events to compare theirs against:

In the end I had 19 stalls and over 400 people through the doors. How does this sound for a first event? I am finding it hard to have any objectivity and I have had a bit of negativity from some of the vendors who didn't sell very much. I don't really have any other similar events over here to use as a yardstick. Also, does anyone have any tips on how to deal with the folk who don't do very well but have clearly not done anything to help their own cause. You know, they haven't put any thought into their display, they sit and look miserable in their stall and don't talk to people who come to look at their wares. I don't want to sound like I am being too bossy with them but I don't think they were doing themselves or anyone around them any good!

One respondent to these questions exclaimed: "That is crazy that you had all that negativity about helping to promote! I can understand when one pays \$200+ for a space at a huge commercial craft show that they really shouldn't have to lift a finger, but grassroots DIY events require a certain spirit of participation and ownership." These comments point to holes in the heroic façade of independent events while at the same time reconstitute and reassert their value. In advice-sharing and aggravation-sharing, organizers reinvigorate each other and affirm the work they were (now) collectively doing.

The in-person gathering in Pittsburgh was enjoyable and informative, but was in no way as effective in formulating a space of civic encounter as the online forum. The online space of the discussion board had allowed for a structure where anyone could enter

into the discussion at any time, and their comments may have been directed in response to someone else but their “audience” was everyone on the board. It thrived from the phenomenon of non-simultaneity, through which participants were able to narrate their own ideas and tune in to the discussion at a time and pace that worked for them. The in-person event, on the other hand, shifted the mode of interchange in a few key ways. Sessions were outlined with specific subjects and led by facilitators who almost all came prepared with their own agenda. One person came prepared with a handout that summarized “Our Role in Politics.” Also, the in-person nature of the event meant that the focus of many attendees shifted to meeting and getting to know the other people on the board. One other attendee told me that she had told her daughter before she left, “I’m going to meet crafty celebrities!” On several occasions when the practical virtues and downfall of internet commerce came up in conversation, facilitators turned to Matt Stinchcomb, the representative from Etsy (and the only man who was attending to participate), for input, performing an assumption that he served as the authority in the room on online sales (an arena that many more of the participants might have weighed in on in the online context).

During one Craft Congress session the facilitator who was charged with leading the “where do we go from here” session picked up a dry erase marker and tried to prompt the attendees to write down a series of next-step action-points that attendees would all commit to promoting. An awkward interchange followed in which a few attendees made suggestions—maybe we could look into finding ways to provide health care for crafters, one person suggested, or we could put together a wiki that would contain all of our ideas,

said another. One attendee piped up: “I feel like we’re talking about unionizing here.” (The sense behind her statement was that this was not appealing. It is also worth noting that independent crafters do not have an entity that they can collectively bargain with.) Another person expressed concerns about whether such a list positioned attendees as a “self-appointed government” for craft fairs. She went on to ask, “Do we have constituents?” The group’s hesitation manifested its awareness that it would be difficult or even impossible to construct a workable set of goals and priorities that would meet the needs of crafter entrepreneurs in all the localities represented by the attendees, as well as a sense that the gathered group was unprepared for such a commitment.

The Craft Congress aimed to create a structure that would allow for sustained cooperative effort across a broad geographic distance, but what it wound up doing was organize a space for a temporary effort of information-sharing, commiserating, and discussion about the particulars and problematics of craft fairs in a period when the look and feel and narrative of handmade commerce is being co-opted by corporate interests. It also spun out into more geographically specific spaces for contact: Becky Johnson started a Toronto “Craft Chat” series to serve as a platform for crafter entrepreneurs in her city to share information and advice, and a group of crafters in Columbus is organizing a summer 2011 event called the Midwest Craft Caucus, in part inspired by the structure and idea behind Craft Congress.

Like the names “Craft Revolution” and “Crafters United,” the name “Craft Congress” is a slightly self-aware humorous designation that posits epically sized hopes, an event that chooses the moniker “Congress” implies its participants will get together

and forge a way forward, a construct, a set of procedures. Though Craft Congress itself was organized and populated by crafter entrepreneurs who were enthusiastic about the prospect of organizing a whole nation-broad network of support and resources, and though it served a temporary function and probably provided some important connections, it was an idea that stopped. Not a democratic arena but an affective, consensus-building one, Craft Congress got things started without persisting itself.

## **Conclusion**

Crafters United and Craft Congress were products of crafters' eagerness to organize, and a response to the way that the Internet (and the platforms for interchange that act as its hubs) promotes contact and affinity. They couldn't help but be temporary performances of civic engagement; their participants came together, engaged in a flurry of activity, and then dispersed to engage in any of the other myriad links and passageways that provide contact with other crafters, information, and resources, and even with people and places in their own cities and towns.

As civic efforts, these spaces participate in mythologizing craft as a "movement," a gesture I propose is connected to the representation of America as a place of possibility, self-making, transformation, and hope. Craft Revolution and its auction Crafters United take the not-uncommon notion of a craft charity auction (a feminized kind of social and economic space for which there is plenty of historical precedent, especially among people who craft) and labor to elevate it to the work of a community, by working to motivate

people to make, buy, give, and link and thus identify with something far-reaching and impactful. Craft Congress, on the other hand, calls on the associations of representative democracy and legislative action, and for a U.S. audience embeds its idea in a founding myth. In fact the site was constitutive neither of democracy or action—it was more of a consensus-based site of discourse, discovery, and commiseration for a loosely defined group of “leaders.” Though the practices of individual crafters and crafter entrepreneurs are diverse in aim, motivation, and style, it might be the very position of these efforts online—in a diffuse, link-centered, fluid space—that allows for this impression of an imagined community in the first place, and allows for some effect (however temporary) to come into being when crafters try to do good.

## Conclusion

*“So my generation has the \*crafting renaissance\* of the 90s and 00s, which promotes (mostly) decorative accessories for the body and the home. Of course, always with a kicky ‘alternative’ slant! If I see one more how-to article that suggests I can join the revolution if I stencil a feminist or anti-imperialist cartoon onto my clutch-purse, throw pillow, or cocktail shaker...oh, and it will only be \$75 in materials that I can easily find at my nearby corporate-owned craft store(!)...grrr. Let me tell you, when the revolution starts we will have NO TIME to carry clutch-purses, relax on pillows, or mix cocktails—let alone time to stencil! This may sound a little at-odds, coming from someone who does sewing projects, but I feel a constant pull to keep my sewing functional, sustainable, practical...just what I need and not more, and always built to last as long as possible.”*

-Alex Martin, in her online Recycling Project journal at [littlebrowndress.com](http://littlebrowndress.com)<sup>27</sup>

I empathize with Martin’s frustration. She identifies (though she chooses not to identify *with*) two of the prominent problematics in craft culture: crafting representations of “alternative” that actually perpetuate the mainstream, and crafter participation in the commodification of the subversive potential of craft. Is it possible to think about a “renaissance” when you think about these problems? There is also something potentially unsatisfying in coming to terms with the deep mutuality of craft-making and consumption practices that can be disingenuous, and the sloppy use of the notion of “revolution” as well. Martin writes this with a blustery immediacy that can be attributed to her format—

an online journal—so perhaps she overstates her case here. All the same, she chooses language that sets her outside of this problematic, marking a discomfort with some of the craft objects that provide a too-easy embellishment, an accessorizing of subversiveness.

Throughout this project, I have aimed to demonstrate that though individual crafters participate in the arenas that make it possible to see craft as a “movement” and attribute their own practice to a resurgence of all kinds of craft practices and craft products, that “movement” does not necessarily contain all of craft practice. Crafters remain resolutely committed to the processes of repeated gestures and decision-making and project planning. They think through their own identities and find pleasures in their own crafting spaces and in the relationships they form. And I remain committed, through all this, to the notion that craft *can* be subversive too, either by opening up space for personal transformation or by opening up space for ways of relating that sit outside the rhythm of the everyday.

This is one of the reasons I believe that considering craft as performance can be so important. The studies here draw attention to a range of social ties and points of contact between crafters that come into view through the performance of craft. As I have discussed throughout these chapters, the performance of craft energizes trivialized, feminized, or peripheralized practices in ways that call attention to the body at work, and opens up space for discussions about how and why people use time, energy, and resources in the ways that they do. This performance engenders connections, contacts, and exchanges with other people that rely on the *doing* of craft. And though I have questioned the precepts of a “craft movement,” the discursive mobilization of a

“movement” is indeed in some ways responsible for the legitimation and spread of craft practice, providing opportunities for entrepreneurs, activists, enthusiasts, and learners to gain traction.

I proposed in my first chapter that there are a number of productive overlaps between craft and performance that rationalize a joint investigation. After investigating five diverse sites where craft catalyzes performance, I concluded that it is the very ordinariness of craft—its firm groundedness in materials, its relentless reliance on bodies repeating gestures—that makes it metaphorically potent and also provocatively limited when it patterns a performance. Craft objects are just objects put to purposes both functional and symbolic, but they are also labor-intensive, warm, and readily evocative of “heritage.”

In my second chapter I examined some more “ordinary”-looking performances—engagement with craft and others in craft circles. Though unlike the sites in the first chapter these do not make a spectacle of themselves, they are still made up of time set aside from the everyday, and they rely on a looking-and-feeling engagement with crafters and in-progress craft objects. I used this chapter in large part to reclaim craft circles from the trivializing notion that they are idle spaces of chatter, because though they are host to all kinds of talk they are motored by the actions and objects of craft. Craft circles provide the possibility for self- and group-constitution that extends out of the work-leisure boundary-bending solo practices of crafters. At the same time as they offer these possibilities, they can also participate in procedures that more firmly embed crafters in problematic patterns of consumption and accumulation.

In chapter three I aimed to explore a number of thematics around the diverse category of craft-exchanges, with the ultimate goal of uncovering ways that craft exchange can open up possibilities for thinking about exchange differently. The examples of craft exchange I offered showed that crafter entrepreneurs can shift the norms in such a way that the relationship becomes part of the transaction, that the doing of craft exchange can provide opportunities for learning and discovery, that craft transactions reinforce the relationship between craft commerce and mainstream commerce, and that craft transactions reinforce the boundaries and perceptions that set up some people outside the “community” of craft.

In my final chapter I decided to narrow my focus to two efforts that aimed to engage crafters in doing something “good” online, while also participating in an effort to position crafters as having impact as a community on the broader culture. I posited that these efforts constituted experiments in crafting civic space for crafters, making use of feminized modes of interchange. I also proposed though their durational efforts had some success, their aims fizzle at the very point where they expect community to cohere.

There is more potential to be mined in this arena of study. In particular, I have gestured at but not deeply investigated a whole variety of activist projects that are located at the intersection between craft and performance: for instance, Cat Mazza’s Nike Blanket Petition, which mobilized a loose collection of crocheters and knitters from almost every U.S. state and over 30 countries to create “pixels” in a giant Nike swoosh. Mazza conceived the piece to be sent to the CEO of Nike to demonstrate dissatisfaction with and ask for change in Nike’s labor practices, but it was a natural for performances

like the one where a group of knitters worked the border of the blanket outside a Nike store in Turkey (Mazza). A study of projects such as this one might further the discussion about the collectivities produced in craft performance and the activist potential or potential for dialogue produced when the labor of making is rendered a spectacle.

There are also many online social formations, including Facebook-like social networks for crafters, that involve sustained and ad-hoc performances-of-self-as-crafter—one of the best examples is Ravelry, a self-described “knit and crochet community” that allows members to share patterns, projects, and reviews—and these could be ripe for investigation as well. Finally, the craft practices and practitioners I focus on here are connected to a whole array of making practices that are not as easily categorized, for any number of reasons, as “craft.” These include but are not limited to game-making, Lego-building, computer-hacking, bicycle or motorcycle mechanics, tattooing, open-source electronics programming like the interactive Arduino platform, and high-science “geek” cookery. A worthy inquiry could be made into the gendered assumptions that pattern these practices, the kinds of spectacles that can be produced with, say, robot-building as opposed to knitting, the intersections between technology and performance, or the different social relations that different making practices foster.

Throughout, this study has been motivated by a fascination with the person at work, repeatingrepeatingrepeating the micro-practices and patterns of the performance of craft, whether I could see them or not. To conclude, I’d like to go back to a keen assertion from Judith Hamera, who describes performance as “eventness in motion” (5), suggesting both that performance events are full of momentum and dynamic but also that a study of

performance can engage in a continual retooling of what can be considered “eventful.” Performance places emphasis, as crafters do, on making and doing, on the embodied and social processes that are self- and culture-making but which might be trivialized, made peripheral. In this project, I’ve made a spectacle of craft and crafters because the performance of craft becomes a strategy for negotiating and renegotiating self-definition and social relations, and though craft is put to uses that exceed its capacity—functionally, rhetorically, or symbolically—it still can structure these ephemeral events that can provide opportunities for dialogue, interface, generosity, achievement, and exposure to innovation.

And to go forward, I go back to the production of *As It Is In Heaven* that I began with. I proposed there that our primary labor was not in building naturalistic characters but in crafting selves that bumped up against and meshed with one another, creating a performance of commonality that never totally lost sight of the individualistic points of view of the performers themselves. The actresses worked the gestures of craft right into the tips of their fingers and helped one another hone the back-to-go-forward skill so they could define the invisible objects between their moving hands more exactly. Their commitment to the work both reiterated the utopian Shaker work-and-worship ethic and also brought about a different kind of relationality, as they held themselves in tension with the implications of a totalizing community but leaned into the collective experimentation and discovery process. I have seen similar back-and-forward gestures in the broader craft culture as crafters labor to find contact with historical practices brought up-to-date in the here-and-now, as they negotiate the boundary between creative flourish

and practicality, as they give gifts and keep some things to themselves, and as they tap the resources of the craft “community” to learn and then try to “give back.” In this way, crafters find creative power in their decisions and in the myriad ways these decisions can connect them to other people.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise noted, all given names are real names.

<sup>2</sup> Including but not limited to the Tocquevillian subject. Tocqueville famously wrote in *Democracy in America* that “Americans of all ages, all stations of life, and all types of disposition are forever forming associations...In democratic countries knowledge of how to combine is the mother of all other forms of knowledge; on its progress depends all of the others” (Sec 2 Ch 5), and elsewhere, that “the inhabitants of the United States almost always manage to combine their own advantage with that of their fellow citizens” (Sec 2 Ch 8).

<sup>3</sup> These origin stories are taken from personal interviews with Callie Janoff, a crafter who runs her own business, a knitter I met at a craft circle, and a newspaper interview (Sabella 2008) with [craftivism.org](http://craftivism.org)'s Betsy Greer.

<sup>4</sup> Madison 152.

<sup>5</sup> For evidence, see my closet for the three sweaters I have knitted and never worn in public.

<sup>6</sup> “Women have sat indoors all these millions of years, so that by this time the very walls are permeated by their creative force, which has, indeed, so overcharged the capacity of bricks and mortar that it must needs harness itself to pens and brushes and business and politics. But this creative power differs greatly from the creative power of men. And one must conclude that it would be a thousand pities if it were hindered or wasted, for it was

won by centuries of the most drastic discipline, and there is nothing to take its place” (Woolf 86).

<sup>7</sup> Here I am referencing Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett’s conception of low-density and high-density sites for viewing.

<sup>8</sup> A debt is owed to Kate Bingaman-Burt for the phrase “obsessive consumption.”

<sup>9</sup> This and other quotations in this section are from my interview with Kristina Wong on 25 March 2007.

<sup>10</sup> This and all other excerpts in this section that are accompanied by dates are from Alex Martin’s The Brown Dress Project website journal.

<sup>11</sup> This and all other non-cited quotations in this section are from my interview with Alex Martin on 20 Aug 2008.

<sup>12</sup> Phrase borrowed from Sherry Turkle’s 2007 book *Evocative Objects*.

<sup>13</sup> Emphasis as in original.

<sup>14</sup> There are two reasons I don’t discuss the Anarchist Knitting Mob any further than this mention here: first, despite their inclusion on the poster there is very little other information available about them on my main access point—the Internet—and second, my contacts for this project didn’t wish to share any information about people from the Anarchist Knitting Mob.

<sup>15</sup> This and subsequent non-cited quotations in this section come from my personal interview with two of the Massive Knit organizers on 27 March 2007.

<sup>16</sup> These and other non-cited quotations in this section come from a personal email from Zabet Stewart. All grammar, emphases, and paragraph breaks are as in the original.

<sup>17</sup> Kathleen Stewart's work, exemplified in *A Space on the Side of the Road*, aims to open up a narrative space that tells a story of America that starts not from mythic origin stories but from localized, particularized speech and stories and images in West Virginia coal camps and hollers.

<sup>18</sup> Though it became so after the fact. Because I wasn't trying to record this experience as a part of the work of the dissertation project I don't have any direct quotations. I was not recording our meet-ups like I made recordings at the other sites I discuss in this chapter.

<sup>19</sup> The following excerpts from Craft n Chat conversations give a different letter to each person; the letter-to-person correlation is only consistent within an excerpt, so "A" in one excerpt is not the same person as "A" in another. The conversations take place over several months of meetings in the first half of 2006. In these conversations, I am "J." I tape-recorded the conversations at each gathering I attended and reintroduced myself to anyone new who entered, most often awkwardly as participants tended to drift in.

<sup>20</sup> In "The Cultural Biography of Things: Commoditization as Process," Igor Kopytoff aims his argument at unsettling the assumption that commodities are stable things and to introduce the notion that in certain times and places they can take on alternate meanings. I would take his argument one step further when it comes to craft objects. In the examples of my interchanges and financial transactions with Elisabeth and AmyD, the

commodity status of those objects wasn't even fixed or "pure" in the moment of exchange, but remained open to negotiation, influence, and narration.

<sup>21</sup> For example, consider Megan Auman's blog *Crafting an MBA* (she even offers an e-course in "Marketing for Makers") or the entrepreneurship series on the group-written blog Whip Up, featuring an interview with Nancy Langdon who maintains that as "president of her own company," she has put together a handmade business degree.

<sup>22</sup> At the time of this conversation, the Renegade Craft Fair website at [www.renegadecraft.com](http://www.renegadecraft.com) claimed that its event was the "original" independent craft fair, asserting that no other event of its kind existed in 2003. If it comes down to chronology, by most definitions of "independent craft fair" Boston's Bazaar Bizarre was the first in late 2001. Since, Renegade has softened the language about being the first of its kind, claiming to be "widely regarded as a marquee event for discovering new talent, building one's independent craft business, reaching thousands of attendees."

<sup>23</sup> Words bolded as in original, after the comic-book style of many Christian evangelical tracts.

<sup>24</sup> G. Johnson 2008, 33.

<sup>25</sup> As a point of clarification, this is by number of sales, not by dollars. By December 22, the date of the last Crafters United sale, it was responsible for 1233 sales, and at that date Etsy had facilitated 11,506 transactions to that date overall.

<sup>26</sup> In excerpts from the interview, participants are identified by letters (A, B, and C) and I identify myself as "J." The Crafters United organizers preferred to be referred to as a

collective which is why I do not refer to them by name. The interview was conducted by instant-message chat, and all grammar and spelling in quotations are as in original. A dynamic of the instant-message technology is that multiple individuals can be typing messages at the same time, so at times I ask questions while someone continues to answer a previous one. Also, people tend to send messages in sentence fragments so that parts of their message can be read while the rest is being typed. I preserve that dynamic here by including a “/” mark between fragments.

<sup>27</sup> All formatting as in original. To clarify, Alex began a second year-long project immediately following the Brown Dress Project, and intermittently journaled on her already-established website.

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