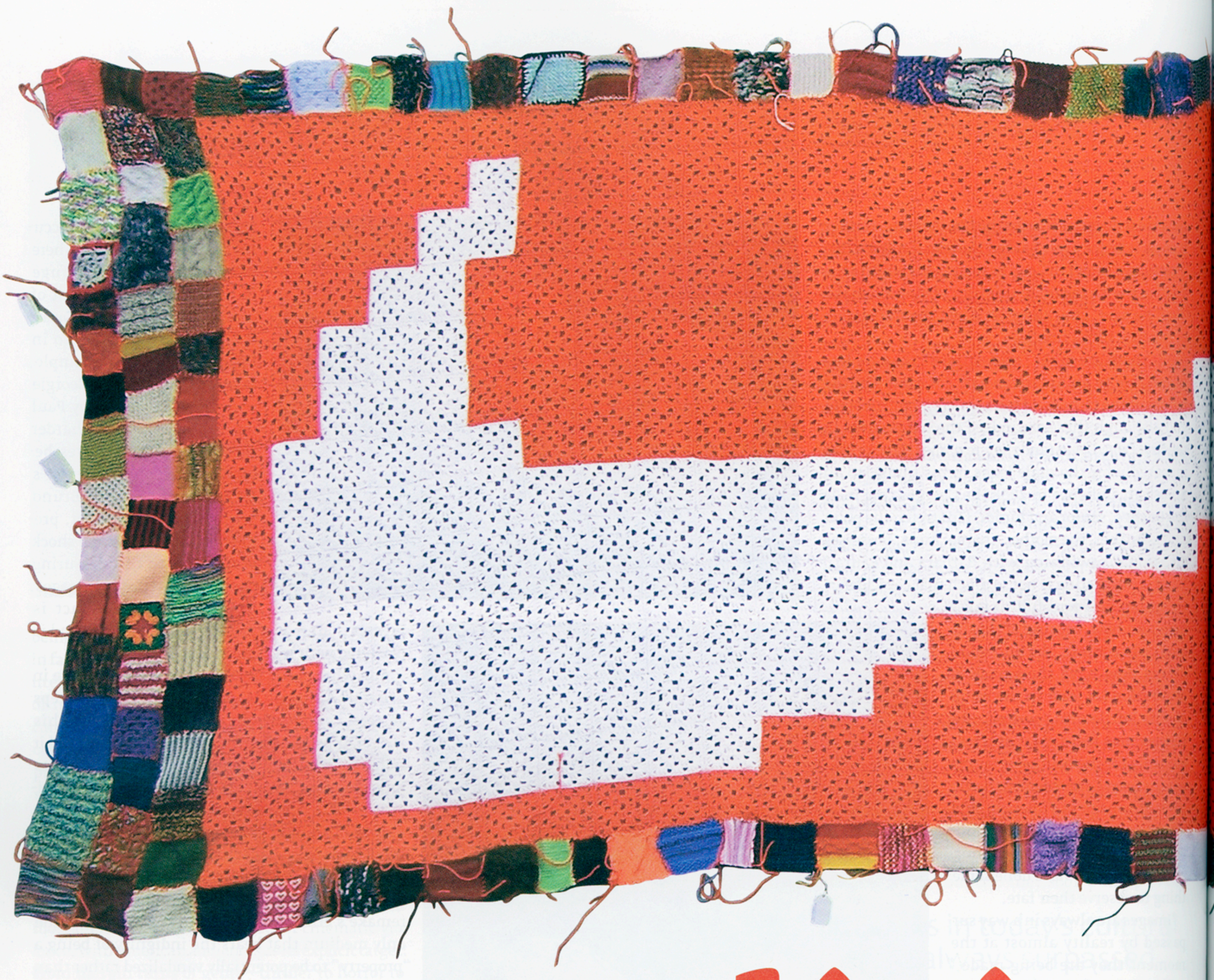


The Politics

What does it mean to make craft-based art in a country dependent on outsourced labor? **JULIA BRYAN-WILSON** talks to four US artists whose work takes up the global economy and its repercussions on national identity, and discovers that it's possible to challenge the status quo without dropping a stitch.

With bars hosting weekly crochet nights and knitting cafés proliferating, the current popularity of textile handicrafts in the US is undeniable. A growing number of artists, many of them women, are also producing critical, socially committed, conceptually oriented, collaborative craft-based work—so many that it could be called an emerging genre. For example, Cat Mazza uses her website, microRevolt.org, to solicit knitted and crocheted squares from crafters around the world for her *Nike Blanket Petition*, which protests sweatshop labor. Sabrina Gschwandtner engaged audiences in discussions about the Iraq war in her 2007 installation *Wartime Knitting*

CAT MAZZA, ***NIKE BLANKET PETITION*, 2007.** YARN, 14 X 6 FT. COURTESY THE ARTIST.

# of Craft

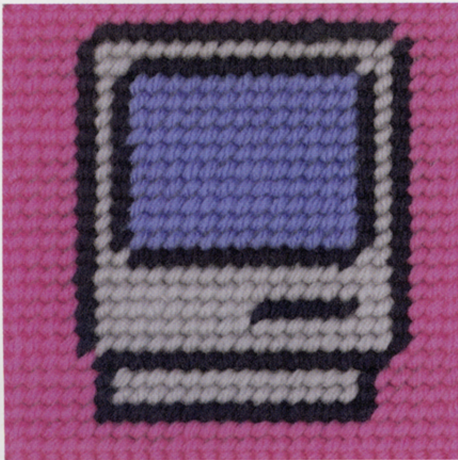
Circle, reminding us that knitting has historically been mobilized as a form of both civic participation and protest. Allison Smith creates work that examines how handmade objects are embedded in political narratives, and in 2005 she orchestrated a public art project on New York's Governors Island, "The Muster," that deployed the rhetoric of Civil War–era "mustering" to explore the place of historical reenactment in a time of national crisis.

One of the more than 50 projects at "The Muster" was Liz Collins's *Knitting Nation: Knitting During Wartime*. For this piece, Collins, a knitwear designer who teaches textiles at the Rhode Island School of Design, assembled a small army of women who used hand-powered knitting machines to churn out a massive abstract flag in red, white, and blue. As the Stars and Stripes grew to cover the ground, an orator clad in a dress that recalled a tattered US flag read texts about women knitting during wartime and about textile trade policies. (Full disclosure: that orator was me.)

Collins, Gschwandtner, Mazza, Smith, and I met in New York last fall to reflect on the nascent movement of craft critique as well as to discuss the wider implications of hand-making today. The following conversation was distilled from many hours of talk. —JBW

Race, class, and gender are played out in the global economy as advanced countries subjugate an entire third-world workforce. I try to consider this global critique in my work. —Cat Mazza

JULIA BRYAN-WILSON: Craft can be a moving target. I was part of a conference at the Getty last spring, "Craft at the Limits," that brought together studio craft artists and contemporary-art historians who were not necessarily decorative-arts scholars. At some points it felt like we were on different planets—the art historians were discussing how craft was devalued before it was resurrected by '70s feminism. There was talk, even, of embarrassment.
LIZ COLLINS: Craft shame.
JBW: Exactly. You can see echoes of it in the way that the word has been dropped from the California College of Arts and Crafts [now the California College of the Arts] and the American Craft Museum [now Museum of Arts & Design]. Neither of those has *craft* in its name anymore. But the studio craft artists of an older generation at this conference were completely puzzled by the idea that craft has been marginalized: "What are you talking about? There's a stigma associated with craft?"
LC: I wonder if the fine-art versus craft split matters anymore. I teach a new generation that doesn't care about old art-craft hierarchies. The DIY movement doesn't think of *craft* as a dirty word.
ALLISON SMITH: Even though the work each of us makes can be categorized as craft, we are all trying to stretch the boundaries of conceptual and collaborative art as well. We are conceptual artists whose subject is craft. That's the difference between our work and studio craft artists: we are working within a theoretical framework. And yet all of us are actively courted by the craft arena—often *more* courted by that world than by contemporary-art audiences.
JBW: One striking thing about you all as artists is how you explore the relationship of craft to politics. If craft implies utility, for you four, craft's "function" is to generate political dialogues.
AS: Well, American culture—a lot of cultures, actually—foregrounds craft as a mode of expression for defining national identity. In living-history reenactments and open-air museums, which are pedagogical sites, the focus is always on two things: craft and war. Obviously our master narratives of history are about war more than anything else, but at these sites it's craft that meticulously re-creates war and makes it visible. Handicraft becomes a metaphor through which to think about the terrain of war.
JBW: *Notion Nanny* (2005–2007), a community-based performance and installation in which you work with local craftspeople, is a good example of how you explore the relation between the two.
AS: In *Notion Nanny*, one sculptural element is a doll wearing a handmade Revolutionary War–era costume. I was trying to think about what can be considered revolutionary or politically relevant within very traditional craft practices.



CAT MAZZA, ***COMPUTER*, 2005**. NEEDLEPOINT WITH KNIT-PRO PATTERN, 4 X 4 IN. COURTESY THE ARTIST.

JBW: *Notion Nanny* has a significant interactive-collaborative component. All of you take this approach in your work, and I'm curious how that gets elaborated for each of you in different institutional contexts.
SABRINA GSCHWANDTNER: My *Wartime Knitting Circle* in the "Radical Lace and Subversive Knitting" show at New York's Museum of Arts & Design [2007] worked really well, because the museum was very generous in allowing people to knit at my table without paying an entry fee. But other times I run into installation problems, because curators don't always understand that this kind of work is not made through a studio practice that leads to discrete objects. The works are collaborative, and can be made outside the exhibition site or at the site itself, or some mixture of both. It's not the same as when artists come in and bring their materials and create an installation that somebody walks around in and then leaves. The audience is helping to create the work. So the exhibition site becomes a participatory space, an activist space, an education space, and a tactical space. It's also a working space.
AS: When *Notion Nanny* was exhibited at the Berkeley Art Museum in 2007, there was a similar institutional confusion about what the art actually was. It was a living, active process that would continue throughout the show. The public is coming in and doing things; I'm there doing things. Things are being added; things are disappearing. The show is accumulating objects and ideas as it goes on. I had apprenticeships with craftspeople in the area, and crafts we made collaboratively were integrated into the exhibit. You just said a great string of words, Sabrina, about how an activist, participatory, tactical space is part of the work. It's something that isn't always clear, I think, for the institution.

There were a lot of interesting moments when I was trying to install *Notion Nanny*, because boxes were arriving from my studio and from a lot of different locations. Some of them had objects that I had made. Some of them had objects that people had given to me. Some of them had pencils and paper and art supplies that were there for the audience to use. When these boxes came in, there was a registrar with a clipboard—
LC: She must have been going crazy.
AS: She was like, "What's this ball of string? What's this pencil?" And when I got everything back at the end of it, things like pencils were wrapped in Bubble Wrap, preciously packaged as if they were artworks. Of course I love working in institutions, because there's sustained dialogue that's generated around the work that you don't always get in galleries.
SG: One problem I had with the *Wartime Knitting Circle* piece had to do with maintenance. It took me a while to figure out how to display it so that yarn wasn't always getting tangled. I was there all the time just to clean it up. It was like a full-time job, but I wasn't getting paid to do it. It would be great if museums could realize that support might be needed and budget for it accordingly.

What was wonderful was that two museum staff members really helped out, including the traveling exhibitions coordinator. He was really into the piece. He had a relative on duty in Iraq, and it was very therapeutic for him to be knitting. He learned to knit there. He was so into it; he would go almost every day on his lunch hour and tell people, "You can also sit and knit here with me."
CAT MAZZA: I had a different experience with the "Radical Lace" show. The piece I was showing is a

14-foot-wide blanket portraying the Nike swoosh. The swoosh is made up of four-by-four-inch squares that serve as petitions for fair-labor policies for Nike garment workers. It was created by knit hobbyists from over 25 countries who visited the microRevolt website. The interface [microrevolt.org/petition_overview.htm] allowed users to virtually sign their names and mail in their hand-stitched squares instead of the traditional signing of a petition. And the public is supposed to add to it during the exhibition. But MAD decided not to show the Nike blanket; they decided to show *documentation* of it. Maybe the political rhetoric made the institution concerned; there were also copyright questions because of the logo. But there was another issue, too.

AS: What was it?

CM: Aesthetics.

SG: That was the big one, I think. More so than the political issue.

LC: When was this decision made?

CM: They decided that the Nike blanket would be in the exhibition. Then, three days before the piece was supposed to go up, I got an e-mail from the curator saying, "We're so sorry; we just can't hang it. It's too difficult to hang, and it looks too 'funky' among the other work." I thought maybe someone from Nike was on their board. But in fact the aesthetic issues are just as interesting. The banner is made from iridescent orange yarn—acrylic, synthetic material—and the squares are made by hobbyists, so they are sometimes a bit amateur looking. The museum assumed that the banner aspired to some high-art quality, which was never the intention. The show was about radical and subversive artworks using knitting or lace, and while the piece fit into their title, it didn't fit into their aesthetic.

AS: All of us have tried to reach out to this incredible crafter energy that's waiting to be engaged, which is somewhat separate from the concern to reach a museum audience. There was something so exciting for me about the way "The Muster" brought together so many different groups of people beyond the contemporary-art world.

CM: Looking back on the Nike piece's appearance in "Radical Lace," I was really disappointed, but on the other hand, it made sense. We negotiate these different venues, and our expectations have to change based on those venues. I use Web media to reach audiences beyond the museum. In fact this connects back to craft, because craft, like the Internet, is also seen as a democratizing medium, a social network that operates outside the institution.

SG: What's fascinating, too, is that people pick up knitting needles as an escape from the computer. In the face of everything fast and glinting, they want something real—a reinjection of the artisanal. But handicraft often brings them back online, because they go searching for instructions or tips, and they discover there's this whole online community of blogging crafters. So it feeds back into the digital environment.

LC: Maybe putting together a MySpace page is not that different from collaging or quilting. You're using different materials, to different ends, but along the way you're starting with matter and transforming it into something else, using your hands and your brain.

ALLISON SMITH, ***NOTION NANNY*, 2005–2007**. MIXED MEDIA, 84 X 48 X 48 IN. PHOTO: SIBILA SAVAGE, COURTESY THE ARTIST, UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA BERKELEY ART MUSEUM AND PACIFIC FILM ARCHIVE: MATRIX 222, AND SAATCHI GALLERY, LONDON.

CM: There's a rich interface between textiles, technology, and labor issues. Theorists have written about the link between textiles and digital media, because the computer is made up of a binary machine code, ones and zeros, while knitting is also based on a two-digit system: the stitches, knit and purl.

JBW: Your point about labor, Cat, is crucial. The various ways you all treat craft foreground the role of the hand in making art—which has been somewhat effaced since the Conceptual turn—plus by larger economic issues.

AS: Somebody who saw my project at Berkeley titled their blog entry "The Handmade vs. the Brainmade (Idea)." They were frustrated because the label of a piece in my show, which is a coverlet, read, "Coverlet by Allison Smith, woven by Leigh Alexander of Charleston, South Carolina." I take a lot of pride in foregrounding all of the people who are making this work with me, but for this person, the issue was that the weaver was secondarily mentioned. It's an interesting dilemma. This person was struggling with what that meant in terms of legitimate labor, as if to say, "It's her idea, but somebody else made it. Is that OK?" I find all of this, this exact conversation, to be the meat of the work.

LC: If at the top of the hierarchy is the artist, and underneath that is the crafter, there's a huge, important population of hand-makers even lower than that. Art historian Glenn Adamson called our attention to this at the 2006 American Craft Council conference in Houston. If you want to talk about what's going on in craft today, let's look at the kids making soccer balls overseas.

AS: Exactly. We forget that even today Nikes are made by workers. We tend to think of mass-produced "machine-made" things as if they're totally devoid of human hands and workmanship, but machines aren't making all these things; people are making these things.

LC: The harsh reality is that a lot of US textile mills are still in business only because they have government contracts making uniforms for soldiers—all uniforms are supposed to be American made, which is why they're so expensive. There is a glove

Craft is considered to be at odds with the intellectual labor that has fed conceptual and politically motivated art. So bringing back the activist spirit to something interactive and bodily is important. —Allison Smith

factory in North Carolina that makes trigger-finger gloves with antimicrobial liners for the soldiers in Iraq, so that their hands don't fall off from sweating so much. That's the kind of thing keeping domestic factories alive. But I think we're on a cusp of a new shift, perhaps, because of the anti-China backlash.

JBW: There's also the reinvigorated "made in the USA" movement that stems not from xenophobia but from localism and sustainability, as consumers become more aware of carbon footprints and the resources wasted in shipping.

LC: In *Knitting Nation* at "The Muster," I was trying to address this tension: "I hate patriotism; let's put the flag on the ground and walk all over it." But at the same time, I love where I live, and I want people here to have jobs. It's complicated; if we take back manufacturing and pull out of other countries, suddenly those people don't have any jobs, and then they're starving. There are no easy answers.

CM: Liz, maybe out of all of us, you have your finger on the pulse of manufacturing because of your work as a clothing designer.

LC: When I started out as a designer, I didn't know much about production and manufacturing. That's part of why I created a niche for my work as handmade. At a certain point, though, I knew I had to shift to outsourcing; my business could not survive if I continued to make clothes in my studio, paying the labor wages I had to pay. I think Natalie Chanin from Project Alabama, a fashion line that featured garments hand-sewn in a town called Florence, sold her company for this very reason. It was sad; she had this fantastic mission to have her stuff made in the US, and she really revived a community and gave them a lot of work. But the garments were too expensive. Another company bought her out, and now all of those pieces are made in India.

For me, trying to survive by outsourcing took an ironic twist: Barneys wasn't interested in my work when I had it made by a Chinese factory. They said, "We have other designers who do that. We want the handmade pieces from you." But if you do go handmade, you have to find a factory that can manage that quality of labor and be humane—which raises a lot of questions.

JBW: Ethical questions.

LC: Absolutely. I've been working with a factory in Peru that can maintain that level of integrity, but it required research on my part. The biggest problem for me in having a business was that I became disconnected from my creative process. I wasn't getting to make things anymore; it was all about management and outsourcing. It was a real spiritual crisis for me—the commodification of something that had been about love and connection. It sounds hokey, but my work is so emotional. That's part of why I started doing fashion, because I used the knitting process as a way to do self-surgery. I was going through a lot of emotional pain when I started making knitwear, and I was also coming out, discovering my sexuality. Creating garments that are connected to the body was a way to connect to myself and describe my emotional landscape. To go from that to making expensive clothes for Barneys was a difficult transition, and I missed the hands-on aspect.

LIZ COLLINS, ***KNITTING NATION PHASE 1: KNITTING DURING WARTIME*, 2005.** PERFORMANCE AND INSTALLATION VIEW, THE MUSTER, GOVERNORS ISLAND, NEW YORK. PHOTO: KIM STODDARD, COURTESY THE ARTIST.

SG: That kind of alienation is one of the things that draw people to craft as a hobby right now. People don't see the result of their labor in their jobs. You do a part of the administration or a part of the physical assembly, but then your work goes out into the world and doesn't have your stamp on it. So these craft projects at home are something people can do from start to finish. And part of the pleasure of the knitting or sewing circle is that it doesn't happen in isolation. You're sitting with other people, talking and making together. Craft is often a social space.

AS: A lot of what we've been talking about is the mind-body split—how intellectual labor is valued over manual labor. Craft, as a physical, performative act, is still considered to be at odds with the intellectual labor that has fed conceptual art and a lot of politically motivated art. For many of my political artist role models, the critique of the commodification of art entailed a rejection of hands-on making—and *craft* became a bad word. So bringing back the political-activist spirit to something interactive and bodily is really important.

LC: Part of my mission with *Knitting Nation*, which has taken various permutations since its first appearance at Allison's "The Muster," was to give people an inkling of the human effort involved in the process of making something. My intentions were multifaceted. It's a public art experience that lays bare the process of machine knitting and textile and garment construction. It's also a celebration of movement and the physicality of a manual process. And it's usually collaborative, with many people working together to build one thing; in this it's a commentary about labor.

> With *Knitting Nation*, I was addressing this tension: "I hate patriotism; let's walk all over the flag," but the same time, I love where I live, and I want people here to have jobs. It's complicated. —Liz Collins

CM: As we're talking about garment labor issues, I'm reminded, too, of the unjust conditions in computer manufacturing. This is something that I try to remember when I'm discussing sweatshop labor using my mass-produced laptop. But, then, we all coexist in corporate culture, and we try to do what we can within it. What inspired me to call my website microRevolt was Guattari's idea of molecular revolutions—the idea that social and cultural

change can occur from small acts of resistance, that change is not simply a consequence of a governing or economic policy.

JBW: A café in my neighborhood in Long Beach, California, recently held a craft fair called "Handmade Revolution," and it made me think about the desire to connect craft, William Morris style, with utopia or radical politics. Yet as much as this event couched itself as resisting capitalist culture, it just featured a lot of tables with people selling stuff. It didn't, for instance, sponsor workshops on how to knit or crochet. While they could be part of an alternative microeconomy, more often these craft fairs have become about hipster shopping.

AS: *Craft* has become a buzzword in the artworld, too. In so much contemporary art, though, when a work is supposed to be about craft, what that means is it's got some big, sloppy stitches on it. It's a kind of disrespect to craft traditions and the deep history of hand-making.

SG: Well, I'm a pretty bad crafter, I have to say. I took some sewing lessons recently and just learned how to do an invisible hem. I work with film, video, photography, sewing, embroidery, crochet, and knitting, and I'm pretty much just technically proficient with all of those mediums.

LC: But that's not your process.

SG: No, it's not. I make installations, events, and publications, among other things, that challenge boundaries between artist and curator, or archivist, and between art and craft. When I wrote my book *KnitKnit*, for example, I chose a publisher, Stewart, Tabori and Chang, that specializes in craft books. It's a division of Abrams, the art book publisher, so Abrams sells *KnitKnit* to yarn stores and to art bookstores. It was really important for me to write with handcraft hobbyists and fine-art readers in mind, because I wanted to mix perspectives on what art is and can be; I've often used handcraft as a site to engage ideas about what constitutes art.

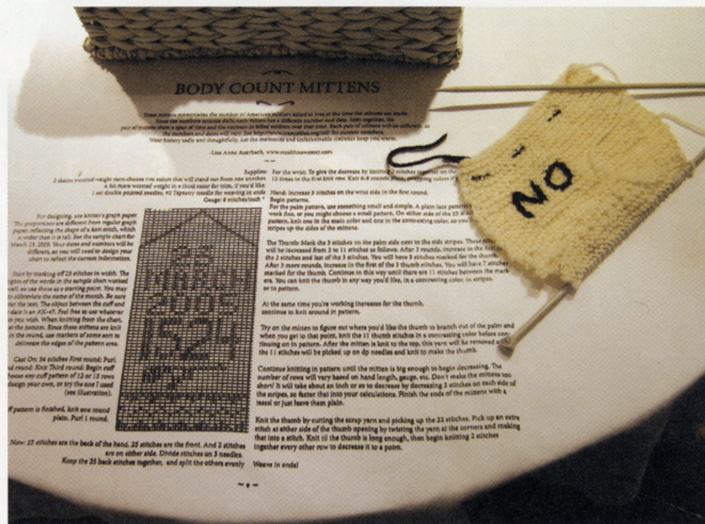
AS: If you're using craft, the question of skill is going to enter the critique no matter what.

SG: I'd like to hear some people's thoughts on their relationship to feminism.

LC: Some of my garments address female sexuality and ideas about erogenous zones, or areas of comfort, discomfort, bondage, and release. And that ties into queerness, but I don't know where it falls within feminism. *Knitting Nation* in "The Muster" was, importantly, all female, and it was about women working in a time of war and a tradition of women getting together for a cause. But I've moved on from that and thought about configurations that would be more about labor that's not gendered.

SG: Historically, hasn't textile labor been mostly done by women?

Alienation is one of the things drawing people to craft as a hobby right now. People don't see the result of their labor; their work goes out into the world and doesn't have their stamp on it. —Sabrina Gschwandtner



SABRINA GSCHWANDTNER, ***WARTIME KNITTING CIRCLE* (DETAIL), 2007.** MACHINE-KNIT COTTON, COTTON TABLECLOTH, WOOD TABLE AND CHAIRS, WOOL YARN, KNITTING NEEDLES, TAPE MEASURE, SCISSORS, STITCH MARKERS, AND OTHER KNITTING NOTIONS, DIMENSIONS VARIABLE. COURTESY THE ARTIST.

LC: Well, when you look around the manufacturing landscape globally, there are some areas where it's women's work, but there are others where it's men's work, and there are others where it's both. I was really jazzed by being in the factory in Peru and seeing men who were knitters. The men are the ones running the industrial machines and doing the programming, to be sure; but where people are doing things by hand, it's a real mix.

AS: The '60s and '70s feminist approach revealed the historically gendered nature of craft and tied it to domesticity. I grew up in a Martha Stewart–type household, with all the straight white rituals of suburban America that are embodied in craft projects. Feminism helped me be critical of those things while also implicating me in the critique, and it also gave me a way to think about performance and queer identity. I've had a lot of students—women students—who don't want to have anything to do with feminism. Up until LTTR [the Brooklyn-based feminist artist collective], really, the predominant attitude was, "It's done, it's in the past, feminism's outmoded." Feminism has been just as messy and unwieldy, and stigmatized, as craft.

CM: I have a mentor, Faith Wilding, who worked with Judy Chicago on *Womanhouse* and made influential craft-based artworks in the '70s. Wilding is also now involved in new media and cyberfeminism, and she made me aware of those overlaps. Third-wave feminist theory has taken up other aspects of identity—sexuality, race, and class—so feminism is still relevant; race, class, and gender are also played out in the global economy, as advanced countries subjugate an entire third-world workforce to create products. I try to consider this more global critique in my work.

JBW: Perhaps *craft* is a useful term today for the way it allows us to see these overlaps, to make connections between such different subjects: globalized labor, war, digital culture, feminism, collaboration, queer identity. Because it is so slippery and unfixed, it can encompass a broad spectrum of issues.

For more information on the artists in this story, turn to Index, p. 110.