

Craftivism in Canada: Exploring Identity Through Politically Charged Textiles

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## **ABSTRACT**

The objective of this thesis is to address the marginalization of craft, specifically textiles, within the Canadian art history canon by isolating and analyzing specific case studies that represent the role of the contemporary textile artists in the modern Canadian arts and culture community. By investigating the work of contemporary textile artists Cindy Baker, Allyson Mitchell, and Anthea Black, I will indicate the ways in which they have made significant contributions to the development and acceptance of contemporary craft in Canada, not simply through their own art practice, but also as lecturers, writers, and curators. These artists have impacted the world of Craftivism, the culmination of modern day activism and craft, making the Canadian Craftivist scene innovative, cutting edge, and politically relevant.

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## Introduction

Canadian craft, as both a professional discipline and creative practice, has been the constant target of misinterpretation and stereotyping and is often excluded from the traditional, high-art discourse. This may be due to the fact that craft has, for far too long, been considered domestic women's work; simple, and devoid of the rich, creative, and technical worth that defines the fine arts.<sup>1</sup> The categorization of North American craft as secondary to other, more celebrated, genres such as painting, drawing, and sculpture, has inspired contemporary Canadian craft artists and scholars to begin the grand attempt to rid Canadian craft of the debilitating stereotypes that have so often prevented textile-based artists from securing themselves a place in the fine art world; unable to exhibit in art galleries and museums, or considered a credible point of interest within the North American academic community. In recent years, textile-based artists across the globe have begun working together to create a dialogue about the exclusion of craft within western art history, and they are achieving this by reworking craft in a radical way, increasing their vocal presence within the artistic community while cultivating political awareness on both local and global levels. Craftivism,<sup>2</sup> the culmination of contemporary craft and grassroots political activism, has allowed Canadian crafters<sup>3</sup> to redefine their genre through the reclamation of the once marginalized and undervalued medium.

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<sup>1</sup> The marginalization of craft throughout history is outlined in the following texts: *The Subversive Stitch: Embroidery and the Making of the Feminine* (1989) by Roszika Parker and *String, Felt, Thread: The Hierarchy of Art and Craft in American Art* (2009) by Elissa Auther, in addition to articles published by other contemporary craft scholars in Maria Elena Buszek's publication entitled *Extra/Ordinary: Craft and Contemporary Art* (2011).

<sup>2</sup> "Craftivism" is a term coined by American Craftivist scholar Betsey Greer to describe a movement that combines grassroots political activism and traditional forms of (most often textile-based) craft-making.

<sup>3</sup> The term "crafter" is used in the Craftivist community to describe an artist who utilizes craft-making in their practice, often within the boundaries of DIY, Green Movement, and indie crafting.

Craftivism has allowed contemporary artists to take control of their strong political voices, speaking to the global interest in seeking an alternative to consumerist culture and exploring radical initiatives.

Today, Craftivists are redefining their genre as socially active, politically relevant, and globally revolutionary, touching on issues and causes that greatly impact the way people work, think, and interact. Canadian Craftivism takes on issues of war, consumerism, feminism, homophobia, and body image, to name a few, circulating powerful messages throughout their communities via string, yarn, and fabric, and working against the mainstream to develop and spread ideas about some of today's most important issues.<sup>4</sup> The Canadian artists that I will be focusing on in this thesis are Craftivists who specifically use textiles to scrutinize issues relevant to our modern society, speaking particularly to the intersecting matters of gender, sexuality, and popularized notions of beauty. By looking at the different ways in which contemporary Canadian feminist artists Cindy Baker and Allyson Mitchell are redefining their own identity as marginalised women practicing work of a taboo subject matter, in addition to analyzing the contributions of Calgary based curator, writer, and Craftivist Anthea Black, I am able to dissect how each of these women are contributing to what has recently become a radical shift in the craft conversation in Canada, one that speaks to real issues and encourages a dialogue about what it means to work against the grain in our, oftentimes close-minded, society. This radical shift separates contemporary Craftivism from its predecessor, traditional craft, by way of subversive politics and by confronting

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<sup>4</sup> While textiles dominate Craftivist works it also takes many other forms. The 2011 exhibition titled *Gestures of Resistance* at the Museum of Contemporary Craft in Portland, Oregon is an example of Craftivist work which includes clay, wood, printmaking, yarn, and performative craft. "Gestures of Resistance," Museum of Contemporary Craft, 2011, accessed

overtly issues of gender, sexuality, and the body.

## **History of Craft(ivism)**

Fiber-based craft has been a fundamental component of artistic practice since the beginning of civilization, making the history of textiles both extensive and complex. This history reflects trends in international trade and manufacture, from the trading routes in the ancient Mediterranean, to the export of Chinese silk on the Silk Road, all the way to the industrial revolution with the invention of the cotton gin and the power loom, making textile production faster and more economical.<sup>5</sup> Historians consider the geographical origin of handicraft, namely knitting, somewhere in the ancient Middle East where the first traces of weaving on two sticks were found in the form of Coptic socks<sup>6</sup> (Image 1) from Egypt, documenting an early example of the knitted stockinet stitch dating to 1000 CE. From Egypt the tradition of knitting spread to Europe by Mediterranean trading routes,<sup>7</sup> when German painter Bertram von Minden created the 15<sup>th</sup> century painting titled *Visit of the Angel* (Image 2) illustrating a rare example of monastic knitting in the Middle Ages.<sup>8</sup> During the European colonization of America, knitting continued to be considered a valuable technique for nomadic and non-agrarian peoples who required a mode of weaving that was both quick and compact. For many decades to follow, knitting

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10August 2012. <http://mocc.pnca.edu/exhibitions/1278/>

<sup>5</sup> Julie Theaker, "History 101," *Knitty*, Spring 2006, accessed 06 May 2012. <http://www.knitty.com/ISSUESpring06/FEATHistory101.html>

<sup>6</sup> Archaeologists discovered what they call "Coptic socks" in the city of Fustat, near modern day Cairo, Egypt. The socks are believed to be from the 11<sup>th</sup> century, and are currently in the collection of The Textile Museum, Washington DC. "Collections," 2011. Accessed April 01, 2012. <http://www.textilemuseum.org/totm/islamicsockindex.htm>

<sup>7</sup> Julie Theaker, "History 101," *Knitty*, Spring 2006, accessed 06 May 2012. <http://www.knitty.com/ISSUESpring06/FEATHistory101.html>

<sup>8</sup> Richard Rutt, *A History of Hand Knitting*, London: Batsford Ltd, 1987.

was arguably the most popular form of textile manufacturing, and it was not until the advent of the Industrial Revolution that knitting would give way to more prosperous modes of factory development. However, it was during World War I, post Industrial Revolution, that women truly banded together to knit garments for their men overseas, as advertised on a 1918 Red Cross poster stating *Our Boys Need Sox, Knit Your Bit* (Image 3). This early example of knit-activism was a means of providing warmth and comfort for the soldiers in battle in addition to instilling a sense of civic participation in the collective knitters on the home front.<sup>9</sup>

The North American tradition of quilting is celebrated as a unique domestic practice; one that continues to be utilized by contemporary Craftivists who use this traditional technique to speak to modern issues. The 2007 article by Sandy Poitras titled “A Passion for Quilting,” features Nancy Armstrong, researcher and Chairperson of the Canadian Quilt Study Group,<sup>10</sup> who asserts that, while Canadians and Americans are influenced by the same media, Canadian quilt designs and colours are clearly inspired by life experiences, geography, and availability of resources that are unique to Canada. Additionally, she claims that, perhaps due to geographical isolation, Canadian quilts seem to exhibit a creativity and sense of community, as well as subject matter that often depicts wilderness, landscape, and weather.<sup>11</sup> In Quebec, Montreal’s McCord Museum is home to what is considered the earliest quilt in North America, dating from 1726, called “The

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<sup>9</sup> Lisa Bogart, *Knit With Love: Stories to Warm a Knitters Heart*, Michigan: Revell Books, 2011.

<sup>10</sup> The CQSG is an organization dedicated to encouraging and advancing the study and research of quilt making. The members work for the promotion of contemporary quilts and the preservation of historical quilts through cooperative action with guilds and appropriate provincial, state, and federal institutions. “Goals and Policies,” The Canadian Quilt Study Group, 2011, accessed 10 August 2012. <http://www.quilt.com/History/CanadianQuiltStudy.html>

<sup>11</sup> Nancy Armstrong in Sandy Poitras’ “A Passion for Quilting. Sideroads of Simcoe-



McCord Quilt.”<sup>12</sup> Today the Canadian Quilters’ Association, in addition to provincial guilds scattered across the country, continue the tradition of creating and quilting in public groups and private residences, maintaining a rich sense of history and community through the Canadian quilting tradition. Quilting history in Canada, however, cannot be summarized without mention of Canadian First Nations ceremonial Star Blankets (Image 4), which have been used to honour people since the late 1800s, mostly in the prairie provinces. In an essay titled “The Eight-Pointe Star and Wally Dion’s Star Blanket” by Concordia University M.A. graduate student Wahsontiiio Cross, she explains that the quilt “whose design consists of diamonds and squares cut out of fabric and sewn together” as meant to be gifted and passed down to each new generation, giving descendents the gift of culture, language, and tradition. Today, Star Blankets are given in honour of events such as graduations, “Thus, the meanings and traditions associated with the star blanket have survived until today.”<sup>13</sup> It is in this way that Canadian quilt making contributes to a vast history of textile craft, which enables the current generation of Craftivists to reconsider the traditional discipline.

Canadian craft has flourished across many historical periods, and has remained present in North America’s complex art history. The history of Canadian craft ranges from Northwest Coast woodcarving, using natural resources for both decorative and ceremonial purposes, to domestic prairie homesteaders who practiced embroidery and weaving as a source of warmth and comfort in their sterile winter homes, into the decade

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Grey,” Alliston, Ontario, September, 2007: 42-45.

<sup>12</sup> Barbara Brackman, *Clues in the Calico: A Guide to Identifying and Dating Antique Quilts*, C&T Publishing Inc, 2009: 14.

<sup>13</sup> Wahsontiiio Cross, “The Eight-Pointe Star and Wally Dion’s Star Blanket,” Canadian Heritage Information Network, 2010: paragraph 3, accessed 10 November 2011. <http://www.museevirtuel-virtualmuseum.ca/sgc-cms/expositions-exhibitions/tresors->

of the 1960's where a growing interest in anti-consumerist culture popularized the notion of the handmade. Although the genre of craft has long occupied a marginal role in modernist discourse, Canadian craft scholars like Sandra Alföldy believe that the second half of the 20th century introduced to the fine art world new opportunities for Canadian craft artists, as they continued to push the boundaries of traditional fine art practice both inside and outside of the gallery.<sup>14</sup> Alföldy, craft historian at the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, delves into the history of Canadian craft in much of her writing and research, explaining in her text *Crafting Identity: The Development of Professional Fine Craft in Canada* that “semantics surrounding the word craft developed in the postwar period when a system of labels based on the legacy of North American modern art were developed and applied to distinguish a new entity, professional North American craft, from its predecessor, traditional craft.”<sup>15</sup> As a result of this, craft artists were given an opportunity to make a career for themselves in the professional realm, as opposed to being stuck in a traditional and undervalued line of work.

Alföldy's *Crafting Identity* is largely focused on craft in the 1960s and 1970s, which she cites as the time period that first marked the emergence of professional craft experts and organizations in Canada, introducing to the country the Canadian Craftsmen's Association, Montreal's Expo 67 (still regarded today as one of the country's finest cultural achievements) and North American fine-craft experts such as Aileen Osborn Webb of the American Craft Council and Canadian curator Moncrieff Williamson.<sup>16</sup> Alföldy explains, “The 1960s witnessed the emergence of professional craft experts in

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treasures/?page\_id=4589&lang=en

<sup>14</sup> Sandra Alföldy, *Crafting Identity: The Development of Professional Fine Craft in Canada*, Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2005:11.

<sup>15</sup> Alföldy, 3

Canada. While there had been significant voices for craft throughout the twentieth century, the decade of the 1960s encouraged a new approach to the crafts that emphasized innovation.”<sup>17</sup> Despite this revolutionary new approach to discussing Canadian craft, she explains that it was the voices of men, not women, made public during this time; a problem that persisted well into the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Still, the development of craft awareness and appreciation in the 1960s ultimately contributed to the materialization of the Canadian Craftsmen's Association, which challenged the bureaucratic management of craft previously dominated by the Canadian Handicrafts Guild, changing the way craft was considered in the professional world.<sup>18</sup> Additionally, many scholars, including curators Alan C. Elder and Rachel Gotlieb, agree that the 1960s emphasized a moment in history where Canadian craft artists took control of their profession and the way it was institutionally and publicly celebrated, ensuring that their work would be taken seriously.<sup>19</sup>

Although professional Canadian craft flourished during this period, it was also an important time for handicraft artists who were looking to tap into a different industry: tourism. During the 1960s Canada was at the forefront of the tourism industry, funded generously by the government, which encouraged local communities to play a vital role in the planning, coordination, and marketing of a new Canadian style.<sup>20</sup> Douglas

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<sup>16</sup> Alfoldy, 55-122

<sup>17</sup> Alfoldy, 17

<sup>18</sup> Sandra Alfoldy, *Crafting Identity: The Development of Professional Fine Craft in Canada*, Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2005: 52-53.

<sup>19</sup> Alan Elder, *Made in Canada: Craft and Design in the Sixties*, McGill-Queen's University Press, 2005: p.vii – xi and Rachel Gotlieb, “Thor Hansen: Crafting a Canadian Style,” Curatorial essay, Textile Museum of Canada, 2005, accessed 10 November 2011. <http://www.textilemuseum.ca/apps/index.cfm?page=exhibition.detail&exhId=286>

<sup>20</sup> Robert Mill and Alastair Morrison, *The Tourism System*, Dubuque: Kendall Hunt, 1998: 121.

Coupland, contributor to Alan Elder's collaborative text *Made in Canada: Craft and Design in the Sixties*, explains:

The sixties were the decade when the focus shifted to urban life, creating the tendency to sentimentalize the land and out of doors [and] marked a cathartic and definitive breaking away from the Canadian past. No longer was the nation's visual identity going to be defined by styles or expressions that were either too regional or too historically problematic.<sup>21</sup>

Local interest in tourism coincided with the mainstreaming of handicrafts, pushing artists to create trinkets and souvenirs that would to appeal to both Canadian residents and foreign visitors. Although the mass production of trinkets may have lowered the status of professional craft artists during this time, it also propelled craft into the mainstream. Alan Elder, author of the article "When Counterculture went Mainstream," claims that Canadians in the 1960s quickly developed an enthusiasm for the handmade, the culturally conscious, and an interest in the rejection of consumerism. Elder explains that "Although seen as being a part of the nations thriving counterculture, craft was quickly being incorporated into the mainstream,"<sup>22</sup> creating a new demand for hand-crafted items, transforming the 1960s into a period of transition for artists working and contributing to the ever-expanding craft genre.

The history of craft is extensive and complex, as highlighted by several prominent craft historians who focus much of their research and writing on the delineation between fine-craft and amateur-craft, and the hierarchy that has developed throughout the expansion of the genre since the mid-twentieth century and its insertion into the

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<sup>21</sup> Coupland, preface VII

<sup>22</sup> Elder, 106

mainstream fine arts community. While the 1960s brought about change in the understanding, appreciation, and professionalization of craft in Canada, Dr. Jennifer E. Salahub, author of the article “A Tipping Point in Canadian Craft History?” 2008, claims that the year 2007 was the most pivotal time in Canadian craft history that “witnessed a number of events including the launch of innumerable web sites, craft blogs and virtual craft galleries.”<sup>23</sup> In Calgary, ACAD organized a craft symposium *Invisible/Visible* to welcome the American Craft Organization Development Association (CODA), which was meeting in Canada for the first time. In Halifax, NSCAD organized an international forum for craft called NeoCraft, an academic conference designed to unite makers and academics in hopes of fostering a discussion about the future of craft in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The 2007 publication *NeoCraft: Modernity and the Crafts*, based on this conference, is one that Salahub identifies as a marker of a growing contemporary fine arts field, one where craft is taken seriously as an academic discipline, documenting and discussing the progress of craft throughout Canadian art history.<sup>24</sup> The Canadian craft organization that supported NeoCraft and the 2007 Year of Craft is The Canadian Craft Federation, which works to advance and promote Canadian craft nationally and internationally to the benefit of Canadian craft community at large.<sup>25</sup> The conference and coinciding publication was described by Sandra Alföldy as an alternative method for assessing craft and solidifying the discourse of craft history, theory and critical writing. Alföldy further points out that *NeoCraft: Modernity and the Crafts*, has played an important role in pre-empting history

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<sup>23</sup> Dr. Jennifer E. Salahub, *NeoCraft: Modernity and the Crafts*, NSCAD, 2007: paragraph 1, accessed 12 February 2012.  
<http://www.saskcraftcouncil.org/celebrating/articles/2007/tipping-point.php>

<sup>24</sup> Salahub, paragraph 3

<sup>25</sup> “About the Canadian Crafts Federation: A Historical Perspective,” Canadian Crafts Federation, 2012, accessed 15 August 2012.

from repeating itself<sup>26</sup> and, although it may be premature to judge whether 2007 was indeed a "tipping point" in the history of Canadian craft, Canada has never seen a more vibrant state of craft making, which Salahub considers a clear indication of a healthy future for Canadian crafters.

Another publication that transformed the way people were considering craft was J. Keri Cronin and Kirsty Robertson's 2010 text titled *Imagining Resistance: The Visual Culture of Activism and Dissent*. Cronin, assistant professor in the Visual Arts Department at Brock University, and Robertson, assistant professor of Contemporary Art and Museum Studies at the University of Western Ontario, share research interests that include globalization, immersive environments, activism, and contemporary craft practices in Canada.<sup>27</sup> In *Imagining Resistance*, Cronin and Robertson offer to their readers a history of radical artistic practice in Canada accompanied by a collection of eleven essays that focus on a range of institutions, artists, and events that have transformed Canadian contemporary art and activism. Their publication focuses on the history of radical practice, responsible for what Cronin and Robertson consider the reworking of important global issues, as they use this text as a platform to examine and understand the landscape of activism and fine art in Canada; posing the question "how might activists begin to take account of not just the way that visual culture can be used but also the chains of value by which those images come into being? And how might new resistances be imagined in the cracks and fissures of a system that is ever changing, ever

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<http://canadiancraftsfederation.typepad.com/canadian-crafts-federatn/about-us.html>

<sup>26</sup> Salahub, paragraph 15

<sup>27</sup> J. Keri Cronin and Kirsty Robertson, eds. *Imagining Resistance: Visual Culture and Activism in Canada*, Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier Press, 2010.

evolving, and, according to numerous theorists, all encompassing?”<sup>28</sup> Although these questions may remain unanswered, Cronin and Robertson present a survey of Canadian activist culture from the 1940s to the present, providing case studies that prove there is much to be considered on the topic of art and activism in Canada.

Robertson, in addition to being the co-editor for *Imagining Resistance: The Visual Culture of Activism and Dissent*, has taken a hands-on approach to Craftivism with her 2006 work titled *The Viral Knitting Project*. This project used a traditionally domestic practice as a means of creating a community based initiative that transcended the stereotypical barrier that is often created by age and gender. With collaboration between visual artists, art historians, and activists, *The Viral Knitting Project* became an experimental networked art success consisting of a computer virus, a series of downloadable videos, and a public exhibition that inspired knitters across the globe to create politically charged projects and engage in critical banter that would transform ideas involving textile art, net art, and their possible future as coexisting mediums.<sup>29</sup> According to Kirsty Robertson, “The idea is to bring together a number of issues under one performance (in a manner similar to the affinity groups at global justice protests), but also to highlight some of the links between technology, culture, and capitalism.”<sup>30</sup> It seems that Robertson’s *Viral Knitting Project* grew out of her interest and desire to combine the “viral” communication possibilities of modern technology with political activism in the realm of traditional craft. This experimental new media project was one of the first of its kind, and opened a new door for media-based Craftivists in North America.

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<sup>28</sup> Cronin and Robertson, 248

<sup>29</sup> Kirsty Robertson, “The Viral Knitting Project: an ongoing collaboration,” 2007, accessed 09 March 2012.  
<http://www.kirstyrobertson.com/viral%20knitting/viral%20knitting.html>

As an accessible and participatory practice, the popularity of contemporary craft on both online and offline forums continues, marking 2012 as another period of increasingly DIY (Do-It-Yourself) interests, local crafting, and an appeal to the handmade. The birth of the DIY Movement has, as we have seen in recent years, transformed the way craft is being considered, gaining an international following as crafters are coming together to display, sell, and promote their work and political ideas.<sup>31</sup> Although craft is a large component of the DIY Movement, the term DIY has taken on a broader meaning that covers a wide range of skills and characteristics. The DIY Movement is associated with the international alternative rock, punk rock, and indie rock music scenes, in addition to independent media networks, publishing companies, and sustainable food farmers. It is in this context that the DIY Movement offers an alternative to modern consumer culture's emphasis on relying on others to satisfy our needs. With the rise of the Internet, and other new media outlets, the popularity of craft and the DIY Movement has transformed the way craft is being written about and considered in scholarly texts, making textile work simultaneously accessible and exclusive as it is propelled into the trendy DIY subculture while remaining a component of the everyday. This dichotomy in the contemporary craft world has caused Craftivist groups to create a new dialogue about what it means to be a crafter, contributing to a global framework that puts Canada on the Craftivist map. According to Mandy Moore and Leanne Prain in their 2009 publication *Yarn Bombing: The Art of Crochet and Knit Graffiti*, the contemporary craft community uses a variety of mediums to reach their audience, including “word of

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<sup>30</sup> Robertson, paragraph 2

<sup>31</sup> Andrew Wagner, “Craft is What You Make It” in Faythe Levine and Cortney Heimerl’s *Handmade Nation: The Rise of DIY, Art, Craft, and Design*, New York City: Princeton Architectural Press, 2008: 1-3.



mouth, knitting clubs, and the Internet, and [is] of varying age groups, sexes, and nationalities.”<sup>32</sup> Due to ease of communication with participants through the internet, contemporary crafters are able to create awareness, buzz, and influence many people at once, regardless of age, gender, or cultural background.

Crafting has been long regarded [since the early 19<sup>th</sup> century in fact, see Parker’s book for this history] as a peripheral, non-capitalist domestic pursuit, and as a simple means of personal fulfillment. From sewing and knitting garments, to communal forms of socialization at quilting bees, knitting circles, and craft fairs, craft has situated itself at the centre of social movements and has encouraged a kind of critical awareness of craft politics and practices that has informed the cultural appreciation of craft in the creative arts.<sup>33</sup> Among those working to redefine traditional modes of craft is the collaborative project *Marginalia*, 2004, which explores the notion of tradition and identity through the exchange of “memory cloths.” This five-year partnership involved Margaret Dragu of British Columbia and Pam Hall of Newfoundland, as they located themselves in the extreme coasts of Canada, facing different oceans, practicing different disciplines and coming from different artistic backgrounds, yet sharing a history of crafting grounded in issues of communities and politics. For *Marginalia*, artists Hall and Dragu constructed tactile snapshots of their daily lives that they would send to each other through a variety of mediums including physical mail, email, and video clips, which would be documented and displayed over the web and in the gallery. Each cloth square was used as a canvas for a variety of media, including flocking, felting, knitting, weaving, and embroidery, in

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<sup>32</sup> Mandy Moore and Leanne Prain. *Yarn Bombing: The Art of Crochet and Knit Graffiti*. Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 2009: 205.

<sup>33</sup> Susan Beal “Craft Fairs Redux” in Faythe Levine and Cortney Heimerl’s *Handmade Nation: The Rise of DIY, Art, Craft, and Design*. New York City: Princeton Architectural Press,

addition to using found objects. Over the course of their experiment, Hall and Dragu produced more than 2,700 squares that focused on notions of home and community, of aging and domesticity, and of global events and political issues (Images 5-7). It is in this way that *Marginalia* is about creating a discourse through the traditional practice of quilting, both between the artists and the audiences who experience the work.<sup>34</sup>

According to Hall, “We are, like most Canadians, exploring how it might be possible to forge deep connection, mutual understanding, and complicity across great distance.”<sup>35</sup>

The imagery depicted on Hall and Dragu’s “memory cloths” is both political and activist in content, facilitating a conversation about craft, communication, and identity, as they attempt to change the way textiles have previously been considered. Although this work may be accessible to many kinds of viewers, it has a particularly Canadian quality to it with references to distance, coastlines, wilderness, and political issues specific to Canada (the displacement of Canadian First Nations, the relationship between French and English speaking communities, etc), making Hall and Dragu’s *Marginalia* a particularly relevant example of contemporary Canadian craft.

### **(Third wave) Feminism and Craft**

Today, Craftivists are tapping in to new media resources that are opening up possibilities for crafters, making virtual craft projects, like Kirsty Robertson’s *Viral Knitting Project* and Pam Hall and Margaret Dragu’s *Marginalia*, a reality for many artists and participants across the globe. Similarly, the Third Wave Feminist Movement

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2008: 121-125.

<sup>34</sup> Pam Hall, “Marginalia,” 2010, accessed 12 April 2012.  
[http://www.pamhall.ca/work\\_with\\_others/Marginalia/index.php](http://www.pamhall.ca/work_with_others/Marginalia/index.php)

<sup>35</sup> Pam Hall, “Marginalia,” 2010, accessed 12 April 2012.

has begun to reinterpret craft in a contemporary way, using new media to exercise an interest in textiles. In the *Journal of Popular Culture* article titled “A Stitch in Time: Third-Wave Feminist: Reclamation of Needled Imagery,” by Ricia Chansky, the author explains:

As Third-Wave feminists explore the power afforded them from the women’s movement, they are moving to reclaim many of the domestic arts that were both devaluated by the predominant masculine society and shunned as associative with oppressive domestic labour by many Second-Wave feminists. Paramount in this reclamation movement is the overwhelming trend among women in their twenties and thirties to utilize needled works as feminist expression.<sup>36</sup>

These women are returning to domestic arts such as knitting and quilting with a sense of strength, viewing the needle as a means of creative outlet that communicates their individual strength and are exercising what Chansky calls “indirect activism.”<sup>37</sup>

Craftivism also plays out in a more direct manner. Several organizations within the craft community also act as non-profit organizations, taking an active role in crucial political and social issues. For example, The Fiber and Craft Entrepreneurial Development Center sponsors a program called Rwanda Knits that sets up knitting collectives for the underprivileged, hoping to bring them closer to economic freedom and a brighter future. Rwanda Knits is a non-government run program based out of Rwanda that started in 2003, where Executive Director Gedeon Bihonzi worked to create a program for women artisans’ seeking economic sustainability with the goal to educate

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[http://www.pamhall.ca/work\\_with\\_others/Marginalia/index.php](http://www.pamhall.ca/work_with_others/Marginalia/index.php)

<sup>36</sup> Ricia Chansky, “A Stitch in Time: Third-Wave Feminist: Reclamation of Needled Imagery,” *The Journal of Popular Culture*, Vol 43, Issue 4, August 2010: 68.

<sup>37</sup> Chansky, 681–700

women and ultimately end war and poverty.<sup>38</sup> Similarly, the Warm Up America! Foundation, in conjunction with the Craft Yarn Council of America, employs crafters to make blankets for victims of natural disasters, battered women's shelters, and the homeless, among other underprivileged communities.<sup>39</sup> Craft has also taken on an important role as an undeniable visual force that allows us to reflect on the injustice taking place in our modern society, as made evident with Washington D.C.'s AIDS Quilt that was spread out over The National Mall in front of the White House to promote equal rights for the LGBT<sup>40</sup> community.<sup>41</sup>

Craft throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century has made both strong and subtle political statements, but it was in the 1990's that this new era of contemporary craft became particularly focused on feminist issues: gender, sexuality, and body image.<sup>42</sup> While 'Second Wave' feminists who actively reclaimed women's art in the 1960s and 1970s made a point to disassociate themselves from traditionally feminine and domestic practices, 'Third Wave Canadian Crafts Federation' feminists hope to salvage what is left of traditional craft and redefine the role that domestic pursuits play in the lives of contemporary women, attempting to overcome lingering stereotypes. With the emergence of 'Third Wave' feminist crafting in the 1990s, and the technological advances that

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<sup>38</sup> *Rwanda Knits*, 2008. Accessed 01 May 2012. <http://www.rwandaknits.org/about.html>

<sup>39</sup> *Warm Up America!*, 2009, accessed 01 May 2012  
<http://www.craftyarnCouncil.com/warmup.html>

<sup>40</sup> LGBT is an acronym that collectively refers to lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender community.

<sup>41</sup> *National Coalition to Save Our Mall Inc.*, 2010, accessed 04 May 2012.  
<http://www.savethemall.org/moments/quilt.html>

<sup>42</sup> Feminist artists throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century have focused on subjects matters of gender, sexuality, and body image in various media since the 1960s. North American women such as Judy Chicago and Joyce Wieland, for example, contributed a body of work to the Craftivist conversation and shaped the way contemporary artists consider political craft. Lilith Adler, "Feminist Art Practices & Political Art: Feminism in Artistic Theory & Practice," *The Art History Archive - Feminist*, 2011. Accessed 14 August 2012.

quickly followed, the craft movement was able to re-emerge as a discipline with great socio-political significance and rich creative worth. It is because of craft's revolutionary components that Craftivism, and the DIY movement, appeals to marginalized groups, or outsiders. It is therefore not a surprise that women who are fighting for LGBT issues and attempting to redefine societal constructs of beauty are helping give a voice to artistic communities, while working with the public to change the way they treat those who are different. During a time when countless women are actively trying to work against culturally regimented ideals of female identity, feminine beauty, and body image, and redefine what it means to be a woman, today's feminist crafters are able to reject these unrealistic beauty ideals that, despite the limitations of mass-media produced ideas about body size, are proving it is possible to reject unrealistic expectations and societal pressures. Recent publications like *Big Girl Knits: 25 Big, Bold Projects Shaped for Real Women with Real Curves*, 2006, written by Jillian Moreno and Amy R. Singer, offer alternatives for plus size crafters with trendy sewing projects specifically tailored for voluptuous women. Similarly, Lacey Jane Roberts article "Put Your Thing Down, Flip It, and Reverse It: Reimagining Craft Identities Using Tactics of Queer Theory," makes an empowering statement for people who feel trapped by the bounds of societal standards propagated by a biased media-based culture, especially in an LGBT context.<sup>43</sup> Feminist, fat, and LGBT crafters are choosing to contribute to relevant discussions about media and the damaging effects of societal pressure and unrealistic expectations by involving the contributions of artists and activists from these communities.

Although both Feminist and Queer studies are a well-established fields with a

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<http://www.arthistoryarchive.com/arthistory/feminist/Feminist-Art-Practices.html>

<sup>43</sup> Maria Elena Buszek, *Extra/Ordinary: Craft and Contemporary Art*, Durham and

wide selection of scholarly work, Fat studies is only an emerging field that members of the Fat Pride community are working to develop. Fat Pride, also called the Size Acceptance Movement, began in 1969 with the National Association to Advance Acceptance in the United States, which worked to promote the acceptance and appreciation of people of all colours, genders, and sizes.<sup>44</sup> Later, the work of the Fat Underground in the 1970s promoted the belief that societal pressure to be thin only perpetuated the hatred and rejection of fat people.<sup>45</sup> Since the 1970s, fat activist groups have built resources for health and fitness, fashion, and anti-discrimination advocacy, and have finally created enough scholarly writing to make fat studies a worthy and accepted field of academic research.<sup>46</sup> Scholar and fat activist Marilyn Wann considers the 2009 publication *The Fat Studies Reader* representative of a big step towards establishing fat studies as an actual field, in addition to recognizing the crossover between fat and other, marginalized, communities. The relationship between queer and fat studies is discussed in *The Fat Studies Reader* article “Double Stigma: Fat Men and their Male Admirers” by Michael Loewy and Nathaniel Pyle. Loewy and Pyle explain that, although there are many things that members of the LGBTQ<sup>47</sup> community have in common with one another politically, there are actually many different queer communities within the greater queer population.<sup>48</sup> Namely, those who belong to both queer and fat subcultures.

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London: Duke University Press, 2011: 243-259

<sup>44</sup> Marilyn Wann, preface to *The Fat Studies Reader* by Esther Rothblum and Sondra Solovay, New York University Press: New York City, 2009: xi.

<sup>45</sup> Dan Fletcher, “Brief History: The Fat-Acceptance Movement,” *Time Magazine*, 2009. <http://www.time.com/time/nation/article/0,8599,1913858,00.html>

<sup>46</sup> Marilyn Wann, preface to *The Fat Studies Reader* by Esther Rothblum and Sondra Solovay, New York University Press: New York City, 2009: xi.

<sup>47</sup> LGBTQ is commonly used acronym for those who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and/or queer. <http://www.lgbtqparentingconnection.ca>

<sup>48</sup> Michael Loewy and Nathaniel Pyle, “Double Stigma: Fat Men and their Male Admirers” in *The Fat Studies Reader* by Esther Rothblum and Sondra Solovay, New York

Scholars believe there is a clear connection between North American queer and fat activists, both of which are situated under the umbrella of feminism.<sup>49</sup> Countless female queer and/or fat activists that I have researched are fighting for the same cause; to give a voice to the marginalized and change the social and political climate of their community, making it easier to be different and proud to be a woman. An artist-based organization called The Queer Crafter Collective: Queering Crafts in the Nation's Capital (based out of Washington, D.C.) is a collective of queer-identified and queer-allied crafters who are dedicated to the promotion and exposure of queer arts, crafts, and the DIY culture. They have organized events during the annual Capital Pride week, as well as maintaining a powerful internet presence, frequently updating a blog that post events, big names in queer craft, and important issues in the LGBT community for the public to see.<sup>50</sup> Today it is not only women who are not complying to ideals of the mainstream, but groups like the Austin, Texas based all-male craft collective *Mascuknit* and Calgary's *Revolutionary Knitting Circle* headed up by men, helping to shift perceptions of craft as exclusively domestic women's work. Craft is an area where queer and straight, men and women, old and young, can band together to make a statement and make an impact on both a local and global level.

Issues of queerness and fatness, and the relationship between the two, are addressed in the work of Canadian Craftivists Cindy Baker, Allyson Mitchell, and Craftivist curator Anthea Black, who have gained notoriety in both the independent craft and academic gallery world. These three notable Canadians have contributed an extensive

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University Press: New York City, 2009: 143.

<sup>49</sup> Abigail Saguy and Anna Ward, "Coming Out as Fat," *Social Psychology Quarterly*, XX(X) 1–23, 2011.

<sup>50</sup> Meaghan O'Malley, *Queer Crafter Collective: Queering Crafts at the Nations Capitol*,

body of work to the area of marginalized art, specifically queer/fat craft. By looking at their work together in this thesis, I contend it is clear that (through both collaborations and independent work) they have created an important dialogue about the relationship between contemporary craft and activism within and beyond Canada, as each of these artists take specific interest in fat and queer studies. It is in this way that their work addresses the marginalization of craft, specifically textiles, within the Canadian art history canon by isolating and analyzing specific aspects of our contemporary society that are also marginalized. Baker, Mitchell, and Black have achieved this by making significant contributions to the development and acceptance of contemporary craft in Canada, not simply through their own art practice, but also as lecturers, writers, and curators.

### **Cindy Baker**

Artist Cindy Baker, based out of Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, is an example of someone who has achieved widespread success and attention for her Craftivist work, documented on her website [populust.ca](http://populust.ca). Baker is a progressive crafter and interdisciplinary artist whose work addresses issues of gender culture, queer theory, and body image. She works mainly (but not exclusively) with textiles and found objects, which is of little consequence to Baker who believes that her art “exists in its experience, and not in its objects.”<sup>51</sup> In each of her projects, Baker attempts to skew traditional context and examine societal standards of beauty and gender, acting in line with countless other Third Wavers as Baker follows in the example of the punk and Riot Grrl

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2010, accessed 10 July 2102. <http://www.queercraftercollective.com>

<sup>51</sup> Cindy Baker, Homepage, 2012, Accessed 23 July 2012 <http://www.populust.ca/cinde/>



movements which fought to reclaim so many aspects of traditional femininity in powerful new ways.

Baker attended the University of Alberta in the early 1990's which, at the time, was considered a formalist, Modernist school. It was then that she formed her ideas on art, and the art world, which propelled her into a more subversive art practice that pushed the boundaries of traditional art. Post-graduation, Baker became even more disillusioned with the "high-art" world, and she struggled to find her place in accordance with the expectations of her faculty and colleagues. In her own words, Baker felt that,

Modernism had done a disservice to art [...] I felt like the public would look at something interesting or beautiful or intriguing, but as soon as they realized it was art, they'd relegate it to that category in their brain, and no longer think about it. So I wanted to make objects, to make ART, that didn't look like art. I wanted to make familiar things that on their own were evocative of certain kinds of emotions and connections. I thought that if people felt empathy for a knit afghan or a crocheted toy because it looked like something their grandmother made, then they would leave themselves open to the content of the work, whether they knew it was art or not.<sup>52</sup>

After leaving the University of Alberta, Baker immediately found her place in the world of multi-disciplinarity; a place where her interest in truly touching people, jogging their emotions and memory bank, or making them feel nostalgic, eventually formed her current Craftivist practices and beliefs. Though she had no formal training in textile arts or performance (media which would not have been considered valid art forms at the University of Alberta at the time), she started focusing her creative efforts on

embroidering, latch hooking, and performing.<sup>53</sup> She brought these talents with her when she moved to Saskatchewan to immerse herself in Saskatoon's thriving, but small, creative community. She quickly found a place for herself as the Programme Coordinator at the AKA Gallery in downtown Saskatoon, a position that she held from 2000 to 2008.

Although Baker quickly became one of the most well-known and respected artists and leaders in Saskatoon's cultural community, it was her own practice that she hoped to focus on full-time. With the help of the Canada Council and various supporters, Baker was able to become a full-time practicing artist in 2008, as her career expanded and garnered the attention of international critics, writers, and curators.<sup>54</sup> When I asked Baker if she found it difficult to gain notoriety as a working artist due to the style of her work, she responded: "Notoriety is such a strange word. I found it very easy for a few years, but I think that was mostly because of working in artist-run centres and knowing how to work the system. I think I've definitely reached a plateau; being a woman is one hurdle - you can only get so far and suddenly it's mostly men up ahead."<sup>55</sup> According to Statistics Canada, as of January 2012, women comprised only 35.4% of all management positions and 22.9% of all senior management positions.<sup>56</sup> These numbers, as Baker points out, are not in women's favour. Despite the odds, Baker was able to successfully immerse herself in western Canada's gallery world, inserting her subversive, political ideas into the otherwise conservative high-art community.

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<sup>52</sup> Baker, email interview, 6 July 2012.

<sup>53</sup> Baker, email interview, 6 July 2012.

<sup>54</sup> Cindy Baker, Press and Promo, 2012, accessed 23 July 2012.

<http://www.populust.ca/cinde/>

<sup>55</sup> Baker, Email interview, 6 July 2012.

<sup>56</sup> Statistics Canada, 07 July 2012, Accessed 20 July 2012.

<http://www5.statcan.gc.ca/cansim/a26?lang=eng&retrLang=eng&id=2820009&paSer=&pattern=&stByVal=2&p1=-1&p2=38&tabMode=dataTable&csid=>

Upon leaving AKA Gallery in 2008, Baker began developing perhaps her most well-known project titled *Personal Appearance*, 2008-2011, which catapulted her to national and international attention for her smart, subversive commentary on contemporary ideas of female beauty. In *Personal Appearance*, Baker designed a mascot replica of herself, making sure the mascot dimensions and features turned out as accurately as possible in order to convey her voice on issues of body image, gender construction, and expected gendered behaviour.<sup>57</sup> In creating a mascot costume of herself, Baker came up with a preliminary sketch (Image 8), which she then sent to a professional mascot making company who she worked alongside during the entire creation and design process until they reached the final product (Image 9). Baker, who is an experienced sewer and designer, found the collaborative process to be an important component of the project, as she had to ensure that her vision was being accurately carried out, while she was constantly being questioned by the company about how her mascot breasts needed to be smaller, her face more womanly, and her wardrobe less revealing. But in the end, Baker was able to create a cuddly, approachable version of herself in the way that she envisioned, allowing her to study people while they, uninhibitedly, studied her.<sup>58</sup>

Baker traveled around the world making “personal appearances” in her mascot uniform with the hope of breaking down social barriers and encouraging physical contact and play. Her self-stated identity as fat, queer, and Canadian are three parts of herself that influence her work as she travels across the globe while taking advantage of the

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<sup>57</sup> Cindy Baker, *Personal Appearance - Performing Self*, 2010, accessed 17 March 2012. <http://www.populust.ca/cinde/PCApaper.pdf>

<sup>58</sup> Cindy Baker, *Personal Appearance - Performing Self*, 2010 accessed 17 March 2012. <http://www.populust.ca/cinde/PCApaper.pdf>

opportunity to watch the world from a safe emotional (and physical) distance, exaggerating and simplifying herself for examination and scrutiny by the public while exemplifying Baker's lived reality in a taboo body. This notion of "performing self" is not primarily about the performance of gender roles, it is about the performance of expectations based on one's persona in any given situation. Baker is commenting on the ways in which one consciously chooses to participate, allowing the chosen things to define them. It is in this way that in our public lives everyone is, to some degree, wearing their own mascot uniform. According to Baker, while wearing the uniform she is "able to discover and unpack what makes me me— or, more accurately, what makes me appear to be me. I walk a thin line between being as truly myself as I can, and following standard guidelines of successful and appropriate mascot behaviour."<sup>59</sup> Baker's mascot enabled her to identify with the parts of herself that allow her to comment on the relativity of beauty, desire, and sexuality, the performance of persona and gender roles. Baker's work is clearly meant to encourage the viewer to question the notions of acceptable behaviour around art, and to challenge traditional relationships between viewer and gallery, while *Personal Appearance* encourages this kind of thought. She explains "I know that because when that kind of impact happens, I am there being impacted just as much. My performance work, and *Personal Appearance* specifically, is so much about that very kind of interaction."<sup>60</sup>

A source of inspiration for Cindy, and arguably countless other young activists, is her friend Marylin Wann, an American scholar and activist well known for her

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<sup>59</sup> Cindy Baker, *Personal Appearance - Performing Self*, 2010, accessed 17 March 2012. <http://www.populust.ca/cinde/PCApaper.pdf>

<sup>60</sup> Baker, email interview, 6 July 2012.

contributions to the Fat Acceptance Movement.<sup>61</sup> As a self-identified member of the "fat pride" community, Wann has played a pivotal role in attempting to convince the public that all people deserve equal opportunity in work, school, and society, regardless of size. Stanford University, where Wann earned her undergraduate degree in linguistics with a focus on literature and her Master's in Modern Thought and Literature, published an article by Nina Schuyler in 2003 that highlighted the work of Wann in the field of Fat Activism. According to Schuyler, "the traditional medical stance [...] is that being overweight itself is a major health problem, increasing the risk of heart disease, diabetes, high blood pressure, high cholesterol levels and sleep apnea"<sup>62</sup> while Wann and her supporters believe that the health culprit is not being fat, but living a sedentary lifestyle and having a poor diet. But physician Denise Bruner claims, "if you are overweight or obese and lose 10 percent of your body weight, your risk of developing health problems diminishes substantially."<sup>63</sup> Despite these claims, Wann is quick to point out that few obesity studies consider the subject's diet and exercise habits. She promotes the idea that it is possible to be fat and fit, citing the findings of Steven N. Blair, director of research at the Cooper Institute for Aerobics Research who found that fit men, whether lean, average, or obese, had similar death rates over an eight year period. Wann encourages fat people to take on a healthy lifestyle, while she herself engages in four to five hour-long

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<sup>61</sup> The Fat Acceptance Movement, also known as "Fat Liberation Movement" and "Size Acceptance Movement" originated in the 1960's and targets the discrimination of size, working with organizations such as the National Association of Fat Acceptance (NAAFA) and the International Size Acceptance Association (ISAA) to reach larger audiences across the globe. Dan Fletcher, "Brief History: The Fat-Acceptance Movement," *Time Magazine*, 31 July 2009, accessed 21 March 2012. <http://www.time.com/time/nation/article/0,8599,1913858,00.html>

<sup>62</sup> Nina Schuyler. "Living Large: Marilyn Wann is fat. Got problem with that?" *Stanford Magazine*, July/August 2003: paragraph 14, accessed 13 April 2012. <http://www.stanfordalumni.org/news/magazine/2003/julaug/features/wann.html>

<sup>63</sup> Schuyler, paragraph 17

workouts a week, eats a primarily vegetarian diet, and insists she's healthy by standard medical measurements: her blood pressure, blood sugar, and cholesterol levels are in the normal range. Because of the injustice that she feels as a fat woman, abnormal by societal standards, Wann frequently invokes the language of the civil rights movements, urging fat people to "come out" and to reclaim the word "fat" (as has been done with "queer") so no one can use it against them. Baker believes there is a huge intersection between the organized fat activist community and the organized queer activist community (especially amongst queer women). "These people are having the same conversations because by and large, they ARE the same people."<sup>64</sup>

In our interview, Baker and I discussed Wann and other fat scholars who use terms like "queering the body" when drawing ties between fat and queer activism. Baker states:

Yes, I agree with a lot of what is said about connections between queerness and fatness. I don't necessarily agree with that summary that the work is intrinsically activist BECAUSE the issues are in the minority, but I believe that because both fat and queer people face incredible social stigma and prejudice as well as violence, work made about those issues has a great possibility of being activist.<sup>65</sup>

Baker is hesitant to assume that making art about being queer and fat is automatically activist, however there are obvious political undertones when commenting on these issues in such a public way. She does, however, consider *her* work activist in that it presents a forum for those who view her work to reconsider body image and notions of marginalization; redefining what it means to be a fat, lesbian feminist. Furthermore, her

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<sup>64</sup> Baker, email interview, 06 July 2012.

<sup>65</sup> Baker, email interview, 06 July 2012.

ability to translate these radical, political ideas through her *Personal Appearance* project, makes Baker's work truly Craftivist. In addition to Baker, the power of the creative community has the ability to bring strength to marginalized identity, giving power to that identity, and Craftivism seems to be a popular outlet for those seeking to have their voices heard.

### **Allyson Mitchell<sup>66</sup>**

Cindy Baker's friend and collaborator is Toronto based crafter Allyson Mitchell. Mitchell works to combine feminism and pop culture to explore contemporary ideas involving sexuality, the body, autobiography, and notions of home, with the use of reclaimed textiles and found objects, and is the cofounder of the Toronto-based grassroots fat-activist organization called Pretty, Porky, and Pissed Off (PPPO). Mitchell and artist Ruby Rowan decided in 1996 to start this formal group of fat artists and performers who would experiment with feminist politics while giving back to the fat community. They started a fat camp for kids that promoted a positive body image instead of dieting, in addition to organizing clothing swaps for big women who could purchase a bag of plus sized clothing for just five dollars.<sup>67</sup> These events created opportunities to resist consumerism, while recognizing the gender and class implications of fat bodies. According to Josée Johnston and Judith Taylor, authors of the article "Feminist Consumerism and Fat Activists" in the *Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, Pretty,

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<sup>66</sup> Mitchell and I had been in contact and arranged to do a Skype interview, unfortunately her mother got sick and she had to cancel the interview. Therefore, a personal interview with Allyson Mitchell will not be included in this thesis, though she was kind enough to direct me to specific articles and press that would help with my research for this section.

<sup>67</sup> Josée Johnston and Judith Taylor, *Feminist Consumerism and Fat Activists*, Signs: *Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 2008: 33 (4).

Porky, and Pissed Off “employed what it conceived of as a third-wave feminist approach to fat activism and community building that explicitly recognized multiple axes of inequality,”<sup>68</sup> by providing community opportunities to address social inequality.

Mitchell employs even more direct practices in her 2004 project *The Fluff Stands Alone*, which explores female vulnerability and power through images of plus-sized nudes donning fur and set against a wilderness landscape, using embroidery to explore issues of body politics and the sexualized wilderness, contributing a unique perspective to the Canadian Craftivist conversation. In this project, Mitchell’s work takes inspiration from the retro pin-up girl and the convention of over sexualizing women, seen in advertisements, historical artwork, and photography from gentlemen’s magazines. In her wall-hanging textile *The Michigan Three* (Image 10), part of *The Fluff Stands Alone* series, Mitchell glorifies three voluptuous, multi-cultural women, classically positioned against a dark, ominous landscape. Similarly, another piece in this series titled *Venus of Nudlesque* (Image 11), portrays a plus-sized woman lounging on a couch, in the style of a classic pin-up, commenting on traditional ideas of size, beauty, and female sexuality.<sup>69</sup> By reworking the classic pin-up, Mitchell is hoping to succeed in her feminist aim of changing the rigid, patriarchal terms by which desire has historically been framed. It is in this way that Mitchell’s *The Fluff Stands Alone* is offering a range of attractive alternatives to what is usually seen in sexy publications. According to Maria Elena Buszek, Craftivist writer and author of “Allyson Mitchell: Desire and Dissent,”

[Mitchell’s] work carries undertones of oppression, both in its source material and in the labour-intensive extremity of its detailed colour and design [...] She opens

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<sup>68</sup> Johnston and Judith Taylor, 33

<sup>69</sup> Sally McKay, “Allyson Mitchell: The Fluff Stands Alone,” *Canadian Art*, 2004: Vol



a door with her low-art, craft aesthetic, her direct manner, her welcoming subjects and fuzzy, yummy imagery. And she invites us to go to painful places, to purge, reclaim and ultimately enjoy ourselves.<sup>70</sup>

*The Fluff Stands Alone* was certainly loaded, and appealed to both craft enthusiasts and feminist intellectuals. In this project it is clear that Mitchell's blurring of craft and fine art in deep-rooted activism is intentional, as she straddles a fine line that is the high-art gallery world, and the low-art crafting community. Mitchell, a celebrated rising craft star and independent activist, appeals to both worlds in this subversive craft exhibition, while speaking to serious issues of body image and the Western idea of beauty, size, and female sexuality.

Both Baker and Mitchell have ties to the fat and queer community in Canada, changing the way the public is considering fatness, feminism, and queer culture. With North American activist groups such as Bevin Branlandingham's Queer Fat Femme, and Ontario's queer-fat-craft event coalition Plump it Up Toronto, activist groups are using textiles to convey their political beliefs regarding the reconsideration of fat history and homophobia. According to Anna-Marie Larson, author of *Boys with Needles*, 2003,

The association of homosexuality with textiles is so deeply ingrained in Western culture that it is nearly archetypal. Male homosexuality is also associated with femininity, and both of these are linked to objects and ideas thought to be superficial and decorative. [...]Once textiles came to be seen as women's work, plain sewing and all forms of fine needlework became subordinate, feminized,

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<sup>70</sup> Maria Elena Buszek, "Allyson Mitchell: Desire and Dissent," in Allyson Mitchell: Lady Sasquatch. Toronto, ON: Paul Petro Contemporary Art, 2005: paragraph 3, accessed 14 April 2012. [http://www.allysonmitchell.com/press/pdfs/maria\\_burszek\\_essay\\_lady\\_sasquatch.pdf](http://www.allysonmitchell.com/press/pdfs/maria_burszek_essay_lady_sasquatch.pdf)

inappropriate occupations for men, or at least straight men.<sup>71</sup>

Larson believes that the feminization of textiles contributes to its second-rate classification, and because homosexuality has been historically viewed as opposing masculinity, it, too, is considered disreputable. However, Craftivists like Mitchell, who continue to foster a dialogue that is focused on re-evaluating social stigmas by challenging historically based stereotypes, will eventually help rid society of these standardized norms.

Issues of gender, sexuality, and beauty, are all subjects approached by Julie Rochefort in her 2011 TEDx presentation titled *Shift the Focus* at Toronto's Ryerson University. Rochefort discusses the idea that fat is scary, and the ways in which the government uses scientific claims to tell us that fat is unhealthy, fat will make you die younger, and that fat should be treated with repulsion. Although obesity is a real health problem that Rochefort suggests we should take seriously, she believes that there is health at every size, and that the preconceived notions based on the body can be extremely damaging to those who do not fit within the ideal weight range. Rochefort claims that society has conditioned us to believe that "fat people are gluttonous, fat people are lazy, fat people are inactive, a fat child is child abuse, a fat parent is a poor role model, [and] a fat citizen is a burden to our straining healthcare system."<sup>72</sup> According to the research done by Rochefort these claims contribute to weight based discrimination because these claims are not always accurate. Weight is not always a health indicator and, though there is more risk at a higher weight, many people are able to

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<sup>71</sup> Anna-Marie Larson, *Boys with Needles*, Textile Museum of Canada and Museum London, Toronto-London: 2003: 99

<sup>72</sup> Julie Rochefort, *Shift the Focus*, TEDx Ryerson University, 2011, accessed 20 April 2012. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V9aQUWew7ag>

find health at a natural weight that works for them. Furthermore, she worries that weight based discrimination promotes anorexia, bulimia, depression, and nutritional deficiencies. Rochefort suggests that it is time we as a society attempt to shift the focus from weight as an indicator of health, and embrace different sizes as the new societal norm.

Allyson Mitchell's projects speak to these points, inspiring those who see her thoughtful, provocative artwork to reconsider their ideas about health, size, and beauty. For Mitchell, fat activism is about changing the way people think about how fat people are treated, thought about, and represented. According to Mitchell in her essay "Pissed Off," part of the 2005 publication *Fat: The Anthropology of an Obsession*, "It is crucial for fat people to see themselves reflected in art - to see our struggles and our beauty. When we stop mindlessly consuming culture and begin to actively participate in it, we craft and change our realities. We can imagine alternative ways of living and being."<sup>73</sup> This sentiment is truly reflected in Mitchell's work, and contributes a very valuable component to the Canadian Craftivist conversation. By situating craft at the intersection of her practice as an artist, activist, and academic, Mitchell constructs objects that bridge a variety of perspectives.

### **Anthea Black: Super String**

Cindy Baker and Allyson Mitchell have found professional success as contemporary Craftivists, and have exhibited widely across Canada. Their participation in the 2006 *Super String* exhibition at the Stride Gallery, curated by Calgarian Anthea Black, was a pivotal moment in their careers as both queer/fat-activists and textile artists.

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<sup>73</sup> Allyson Mitchell, "Pissed Off," *Fat: The Anthropology of an Obsession*, Don Kulick & Anne Meneley (Eds), New York: Penguin, 2005: 224.

Black, an artist and activist in her own right, has been making art and publishing essays for several years, transforming the Craftivist community in her conservative local city. In addition to Baker and Mitchell, *Super String* involved the collaboration of notable Craftivist artists including Kris Lindskoog, Mary-Anne McTrowe, and the Revolutionary Knitting Circle. Lindskoog and McTrowe are Alberta-based contemporary artists whose work with textiles has caught the attention of the fine art public in recent years. Lindskoog's project *I want to do Something Nice for the Planet* (Image 12), and McTrowe's *Cozy* (Image 13) are both featured on the Stride Gallery's *Super String* exhibition package, accessible through the website.<sup>74</sup>

Mary-Anne McTrowe was born and raised in southern Alberta, where she earned her B.F.A. at the University of Lethbridge. She went on to pursue graduate studies at Concordia University in Montreal, where she received her M.F.A. in studio art in 2001. Her work has spanned a variety of different media, but she has worked extensively with textiles. Mary Anne McTrowe's cozies, featured in *Super String*, act as sweaters for common household objects in her crocheted array of abstracted kitchen table items. Kris Lindskoog is a Calgary artist who has exhibited regionally, nationally, and abroad. He attended Grant MacEwan University and graduated from the Alberta College of Art and Design in 2001. Primarily a drawer and installation artist, Lindskoog also has an interest in textiles and weaving. Lindskoog's process of creating *I want to do Something Nice for the Planet*, a friendship bracelet long enough to encircle the earth's equator, was a creative political venture that added something of great value to Black's *Super String*

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<sup>74</sup> Anthea Black, "Super String," Stride Gallery, 2006, accessed 20 December 2012. [http://www.stride.ab.ca/arc/archive\\_2006/super\\_string\\_main/super\\_string\\_sml.pdf](http://www.stride.ab.ca/arc/archive_2006/super_string_main/super_string_sml.pdf)

exhibition.<sup>75</sup>

The Revolutionary Knitting Circle, perhaps the most well-known contributor, has gained notoriety from their practice of knitting as a method of creating useful items outside of corporate models, and initiating discussions about the complexity of contemporary craft. According to curator Anthea Black,

Their practices of public knitting, group knit-ins and interventions at public protests don't require, or ask for, legitimacy within the art gallery system to be considered productive and politically charged acts. In fact, it is the simultaneous unruliness and gentleness of public knitting—when a large roaming group of knitters occupies a public place or place of power with a non-violent action—that creates a constructive dialogue.<sup>76</sup>

Although the word “revolutionary” most often references violence, Calgary’s Revolutionary Knitting Circle works to create a community built on local independence and anti-violent politics. All of the artists in the *Super String* exhibition contribute something unique to Black’s Craftivist framework, as she successfully developed a survey of Canada’s most active and influential contemporary craft artists. Black claims that her camaraderie and professional relationship with many of Canada’s most notable Craftivists, including Cindy Baker and Allyson Mitchell, has enabled her to develop a curatorial baseline that would eventually evolve as a series of conversations and exhibitions between a very broad group of artists, curators, writers, and historians. “There are many people working in the States and Britain who I am also in touch with. In that

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<sup>75</sup> Anthea Black, “Super String,” Stride Gallery, 2006, accessed 20 December 2012. [http://www.stride.ab.ca/arc/archive\\_2006/super\\_string\\_main/super\\_string\\_sml.pdf](http://www.stride.ab.ca/arc/archive_2006/super_string_main/super_string_sml.pdf)

<sup>76</sup> Anthea Black, “Super String,” Stride Gallery, 2006: paragraph 15, accessed 11 January 2012. [http://www.stride.ab.ca/arc/archive\\_2006/super\\_string\\_main/super\\_string\\_sml.pdf](http://www.stride.ab.ca/arc/archive_2006/super_string_main/super_string_sml.pdf)

sense the dialogue on contemporary craft practices reaches across those borders to include people from many parts of the (mostly western) world.”<sup>77</sup>

In 2011, Anthea Black teamed up with fellow Craftivist scholar (and Concordia University graduate) Nicole Burisch to contribute to Maria Elena Buszek’s *Extra Ordinary: Craft and Contemporary Art*. Their essay titled “Craft Hard, Die Free: Radical Curatorial Strategies for Craftivism,” discusses issues of craft in the contemporary art world, more specifically surrounding radical craft and its ties to queer, feminist, and anti-capitalist politics, and the future of curating contemporary craft. Black and Burisch present several different case studies that instigate a conversation about curating craft in formal institutions. They suggest that discovering new, radical approaches to curating political craft will allow more room for critical discussion, creating, and exhibiting craft practices in Canada. In our personal interview, I asked Black why she believed textiles work as such a successful medium for artists who are inspired by political subject matter, she explains: “Because they are simultaneously populist and historically routed to women’s work, and varied cultural practices. We *know* craft, and we also know that craft has been historically contested because of this. Like all non-normative notions of intimacy, in the right hands, craft is a menace to society.”<sup>78</sup>

Black’s interest in queer politics comes across in her video piece titled *Pleasure Craft*, 2011 (Image 14).<sup>79</sup> Black’s *Pleasure Craft* documents a do-it-yourself journey down London’s Thames River. According to Black, “the raft construction combines traditional fine-craft processes with DIY building using recycled and garbage

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<sup>77</sup> Black, email interview, 11 July 2012.

<sup>78</sup> Black, email interview, 11 July 2012.

<sup>79</sup> Anthea Black, “Pleasure Craft,” *Anthea Black*, 2012, accessed 01 September 2012. <http://antheablack.wordpress.com/2012/04/29/pleasure-craft>

materials,"<sup>80</sup> referencing Théodore Géricault's Raft of the Medusa and Mark Twain's Adventures of Huckleberry Finn. It is in this way that Black explains her *Pleasure Craft* becomes a symbol of masculine pursuits and tragic narratives, "[carrying] those associations alongside current intergenerational understandings of the impact of HIV/AIDS on our communities, our pleasure, and our access to public spaces, as well as current theories of queer kinship, performance and utopia building."<sup>81</sup> Black uses this raft, and the idea of a float, to parallel the use of floats in pride parades, while the river speaks to the idea of progression, change, and belonging.<sup>82</sup> It is in this way that Black is connected the work and ideas of Cindy Baker and Allyson Mitchell, each of whom use reclaimed materials and grassroots political ideas to redefine queer identity and the marginalization of the queer, fat, and female community at large.

Currently, Black is working on a 3-channel video piece that documents basket weaving as a way to situate the queer body in relation to local geography and narratives of movement, migration, and the pleasure of making. She just finished a residency in Calgary at the John Snow House library and archives with the Ladies Invitational Deadbeat Society – a group that uses humour and craft and feminist strategies for dialogue on artistic labour, mentorship, artist run history, and general disruption. She is heading to San Francisco in the fall to teach craft theory and feminist methods at the California College of Art. She recently curated a program of queer film and video called *No Place: Queer Geography on Screen*, and is working on a tour of this program, as well

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<sup>80</sup> Anthea Black, "Pleasure Craft," *Anthea Black*, 2012: par. 2, accessed 01 September 2012. <http://antheablack.wordpress.com/2012/04/29/pleasure-craft>

<sup>81</sup> Anthea Black, "Pleasure Craft," *Anthea Black*, 2012: par. 3, accessed 01 September 2012. <http://antheablack.wordpress.com/2012/04/29/pleasure-craft>

<sup>82</sup> Anthea Black, "Pleasure Craft," *Anthea Black*, 2012: par. 3, accessed 01 September 2012. <http://antheablack.wordpress.com/2012/04/29/pleasure-craft>

as expanding the research to become a special topic art history course.<sup>83</sup> Black, like Baker and Mitchell, is continuing to work within the Craftivist discipline, tapping into new modes of displaying and working with issues surrounding craft and politics. The 2006 *Super String* exhibition works as a case study drawing Baker, Mitchell, and Black together, as an example of contemporary Canadian Craftivist work.

## **Conclusion**

Cindy Baker, Allyson Mitchell, and Anthea black each contribute something unique to the Craftivist conversation in Canada, focusing on issues involving queer and fat discourse. As activists and contemporary artists, these three women straddle a fine line between the amateur and fine art worlds, engaging in the radical, feminist community while contributing a body of work that appeals to scholars, curators, and art-world professionals. Although craft is historically linked to women's work it has also for this same reason been historically contested. In the words of Anthea Black "craft is a menace to society,"<sup>84</sup> much like queer and fat subcultures. Although, historically, craft has been situated on the periphery, the contemporary craft community has made enormous strides in recent years, bringing Craftivism to the forefront of cultural communities across North America. The objective now, it seems, is to understand how craft might fit into the mainstream fine art community, and how museums and galleries might adjust their programming to exhibit unconventional media.

I asked Cindy Baker how she thinks we might be able to adjust to a new way of curating and showing activist art, and she suggests that galleries need to hire new curatorial staff with new ideas, stating "I'm always excited by new blood coming into a

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<sup>83</sup> Black, email interview, 11 July 2012.



community to shake things up.”<sup>85</sup> She goes on to suggest that large institutions must make space for performance and activist activities and that galleries need to have a structure which allows them to make political statements without fear of repercussion by their funders, or by a government body that runs them. Baker explains: “Not that a gallery must have or even should have a political mandate, but they need to have a structure that makes room for a diversity of voices, even strong political/social ones.”<sup>86</sup>

Black also had some input on the topic, she states:

I don’t think that galleries need to adjust or cater to interests in Craftivism specifically, because this presumes a clear “inside” and an “outside” in terms of cultural movements and institutional spaces. It’s not black and white like that, and I resist the idea that galleries should operate according to a model where they cater to a consumer base.<sup>87</sup>

But, in broad terms, Black can see the inclusion of craft and Craftivism in many galleries already, from artist-run centers to the Tate Modern.<sup>88</sup> Craft is now being inserted into different venues, big and small, and is a growing field attracting academic and professional interest. Textile activists Cindy Baker, Allyson Mitchell, and Anthea Black are truly making a difference in the world of contemporary craft, redefining the way craft has historically been considered and offering new, productive possibilities for how it might be considered now.

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<sup>84</sup> Black, email interview, 11 July 2012.

<sup>85</sup> Baker, email interview, 06 July 2012

<sup>86</sup> Baker, email interview, 06 July 2012

<sup>87</sup> Black, email interview, 11 July 2012.

<sup>88</sup> In 2011 Craftivist Collective’s Sarah Corbett ran a workshop with Tate Forum, Tate Britain peer-led youth group, in response to the *Art for Whom?* exhibition, curated by Susan Hiller. Craftivist Collective, "Our “Make it up!” workshop at Tate Britain," 24 May 2011, accessed 20 June 2012. <http://craftivist-collective.com/2011/05/24>

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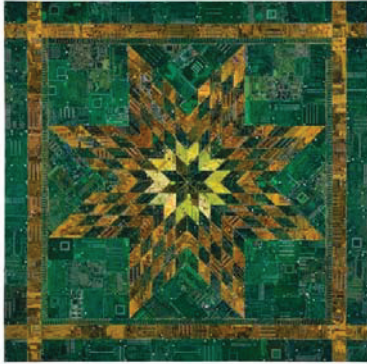
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**Image 4**

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**Image 5**

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**Image 6**

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**Image 7**

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**Image 8**

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**Image 9**

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**Image 10**

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**Image 11**

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**Image 12**

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**Image 13**

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**Image 14**

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