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Fuzing Play and Politics: On Individualized Collective Action in Leisure

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ABSTRACT

Today, widespread use of digital technologies transform cultural forms, among them leisure and art. This article analyzes nine creative, political enactments on the ground, communicated on the Internet. Five are rooted in the vitality and freedom of leisure, and four spring from the dedicated work of professional artists. The techniques applied in all of these actions are knitting/crocheting, allowing crowd production and crowd financing. Amateurs seem to experience less strain and more sociability in this type of activism than professionals do. Their efforts may be modest and imbued with individual gratification, but those who take part are nevertheless able to move among “peers,” announce a project, share in the construction of a political space, and likely to bring this positive experience to future civic/political involvements. The article’s proposition is that the digital turn has opened a participatory political potential growing directly out of pleasurable, everyday leisure.

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Creative enactments in public¹

Currently, a myriad of individuals, groups and networks present themselves by staging political performances in public using craft or other means. Facilitated by the internet, ad hoc actions appear on the ground. Regardless of issue, there is usually a well-defined element of play in these actions, according to Huizinga’s (1944/1955, p. 203) definition of play, as each takes place within certain limits of space, time and meaning, and according to given although flexible rules.² We shall see how leisurely knitters and professional artists negotiate their creativity within boundaries of recognizable principles; how they make use of expressive symbolism and apply the privileges of play to explore subject matters in original ways.

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¹My colleague, Professor Trude Lappegård, initially made me aware of knitters’ activism. I am also grateful for perceptive contributions from the editor and two anonymous referees.

²The mentioned constellation of characteristics in Huizinga’s definition differs from the usual dictionary versions of play with emphasis on enjoying or amusing oneself, or taking part in an activity for recreation. The opposite of play in Huizinga’s sense is not seriousness but real-life, which does not imply that play is unrelated to real-life, quite the contrary.

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The performance itself is the political statement, there is simply nothing higher to attain, claimed the political philosopher Hannah Arendt (1958/1998, p. 206). Greatness, or the specific meaning of each deed, does not lie in the articulation of motive nor in the consequences of the action. Regardless of how pure and impressive the rhetoric is, this is hardly more than a reflection of the actors' psychological traits. What counts is the verve of the performance itself, its *energeia*.

This article visits nine exemplary cases, five leisure projects and four art projects. All are high on *energeia* with an intended "artistic" imagery and a vigorous message, driven by a spirit of protest. These performances appeared on the open internet with prominent imagery and some verbal clarifications, and this is where I found them. Each is shown here as a vignette: a real-life instance of activism, communicated to the participants themselves and the public at large with a carefully designed and striking iconography.³ In order to compare and hopefully tease out characteristic features of the two cultural forms, leisure and art, only completed projects are included, all initiated by women.

Each action addresses a concern beyond the participants' immediate interests, stirs emotions and shapes interaction, not unlike events in social movements. However, the issues vary, the occurrences are separate and unrelated, and there is no overarching rhetoric. This article is not about creativity and craft as such, nor about a new social movement. Rather, its aim is to explore a type of leisure based activism, facilitated by the digital turn. This activism appears to be surprisingly mild on the individual, yet, may have significant implications on society. Already, the first vignette reveals some key points.

Wool port: metaphor for a more vigorous community

Yarn bombing comes in all formats, from small stunts to elaborate decoration of large structures. It can be seen as a type of nonpermanent and noninvasive graffiti, practiced by non-professionals and meant to cause no harm (Sierhuis, 2013). By contrast to much graffiti, urbanists and art historians seem to find expressions in yarn easy to like. Initially, it was a way of reclaiming cold or sterile public places, which underscores the thin line between street activism and street art. Today, some actors amuse themselves by placing colorful yarn in visible spaces, decorating a hydrant or dressing up a small statue, others have a more ambitious agenda.

The two generously decorated control towers of the 98-foot industrial cranes in the photo below are located in Coquimbo, a coastal town in northern Chile (Fison, 2016, p. 2). According to Claudy Tapia Retamal, fashion designer and initiator of the local yarn bombing collective *Lanapuerto* (wool port), the idea is to emphasize and beautify the port's infrastructure – cranes, boats and the like – as maritime history is what characterizes the local community. The group wants to smash the stereotype of a dreary and left-behind town and create positive identity of place through a series of decorated, iconic

³I apply vignettes much like urban geographer Loretta Lees (2008) does when I attempt to highlight a general argument by showing a selection of concrete situations with some nuance. In sociological and psychological research, vignettes usually denote an experimental method. To find out how respondents perceive a particular problem and/or balance considerations, they are asked to evaluate hypothetical but realistic accounts.



Figure 1. Courtesy of Lanapuerto.

objects showing more vigor. In addition to this cognitive element, they have a social ambition, a wish to draw local inhabitants into a joint endeavor (Figure 1).

The main idea of such projects is to shape a credible narrative and attach it to people's memory and feelings. To achieve this, dedicated activists rely on carefully chosen symbols and emotional triggers such as surprise, boldness, brightness, humor, and some will say beauty and poetry. Varieties of "poetics as politics" has a long history throughout the world. Plys (2020), for instance, analyses the political potential of a strong lyrical tradition in the Islamic region, dating back as far as the pre-Islamic Arabian Peninsula. Her emphasis is on how social and political systems shape the menu of social movements' resistance tactics. Within contexts marked by lack of political rights, severe censorship and punishment of dissent, discord cannot be too explicit. Poetic fragments and other cultural materials can convey controversial information in subtle ways, foster sympathy, and counter feelings of fear associated with acts of resistance. Although the challenges are very different in modern societies, striking, appealing, and poetic statements may still sway participants and audiences.

The semiotics of the decorated cranes are straightforward but their sheer size makes the imagery transcend the ordinary. Touches of magnificence and originality can be enough to invoke the necessary "magic," also in the crucial media. Such demanding projects could not be staged without numerous contributions from off-line and on-line networks. Crowd production and crowd financing are essential, which many individual knitters can easily provide. Although participation emerges from individualized action frames, intertwined with personal lifestyle and self-expression, there is connectivity. Such joint individuality appears to be an increasingly frequent phenomenon (cf. Bennett, 2012; Bennett & Segerberg, 2012; Micheletti, 2003).

In the following, we shall explore this type of late modern activism by linking theoretical perspectives from three old-school scholars – Huizinga, Arendt, and de Tocqueville. The vignettes show leisurely actors who do not foreground annoying disruptions or provocations. Rather, something is at stake and they respond in accountable

and appealing ways.⁴ Their operative modus can be seen as play in Huizinga's (1944/1955) sense. The bounded spaces of ad hoc actions furnish the freedom they need to devise sufficiently captivating, yet symbolically adequate narratives to highlight and address their real world concerns. In addition, action in public is anything but trivial. Not only may it mold a political space; it may also generate some modicum of shared existence and confirmation of self (cf. Arendt 1958/1998). Moreover, what these actors do inject new life into the oldest conception of democracy, one that values diversity and creativity from below (cf. de Tocqueville, 1835/1945). In political theory, there is a current call to take a broad specter of informal social and political engagements into account, and a conviction that ability to understand the complexities of contemporary society increasingly depends on our willingness to do so: "No societal system can today afford to ignore the power and knowledge inherent to the everyday construction of narratives" (Bang, 2004, p. 158).

Expressing concern in yarn

Knitting as a Political Act is the title of one of the many popular books about knitting. Moving from the private to the public realm is a personal as well as a collective challenge, admonishes its author, but time has come to join forces and start knitting for "social justice, peace, and hope in a world that seems to have gone awry."

Some of us knit to relax or meditate and calm our minds. Some of us knit to make beautiful things for ourselves, our friends, and our families. Some knit for charity, to give warmth and love to those in need. Some of us knit to learn new things or to keep our hands and brains active. Over the years, I have knit for all of these reasons. But now, I find that I also want to knit as a way to engage in politics. I believe that whatever we do for love, whatever we are passionate about, can be used not only for fun and relaxation, but also to share messages about our values and to start conversations about important issues facing our nation, states, and local cities and towns. I hope you'll join me in a journey of using our knitting for social justice, peace, and hope in a world that seems to have gone awry. (Druchunas, 2017, p. 1)

The rich history of knitting has entered a new phase. *Numerous knitting groups and networks have emerged in several countries.* *Ravelry* for instance, is an online service for knitting, crocheting, spinning and weaving, which by March 2020 claims to register nearly nine million users (<https://www.ravelry.com/>). Yarn sales surge and knitting books are surprising best sellers. Events take place, such as "knit-athons," and craft festivals. All levels of competence and sophistication exist in the "fiber arts" but the necessary starting skills are modest, and investments of time and money need not be great, which facilitates recruitment to public actions.⁵

⁴There are other kinds, also touching on leisure and contemporary politics. Some apply situationist-inspired methods, say, when arranging midnight cricket matches in London's financial district to challenge the use of urban space (see for instance Lashua & Baker, 2019).

⁵Knitting and crocheting are old crafts with wide-ranging social and geographical distribution and recognized utility. With an eye to cultural tradition, household economy, and the need for warm clothing, educators made sure school systems conveyed basic skills to the young, particularly to girls. At least since World War II, the slang term *Stitch'n Bitch* used to refer to groups of women who would join to knit, stitch and talk in organized clubs. The term re-emerged as part of the book *No Idle Hands. The Social History of American Knitting* (Macdonald, 1988). Per 2013 there were, according to Wikipedia, an estimated 1450 registered *Stitch'n Bitch* groups in 289 cities worldwide, and this was only one of several related circles. A third wave of feminism left its mark on some initiatives. *Bust Magazine*, for instance, saw itself as a woman's lifestyle publication, covering music, news, crafts, art, sex and fashion from "an independent third wave feminist perspective." With the slogan "for women with something to get off their chests," editors in the early 90s wanted a publication "as fierce, and funny and as pro-female as the women they knew", by

Soft statements can speak with no less impact than loud voices; such is the conviction of the founder of *The Craftivist Collective* who dedicates a published manifesto to everyone who wants to help improve our wonderful world in a beautiful, gentle and loving way. The call is for respectful popular involvement, using crafts and creative energies to engage, empower, and encourage dialogue (Corbett, 2017).

By contrast, trained artists are often ready to engage in drastic and provocative transformations to make their creations challenge the common sense order and holders of power. From their point of view, esthetic and otherwise potent objects should preferably escape the confinements of art worlds as well as the hegemonies of everyday life. Producing enactments in yarn can be interesting because it embraces different “worlds”; there is no need to overcome the normally sharp line between art and life (Mazanti, 2011).

The two sets of vignettes correspond to and highlight a difference between the two categories. Whereas the artists embark on hard work and personal strain when trying to break the barriers of visibility within their art form as well as in the media, the leisurely knitters extract pleasure and community from their activism by relying on fusions of playful energies and civic engagements. However, the vignettes also illustrate a commonality: Both categories inject issues into political space via carefully created manifestations on the ground. For this purpose, each project invents its own strategy. For instance, flamboyantly decorated cranes and other maritime artifacts are well suited to signal a persuasive transformative program, an energetic effort to make something new and interesting emerge from what used to be.

Four cases of leisure-based activism

The distance is short from advanced birdwatchers’ knowledge and experience to organized protection of biological diversity and wildlife habitats. Likewise, those who climb mountains in nature friendly ways are in a sense pre-mobilized for environmentalism. Depending on circumstances, such specialized players can simply extend their dedication and competence to another realm (Kjølørød, 2019). Our leisurely knitters are not specialized in this sense, they contribute largely by virtue of their own vitality and the perceived situation. This opens a wide specter of possible issues and enactments. The four vignettes in this section span from a political mass demonstration of exceptional scale, to a small knitting circle in the park. Variation exists along several dimensions, not only in scale and goals, but also in the actors’ determination, and type of co-operative arrangements.

contrast to the unreal female models in *Mademoiselle*, *Vogue*, and *Cosmo*. The idea was to balance between consumerism and self-reliance, and to encourage women to embrace their sexuality (Matheson, 2013). The previous feminist wave in the late 1960s and 70s was less relaxed towards several of these themes.

Historically, there were knitting guilds with demanding entry exams, employing males only. Closer to our period, a number of famous male designers have specialized in knitted couture. Currently, quite a number of men take up this interest as leisure.

During the French revolution, leftist groups who planned to overthrow the monarchy adopted the Phrygian cap, a conical hat made from soft felt or wool with a pointed crown that curls forward.

The pussyhat; an instant icon

Quite unexpectedly, The Women's March on Washington on 21 January 2017– the day after the inauguration of President Donald Trump – became one of the largest mass demonstrations in American history. According to The New York Times, estimates range from three to five million participants, including sister demonstrations in a number of US cities and some spillover to other countries (Hess, 2017, p. 1). Commentators were astounded that almost every group alarmed by the election had poured into one single demonstration, and even more surprisingly, under the auspices of a march for women. The banners addressed an unusual variety of issues: gender and racial equality, human rights, social justice, police ethics, immigration reform, freedom of religion, health care reform, reproductive rights, the environment, the new president, and more. Just two months earlier, at the time of the election, the left had appeared hopelessly fragmented into a multitude of infighting entities. A year later, after a follow-up demonstration, *Time Magazine* ran the headline, “The Women's March is Turning into a True Political Force” (Alter, 2018, p. 1).

All had started with a few ideas on Facebook in the hours after Trump's victory. Within days, tens of thousands, mostly women, had pledged to join. Eventually, a team obtained permits and arranged T-shirts, hired fleets of buses and portable toilets, recruited celebrity sponsors, and support from prominent figures. At some point, professional organizers contributed by making the event more conducive to racial and religious diversity. A striking feature of the march was the handmade, pink pussyhat so many participants wore (Figure 2).

This was not just any hat, as was made clear on the cover of *Time Magazine* in early February 2017. The knitted, crocheted or sown hats took a lot of organizing to materialize. Krista Suh and Jayna Zweiman, a screenwriter and an architect located in Los Angeles, initiated The Pussyhat Project (<https://www.pussyhatproject.com/blog/>). The goal was to make a powerful visual statement by having one million hats to hand out. The fact that Zweiman was physically immobile after injury influenced their thinking. The project team sought to include everyone who identified. They wanted to do so: (1) by creating a concrete and accessible way for people to join even if they could not attend in person; (2) by developing meaningful and respectful connections among all those who care about women's rights; and (3) by shaping a framework for community and personal agency from the local to the national level. An active website combined with frequent blogging conveyed advice to those who wanted to knit hats, and encouraged people to spread the word.

What, then, can the hat's design, the way it materialized, and its name tell about the political realm and the intended message? The cumbersome process behind the production of such vast numbers of hats demonstrates collective involvement. The handmade object reflects mainly female crafts, and the exceedingly bright pink color and unorthodox cat-like ears invoke funniness. The name alludes to the hat's outline, but pussy is also a derogatory colloquialism for women in sexual encounters and for female genitalia in particular. Not least, the hat's moment in history points to the newly inaugurated president's caught-on-tape boasting about grabbing unsuspecting women “by the pussy.” Neither of these references were accidental, and in sum, they constituted a well-planned protest. Not shying away from derogatory and/or insulting allegations but reframing



Figure 2. Courtesy of Time Magazine.

and using them for one's own purposes, is a well-known strategy of attempting to reclaim what seems lost. The unorthodox, absurdly pink and jointly produced hats with the funny name speak immodestly, yet with abstract grace and humor about abuses of power on the one hand, and pride, body autonomy, and strength in numbers on the other. An apparently innocent knitted object came to function as a benign, yet subversive token in a major political action (Figure 3).

The presence of humor and ludic irony must have contributed to the hat's favorable reception. Overwhelmingly positive response from knitters and potential wearers energized The Pussyhat Project. Hat-makers, young and old, were asked to attach a small note to their handmade gift, and wearers were asked to save the hat for upcoming events, give it to someone else who would join the resistance, or donate it to one of the museums aiming to document what went on. Such efforts emphasized a notion of historic solidarity across social, racial and generational divides. The hat had become an instant icon.

Several "next times" came, in March 2017, then January 2018, and January 2019. Birds-eye views of later demonstrations do not show similar oceans of pink. Abstraction and playful distance were slipping, as was the hat's powerful symbolism. The project blog reported the critique: people of color did not necessarily feel adequately represented and began to interpret shades of pink as near literal depictions of human skin. There were also concerns that not everybody had a pussy.



Figure 3. Courtesy of Bryan Allen.

In this case, a central organization arranged the necessary infrastructure as well as the hat's design, and net-based communications helped to mobilize. However, individuals or small groups were the ones to take part. Motives varied. The Pussyhat is about giving visibility to the invisible and voice to the voiceless, its beauty is that anyone anywhere can participate – such was the credo. Yet, established identity politics eventually challenged this openness.

Knitting a river

The association *I Knit London*, formed in 2005, comprises a commercial knitting shop, individuals who meet there, and various events announced on the internet. The shop has a licensed bar and is also used for classes, film nights, and a book group (The Kniterati) (<https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php>). This relatively small network places itself in the long tradition of social craft circles, currently consisting of several much larger networks, such as *Stitch'n Bitch*, *Knit & Natter*, and *Knit2gether*.

Ahead of the 2007 G8 summit in Germany, the network joined forces with *WaterAid*, a charity, in order to highlight and protest the injustices experienced by millions of people worldwide without access to safe water. The idea was to create a political petition in the shape of a huge river consisting of knitted blue squares. National and international contributions to the production arrived. In due course, actionists carried a substantial section of the river along London's Albert Embankment and into Parliament Square, and Tony Blair received a smaller section in number 10 Downing Street. Later in 2007, the main section became part of the environmental festival *Watch This Space*. Draped along the terraces of the Royal National Theater in London, it cascaded down to

Theater Square, where *WaterAid* volunteers handed out materials and informed passerby and the media.

Again, the imagery was not intricate but friendly, humorous, and immediately meaningful to anyone. A surprising blue river brought about by a very large number of amateur knitters from several countries invited through the internet, gave popular voice and public visibility to what ought to be a universal human right, namely safe water. In addition to the contributors themselves, the targeted audiences were high-level decision-makers, the media, and ultimately voting citizens. An operative alliance between a commercial/professional actor, a volunteer network, and a charitable organization is not unique. Combining organizing capacity, ideological content, and crowd production and financing provide synergies, which is also evident in the next case.

Warming a city

During an exhibition of Norwegian handicraft, some woolen clothes remained outside each night. When the staff discovered that a homeless person made use of a garment for warmth during freezing nights and returned it at dawn, they contacted a charity that decided to encourage volunteers to knit scarfs for those in need. Craft specialists made an attractive and easy-to-make design accessible on the net, with a given format, a certain knitting technique and brand of wool, and a fixed color-code. A yarn factory co-operated. On a certain day in November 2011, the charity could hand out a few dozen bright orange scarfs. What eventually grew from this came as a surprise to everyone. The initial idea had been to spread warmth and inclusion to those in need, often non-nationals. By 2017, the number of contributed scarfs had snowballed to 15 000 per year, vastly exceeding the number of potentially needy recipients. Thus, the aim was adjusted. Citizens in general were encouraged to wear or display the scarf as a token of a warmer and more including city. According to the charity's leader: "We are not doing this for others, but for ourselves" (<https://kirkensbymisjon.no/artikler>, 2017). The cold, pre-Christmas streets of Oslo became alive with jaunty spots, signaling political orientation and a dash of urban grace in an atmosphere of mounting polarization on immigrant issues.

Crafting self-respect

Sometimes there is no outreach other than the knitters' corporal appearance in public. *The Yarn Mission* is a knitting circle aiming to fight racial injustice, sexism, and any other oppression. Those who want, numbering from a few to more than twenty, meet every other Sunday to knit and chat in certain parks and coffee shops. This started in Ferguson, Missouri in 2014, two months after a police officer fatally shot an unarmed teenager. "If someone asks me what I'm doing, I say I am knitting for black liberation," states one of the regulars (Kendzior, 2015, p. 1). A quiet setting helps the participants to address difficult topics and find solace and hope, yet they view what they do as a form of activism. Coming together simply to knit contradicts the erroneous idea that having time for leisure "is exclusively a white thing," continues Kendzior, and it makes people stop and have a conversation: "They come to see that people who are out on the

streets are very nice, and that we are openly talking about race and racism... It provides a path into the racial activist movement that no one is even looking for.”

By being visible and exhibiting friendliness, concern, competence and diligence in public, *The Yarn Mission* aims to contradict a dominant cultural stereotype of negligence and deficient parenting among the black urban poor. Because knitting reads as a kind and responsible thing to do across ethnic boundaries, it seems feasible to underpin a believable counter narrative by simply performing “the truth” as plainly as possible. In addition, they sell their products in farmers markets and craft-expos, hoping a desire for creativity and entrepreneurship will reach their young. What these mothers and grandmothers are doing in the park is crafting self-respect by addressing complex racial issues touching on history, culture, and situation, while at the same time attempting to invert a degrading cultural formula story (cf. Loseke, 2007).

Summing up so far

Each enactment speaks gently to some controversial civic/political concern. The performance itself is the political statement, we remember Arendt saying, and these statements come in the shape of inventive imagery telling seductive but credible stories: The widely distributed pussyhat becomes a humorous and oxymoronic icon producing unity among many, while subverting and downplaying hegemonic power. The knitted river pushes a life-threatening neglect and injustice into the public eye via a spectacularly large but emotionally and cognitively intelligible sign. The sprightly scarfs in the wintery cityscape contradict a potentially divisive political issue in a friendly way. The serene industriousness of the knitting women in the park represents a poised and self-possessed take on the fight for racial equality. Overall, the staged images do not imply detachment from the core of serious real-world concerns. The idea is rather to convey political opposition in an “artistic” way, as the play factor makes it more pleasant and easier for participants and audiences alike to get the message (cf. Corbett, 2017). The goal is to improve society, not by individual efforts but through collective voice. The model is familiar and practiced by professional artists with roots in social justice and popular education methods.

The mere sharing of a physical space and common purpose evokes a sense of warmth and solidarity because it entails an opportunity “to bathe in the affectual ambience of others,” argues Maffesoli (1991, p. 11). Belonging to a group or collectivity is normally gratifying in itself, even when the experience is only short lived and contingent. Moreover, ambiance is in turn persuasive, as group processes connect people to specific identities on offer within much larger repertoires of possible selves (Maffesoli, 1995, p. 147). Vitality unfolds in these four cases, as in most of the social situations and practices which culture rests on. Such vitality and shared purpose may be more or less enough to encourage people to join. In addition, there is gratification in the action itself, which is not to say that choice of strategy is offhand, quite the contrary. For instance, it is not the first time in history a characteristic hat or cap signifies widespread popular resistance.⁶

⁶.



Figure 4. Barbara Katzin. Courtesy of Marianne Jørgensen.

Four professional art projects

Artists, as we know, are experts in conjuring images that can break conventional perceptions and modes of feeling. Their professional ethos is always to look for interesting ways of depicting the human condition and states of mind, particular events, and social situations. Hardly surprising, representatives of various artistic traditions explore knitting as an expressive medium – here installation, sculpture, portrait/street-art and performance.

Installation: wool warrior

After Denmark entered the war on terror in Iraq, Marianne Jørgensen made a series of installations. The by now quite famous wool warrior in the photograph was placed in front of the Nikolaj Contemporary Art Center in the heart of Copenhagen in 2006. National and international volunteers, recruited through the internet and by word of mouth, produced more than 4 000 knitted and crocheted squares, and four to five people were involved in fitting the 15 × 15 centimeter patches to the machinery while the exhibition lasted. Passers-by also helped (Figure 4).

The visual impact of a real World War II tank is strong; it signals that this war is real. The artist wanted the quilt – consisting of pieces with various patterns: single colored, striped with bows or hearts, loosely knitted, closely knitted, and crocheted – to refer to home, care, closeness between people, and time for reflection (Jørgensen, 2006). Again, the large number of elements in the patchwork is synonymous with shared concerns; the imagery conveys a narrative on behalf of many. According to one commentator, the machinery becomes unarmed and loses authority when covered by a pink quilt.



Figure 5. Grant Mudford. Courtesy of Rosamund Felsen.

The desired result is that “the current barrage of propaganda that incites fear of the war on terror in a global media landscape weighs less” (Pentney, 2008, p. 11). There are other possible interpretations rendering the military involvement no less problematic: This author’s version is that the quilt’s soft and feminine expression does not subtract from the harsh significance of war, quite the contrary. The co-presence of tank and cozy opens a double perception, creating a divided and ironical perspective. This irony is not vacuous, agenda-free, or simply amusing but of course deeply moral and critical. In other words, the artist’s imagery is quite complex, as in the next case.

Sculpture: paying tribute to female resistance throughout history

Inspired by a videotape of the Russian feminist punk rock band known as Pussy Riot, filmmaker and artist Maureen Selwood embarked on a project with 26 prints and five large sculptures. The video shows Pussy Riot members playing a jam session by the altar of the Moscow Cathedral of Christ the Savior in early 2012. Prancing maniacally before the Cathedral’s gold-leaf altarpiece with the refrain “Mother of God, Drive Putin Away,” it was as if the frail performers, clad in bright dresses, colored tights, and knitted balaclavas to hide their faces, were making a sacrifice of themselves, Selwood explains (Miranda, 2015). An ensuing legal drama added fascination. The photo shows one of Selwood’s sculptures, consisting of five three-and-a-half-foot tall reinventions of Pussy Riot’s headgear on the occasion, knitted by the artist herself (Figure 5).

Selwood exhibits this sculpture and several others as a tribute to female resistance throughout history. By her own account, the idea is to depict strength in outrage and defiance, celebrate uncompromising femininity, and transcend violence through sensual



Figure 6. Courtesy of Victoria Villasana.

abstractions (Barns, 2015). The artist creates an original vehicle, the giant balaclava, to convey a narrative of suppression. Whereas the pussyhats are humorous yet subversive, the evocative balaclavas convey their message by exhibiting a mask's inherent capacity to conceal and protect the identity of the wearer, while at the same time reminding the viewer of the broader truth of suppressed voice and identity.

Portraits/street-art: quests for female empowerment

Another well-established artist, Victoria Villasana, applies yarn onto photographs of celebrities such as Frida Kahlo (the picture), Angela Davis, Marilyn Monroe, Nina Simone, and others. Being a Mexican, she also portrays Zapatistas and everyday women (Figure 6).

Villasana sees her line of work as an invitation to remember and upgrade women who have left an imprint on the world: musicians, writers, activists, and others. Criss-crosses above the eyes lend a sense of empowerment to the images. Bright colors are intended to bring hope, and also shed a glow of optimism on the hand-picked subjects she wants to unveil as visionaries. She finds the historical personalities admirable because they have activated their inner strength to change things, and their iconic portraits invite audiences to believe in their own power to reinvent themselves (Melian, 2021).

Villasana began to use yarn as an experiment to highlight famous personalities but after a while began to see the traditional female craft as a new umbilical cord that could connect modern women with their mother civilizations, and also help to strangle injustice and restrain unfairness (Melian, 2021). Under the tag name of ‘Villana’ (meaning female villain in Spanish), her street-art is both more explicit and more diverse in this respect. Overall, this artist’s ambition is to draw attention away from old conventions, and particularly away from the stereotypes of Latin femininity: “Latinas are always the housekeepers or perhaps the hot girl with no class and no brains” (Squad, 2017, p. 3). Living in Mexico, she reaches an international audience mainly through the net, getting most of her commissions, collaborations, press contacts and projects via Instagram.

Performance: visualizing female biology

When performance artist Cassy Jenkins staged the project *Casting off my Womb*, it was widely referred to as “vaginal knitting”:

If you take a good, hard look at a vulva, you realize it’s just a bit of a body. There is nothing that is shocking or scary, you know, nothing that is gonna run out and eat you up... I am spending 28 days knitting from wool that I’ve inserted in my vagina, Jenkins says. It’s confining, because I am attached to this knitting. What emerges is not only an active sensory performance but a piece of cloth that literally records a female life in all its natural states. The performance would not be a performance if I were going to cut out my menstrual cycle from it. (Weinstein, 2013, p. 2)

Creating provocation and discomfort are established heuristics within Jenkins’s brand of performance arts, and her project can be seen in the tradition of “shock by disgust.” The untold reference is probably Carolee Schneeman’s famous *Internal Scroll* from 1975, considered a landmark work within this art-form as well as within the feminist movement. Schneeman’s performance began by the artist pulling a long paper scroll from the vagina of her own naked body, “proceeding to read out from it a mocking parodic critique of her own practice” (Sayej, 2017, p. 2). An essay she wrote at the time, *Woman in the year 2000*, conveyed a hope that no female artist would have to deal with the constant undermining that she herself had to endure as a student. Jenkins wants her performance to be a taboo-shattering act of standing up to the macho art world with a pro-feminine and body-positive approach (Weinstein, 2013, p. 2). By provoking people to question their own negative associations with aspects of the female body, she considers her performance a political act of body politics.

Summing up briefly

The trained artists are not shying away from complex symbolism, ironic destruction or deliberate provocation, by contrast to the leisurely activists. The four are approaching an artistic as well as a political realm with highly demanding, original and multifaceted vehicles: an actual military tank covered with handmade patchwork; an elaborate and elegant composition of vastly oversized balaclavas; facial adornments on professional photos of culturally iconic personalities; exposing an actual vulva throughout a full menstrual cycle. Alone and in their own name, each takes on a highly controversial issue: protesting national engagement in an official, NATO initiated effort; augmenting freedom of speech regardless of method; empowering women may be mainstream in

the West but not in Latin societies; and publicly celebrating a covert part of the naked female body is confrontational everywhere.

The gentle and the not so gentle “arts”: differences and similarities

As it turns out, the two cultural forms provide actors with surprisingly different allowances and restraints. The skills, time, and investments leisurely knitters take on are easier and their expressions “friendlier” than the heavy burdens on the professionals with preference for more complex semiotics. Hardly surprising, the amateurs are at liberty to emphasize what they want. As their modus of operation is play, their activity remains outside the normal rounds. Moreover, light and agreeable actions offer bonding opportunities. Lack of harshness and heavy burdens allow them to gravitate toward their own social foundations and seek fusion between deeply rewarding group energies and their political selves. Thus, *The Craftivist Collective’s* ideal of “a gentle art” is hardly coincidental.

Success in art rests on entirely different criteria, often related not only to artistic tradition but also to some element of provocation. To distill a desired essence and make a significant statement in public, artists can be willing to make an offer of themselves. Marianne Jørgensen took on vast exertions to acquire the real WWII tank and organize production of a huge cozy to cover it; Maureen Selwood spent an entire year knitting the large Pussy Riot inspired sculptures; Cassy Jenkins deliberately exposed herself to public harassment and ridicule. These not so gentle approaches are no less coincidental.

In addition to the crafts’ feminine connotation, both categories tend to make direct or indirect use of feminine references: pink color, soft tissue, or homelike imagery. Three of the four art projects are explicitly feminist in orientation. Apart from this, the concerns are surprisingly diverse and unrelated to the actors’ gender. The amateur projects are joint ventures and local, the professional projects are more cosmopolitan and principled, maybe because artists are less oriented toward gaining a sense of sovereignty on a local scene (cf. Bennett, 1999, p. 347).

Arendt (1958/1998, p. 197) emphasizes the capacity of actions in public to create the world that human beings share. Action in her vocabulary is synonymous with actors’ deeds and words. This is not only the person’s most intimate relationship to the public part of the world, action is the only activity that can constitute a shared space. Thus, actions are always shaping and re-shaping the common ground within which individual citizens can present themselves in deeds and speech, and thereby grant each other recognition. Life together in political space, states Arendt, seems to assure human beings that the condition of having merely “a passing existence and fleeting greatness will never lack the reality that comes from being seen, being heard, and generally, appearing before an audience” of fellow human beings. Our leisurely knitters seem to experience a particularly benign version of “life together in political space.” Getting involved can be entertaining and gratifying in itself, offer chances to “bathe in the affectual ambience of others” (Maffesoli, 1991, p. 11), while not having to renounce any individuality. Quite the contrary, it is possible to convey a more distinct sense of self, with address to self and others.

The fact that so many individuals and groups make themselves socially and politically visible in Arendt's sense could be just as significant as the issues they advocate. The point is that anyone who contributes, even modestly, is able to move among "peers," announce a project, and participate in the construction of a shared political space. Positive experiences may give a taste for more, implying a significant participatory potential. Although hardly recognized as a way of pushing one's self-perception in one direction rather than in an alternative direction, these actions are also likely to entail an element of reconstitution of self.

Identity, meaning and political orientation are mainly produced in the present

Although knitting and crocheting are old crafts, their revival is surely a matter of the present. As actors relate to new contexts and situations, they create—in the present—new projects, new settings for activity, new conceptions of past, present, and future selves and society (Abbott, 2018, pp. 12–13). What emerges as good material for expressing appraisals and shaping representations of current relations, events and sentiment are negotiable in contemporary minds and group processes, and the outcomes of such processes leave imprints on individuals and groups. There is however no sudden affecting of all things; we learn from Abbott. Even if identity, meaning and political orientation are largely produced in the present, such elements rest on layers of pasts: the present is thick rather than instantaneous. Our actors derive present inspirations from a large repertoire of recorded history, including traditions of feminism and craftivism.

To what extent, then, does a revival of these techniques signal a celebration of women's worlds, or even a new and more liberal feminist movement (cf. Archer Mann & Huffman, 2005)? "If second-wave feminists have been historicized as women who put down their knitting, third-wave feminists may be characterized as those who have picked it back up again" (Pentney, 2008, p. 2). Could knitting be a way for daughters of feminists to distance themselves from the more puritan orientation of their mothers? "No way," is the inside answer: "We are creative and collective because eight hours in front of a console leave us with a desire to make things and because online marketplaces allow us to forge bonds with those who share our passion and community spirit" (Taylor, 2007, p. 2). Now we knit just because we want to: "This time around there is irony and politics on our bobbins."

Crafts in art are not new; there is a line back to the once highly respected *Arts and Crafts Movement*, flourishing in Europe and North America between 1880 and 1920 (Hardy-Moffat, 2012). The movement's ethos was essentially anti-industrial with initiators who reacted negatively to the industrial revolution's new division of labor and poor-quality factory goods with alienation from local materials. Its influence on the arts lasted until modernism took over in the 1930s but craft makers, designers, and town planners felt it long after that. The *Arts and Crafts Movement* belongs to the past, but the long interval gives old techniques and materials new freshness.

In media discourse, revival of craft is mainly a youthful, public, hip, socially networked and politically conscious phenomenon, yet researchers claim this impression 'marginalizes' a multiplicity of enthusiasts with variable tastes and practices, spanning

the young to the very mature (see for instance Hall & Jayne, 2016; Harrison & Ogden, 2019). This article merely points out how even an everyday activity like knitting can become a surprising asset in public and political life. Clearly, “bona fide citizenship is practiced as much through everyday life, leisure, critical consumption and popular entertainment as it is through debate and engagement with capital ‘P’, politics” (Burgess et al., 2006, p. 1).

Impact of smaller civic entities within larger democratic frameworks

By looking at politics in the broadest sense, as this article does, it becomes part of an old but newly revived tradition of democratic theory. De Tocqueville (1835/1945) was the first to recognize the importance of smaller civic entities, clubs, associations, religious communities, etc., within a larger democratic framework. Although his insight was never entirely lost to the social sciences, it faded as the discipline of political science became more prominent. Citizens’ institutionalized rights and representation through formal political channels came to dominate perceptions of the steady workings of democracy, with social movements and ad hoc activism as occasional interfering forces.

Given the reduction in electoral involvement over the past decades, the question is what goes on elsewhere. “Social fragmentation and the decline of group loyalties have given rise to an era of personalized politics in which individual expression displaces collective action frames in the embrace of political causes,” asserts the influential political scientist Bennett (2012, p. 37). Not that categorical “identity politics” have evaporated, but “personalized forms of political participation seem to be the defining change of our era.”

Wanting to make public statements in yarn may reflect knitters’ and similar activists’ preference for voicing their concerns creatively and with their own methods outside the customary political channels. Democratic theory as well as empirical approaches to political participation need to incorporate and even encourage such initiatives: “Culture governance represents a new kind of top-down steering; it is neither hierarchical nor bureaucratic but empowering and self-disciplining” (Bang, 2004, p. 157). Even the smallest and apparently most insignificant narrative may be worth listening to, argues Bang and others. Thus, nearly two hundred years after de Tocqueville’s study of democracy in America’s, the significance of a welter of inventive, persistent, and at times enigmatic initiatives launched by individuals, social groups, and networks is again coming to the fore.

This article examines only one version of participatory politics among many other versions not mentioned. Momentary, surprising, and geographically localized as ad hoc political enactments tend to be, they may nevertheless reach large audiences, and last for a while through images and stories circulating in digital space. These are certainly initiatives calling for “poetry, eloquence, and memory, the graces of the mind, the fire of imagination, depth of thought and all the gifts which Heaven scatters at a venture turned to the advantage of democracy...” (de Tocqueville, 1835/1945, p 5).

Concluding comments

The spirit of playful interaction is an impulse older than culture itself and pervades all life like a veritable ferment, according to Huizinga (1944/1955, p. 173). He found

abundant illustrations in the earliest phases of civilization: poetry was born in and nourished on play; music and dancing were pure play; wisdom and philosophy found expressions in words and forms derived from religious contests; rules of warfare came from competitive play configurations, and so on. Huizinga traced few cultural play elements in his own century, but we should not be surprised to detect many in our digital age. The general speed and amount of information in public contexts challenge communicators, on the net and elsewhere. Astonishing imagery can energize visual statements; humor and irony may nurture politics of resistance and resilience, and inventive iconography is likely to help messages bypass ideological and emotional filters.

At the core of each of the nine vignettes is an action on the ground. Each performance relies, as we have seen, on net-based recruitment and communications. Yet, the material aspect *is* the very action. The political performances would be quite empty without this territorial element, representing the real world issue in question. A dominant notion in the literature on digitalization is that participants' projects and identities become less dependent on territory (see for instance Silk et al., 2016, p. 715). This article points to a different effect. The staging of captivating off-line productions is what empowers political creativity in on-line operations. In other words, the two realms are closely connected, even interdependent.

When looking at how our two actor categories bridge their physical and digital spaces, a pattern emerges. Whereas knitters retain classical features of everyday leisure when they contribute to net-based projects, by seeking sociability, intrinsic satisfaction, and adjustable involvement, the artists' approach is more ambitious and specialized. Thus, there is a definite convergence in the ways both occupy their different realms, which is in line with previous suggestions (see for instance Schultz & McKeown, 2018, p. 230).

Currently, amateurs use the net to navigate personalized information, interests and social concerns, and they find each other in low threshold ventures. Even minor contributions to such projects are much more than mere "slacktivism." Each instance of activism may not be particularly effective in the outer world but the aggregate may still be highly significant in psychological, social and democratic ways. Throughout history, people have found routes to political resources and self-worth by forming spaces where they can become visible and grant each other recognition. More or less integrated "counter publics" have emerged with adherents engaging in actions and circulating discourses, permitting them to express interpretations of the world as well as their own identities, strengths, interests, and values (Arendt, 1958/1998; Fraser, 1990). Among the diverse associations and networks digitalization facilitates, the ad hoc actions described in this article are among the most benign.

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