Sewing Notions

JULIA BRYAN-WILSON ON CRAFT AND COMMERCE

Crafting session for Stephanie Syjuco's *The Counterfeit Crochet Project (Critique of a Political Economy)*, 2006–2008. Installation view, Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, San Francisco, 2008.

AT AI WEIWEI'S EXHIBITION at Tate Modern in London this past October, visitors tromping around in his installation of a hundred million handpainted porcelain sunflower seeds allegedly kicked up dangerous clouds of ceramic particles, prompting museum administrators to cordon off the work only a few days after its unveiling. Though the proverbial dust seems to have settled, the specter of outsourced labor that hovered over the masses of individually crafted seeds (made in Jingdezhen, China, a city known for its porcelain production) continues to inform debates about the ethics of hand-making in a global economy dependent on cheap factory labor. Ai's work and the controversy around it are indicative of the disruptive nature of traditional handicraft within contemporary art, but also of the relatively easy containment of craft within institutional and market structures. Despite an increasingly mainstream do-it-yourself movement, craft is often still pigeonholed as outside the purview of art, and has yet to be thoroughly examined at the critical or curatorial level.

However, over the past decade craft has experienced a resurgence of visibility within the art world, as attested by the prominence of international makers as diverse as British potter (and Turner Prize winner) Grayson Perry; Egyptian-born artist Ghada Amer, a producer of sexually explicit embroidered canvases; and Ghanaian sculptor El Anatsui, famed for large-scale tapestries of bottle caps and labels. Aside from a shared interest in recasting traditional forms of handiwork, though, these artists have little in common, as they use craft for very different

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ends—to reconfigure assumptions about the gendered nature of amateurism, in the case of Perry; to explore stereotypes of femininity, as Amer does; or to transform the surplus of consumer waste, as Anatsui does. Still, they are marshaled as evidence of a recent "new wave" of hand-making, with little effort expended to distinguish their methods.

Counteracting this lack of nuance, a spate of scholarly texts written in the past several years have begun to add needed historical and theoretical perspective to this phenomenon—exemplary works include Glenn Adamson's *Thinking Through Craft* (2007), Elissa Auther's *String, Felt, Thread* (2010), and a recently launched peer-reviewed venue for critical writing on craft, *The Journal of Modern Craft*. Major exhibitions such as "Radical Lace & Subversive Knitting," at New York's Museum of Arts and Design in 2007, trumpet the political potential of craft, and in some respects resurrect the 1970s feminist reclamation of domestic labors like embroidery as a "radical" act. But there are differences between how craft was incorporated into art in the 1970s in important works like Judy Chicago's *Dinner Party*, 1974–79, with its legion of skilled artisan-volunteers, and the rhetoric regarding contemporary hand-making. For today craft is not only an artistic trend being rapidly institutionalized; it is also a thriving enterprise that exists within a larger geopolitical context of mass production. Indeed, the lines between manufacture and handiwork are not necessarily clear at all; journalist and author Leslie T. Chang reports that it takes two hundred pairs of human hands to make a single pair of tennis shoes. The very notion of "women's work" that compelled Chicago has now shifted, given the feminization of the global labor force. This shift means that some earlier feminist uses of craft in art—as an institutional critique of gendered hierarchies or as a political recuperation of the decorative and the low—have been rendered somewhat beside the point. The real state of craft today is multiple: It consists of young urban stitch-and-bitchers, to be sure, but more significantly, it is dominated by women making consumer objects in factories in China and elsewhere. Artists who have provocatively explored the working conditions in the nation that, as of January 2010, officially became the world's largest exporter include Guangzhou-based Cao Fei, whose video *Whose Utopia?*, 2006–2007, focused on the fantasies of employees in a lightbulb factory in China's Pearl River Delta region, depicting workers both in documentary segments as they laboriously assemble bulbs and in dream sequences where the same workers appear alone with the machines, dancing or playing guitar.

On the other side of the world, artist Margarita Cabrera, who was born in Mexico and currently lives in Texas, has also turned to multinational manufacturing and its effects on workers' bodies and minds. She has executed a number of projects that focus on immigration and on the rise of the border factories known as maquiladoras and the subsequent decline of long-established Mexican crafts. For instance, in her work *The Craft of Resistance*, 2008, produced as part of a residency at Artpace in San Antonio, she set up a mock metal factory and relied on the hands of many volunteers to make a copper swarm of monarch butterflies (notable for their annual migration from the US to Mexico and back). She has also created a series of soft sculptures of everyday objects, such as toasters and cars, that are made in maquiladoras; she replaces the parts made in

Clockwise from top: **Faythe Levine, *Handmade Nation*, 2009,** color video, 90 minutes. Production still. **Margarita Cabrera, *Pink Blender*, 2002,** vinyl, thread, metal, electric wiring, 14 x 7 x 10". **Cat Mazza, *Stitch for Senate* (detail), 2007–2009,** 100 knitted helmet liners, dimensions variable.

Mexico with vinyl, leaving the threads dangling to emphasize the nature of their construction. In her piece *Pink Blender*, 2002, whose delicate tone is offset by shaggy black strands, her use of a clichéd female color comments on the gendered population of maquiladora workers and the brutal deaths of these women in Ciudad Juárez, where, since 1993, hundreds of what authorities refer to as *feminicidios* (femicides) have occurred. (Pink and black are the signature colors of activist campaigns that have arisen in response to the murders.)

With near-allegorical starkness, the Juárez murders highlight the dangers of joining the immense global labor force that produces most of the things we buy, and they highlight, as well, the moral implications of participating in the system as a consumer. Given the ubiquity of mass-produced garments and outsourced labor, is there something inherently political in crocheting your own hat? In her 2009 documentary and accompanying book *Handmade Nation*, Faythe Levine argues the affirmative, looking in particular at the US boom in "maker faires"; guerrilla knitting projects like the Houston collective Knitta; and feminist sewing circles. These are just a few of the initiatives that have emerged since the 1990s from the rekindling of interest in crafts within post-punk subcultures across the US and Europe. Several groups that seek to harness widespread hobby craft energy include the London knitting group Cast Off, which has sponsored antiwar protests, and the American abortion rights group Knit4Choice. There is even a convenient neologism, *craftivism*, that signals the merger of, or affinity between, craft and activism.

A number of practices that might themselves be dubbed craftivist have emerged in the past few years as artists consciously engage amateur hand-making, often mobilizing far-flung communities of crafters. Cat Mazza's *microRevolt* project, for instance, gathered thousands of knitted square petition signatures to protest Nike's labor practices (*Nike Blanket Petition*, 2003–2008). And, playing with a long history of nationalistic calls for women to knit during wartime, Mazza, who lives in Boston, urged knitters in every state to construct helmet liners to send to their members of Congress with pleas to bring the troops in Iraq and Afghanistan home (*Stitch for Senate*, 2007–2009). Filipino-born, California-based artist Stephanie Syjuco also invites contributions from hobby crafters to unravel the branding and fabrication of desire; her *Counterfeit Crochet Project (Critique of a Political Economy)*, 2006–2008, encouraged participants to hand-replicate designer handbags and posted instructions such as "How to Bootleg a Chanel Purse." Further strategically blurring the line between the handmade and the mass-produced is New York–based Zoë Sheehan Saldaña, whose *Shopdropping* project, 2003–2006, entailed her purchasing garments from Walmart, meticulously duplicating them by hand, and then returning the copies to the rack to be bought for the original price. Are these duplicates detected by their new owners? Saldaña's work solicits this ambiguity. Both garments have been hand-worked, but that making happens within strikingly disparate discourses of value and necessity. Incisively, Saldaña foregrounds the tension between the *privilege* to craft and the impetus for survival that often accompanies hand-making. Fundamentally, work that uses craft techniques asks us to think about process and reminds us that matter itself has origins, stories to tell, and consequences.

These stories are more complicated than they seem. We shouldn't, for example, assume political homogeneity in this sphere. The left-progressive valence of many of the activist and artistic appropriations of craft is evident, but craft-based techniques, like any other, are ideologically ambivalent. Alongside pro-choice crafters making handmade wombs, there are pro-life knitters inspired by biblical passages about being "knit" in the womb by God. Craft has historically been recruited as patriotic and conservative, and in part the craftivist movement has sought to resist those narratives, to contradict them with proliferating examples of leftist or innovative hand-making. Further, the claims for progressive craft can be overstated: A festival in Southern California might proclaim itself part of the "Handmade Revolution," but it is hard to see the subversive promise of buying and selling baby bibs decorated with hand-stitched animals. In fact, this looks not like an alternative to but precisely the norm of advanced capitalism, with its relentless entrepreneurialism in which even improvised, local cultural networks of exchange become forums for commerce—a problem that artists who successfully deploy craft negotiate, directly or obliquely. This instrumentalization is evident as well in micromarket e-commerce sites like Etsy.com, through which makers sell handmade objects online, or in the many prepackaged craft kits for sale at Urban Outfitters. The real value of craft at this moment has nothing to do with a stable ideology or indeed any singular quality inhering in the idea of "craft," but rather with craft's strange, pressured, and contested position within the schematic of contemporary consumption. Craft is uniquely positioned to allow us to reconsider the politics of materiality and exchange—their labors, pleasures, and hazards. □

JULIA BRYAN-WILSON IS THE AUTHOR OF *ART WORKERS: RADICAL PRACTICE IN THE VIETNAM WAR ERA* (UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA PRESS), WHICH WAS RELEASED LAST MONTH IN PAPERBACK.