

## Knitting is . . .

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**Sabrina Gschwandtner**

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Sabrina Gschwandtner is a New York-based artist who works with a range of photographic and textile media. Her artwork has been exhibited at various international museums and galleries, including the Museum of Arts and Design, New York and the Fleming Museum, Vermont. Her book *KnitKnit: Profiles and Projects from Knitting's New Wave* was published in September 2007.

### **Abstract**

**Sabrina Gschwandtner discusses her introduction to knitting and the ways in which it has inspired her to write, curate and make sculptural, participatory and interdisciplinary artworks.**

**Keywords:** knitting, film, video, sculpture, participation, community, writing, gift, pleasure, home, media.

When I'm asked what I do I often reply that I'm an artist who works with film, video and textiles. To me the link between the three is instinctive and implicit—media is a textile—and my work expresses why and how I find that to be true. The model for my career as an artist, curator, writer, editor and publisher is knitting.

I started knitting in my final semester of college as an art/semiotics student at Brown University. Two of my roommates were textile students at the Rhode Island School of Design and when they came home late at night, still full of energy, they'd climb onto the yellow stools in our kitchen and chatter and spool yarn toward their needles like addicts. They showed me the basics of knitting and crochet (my mother had taught me when I was eight but I had mostly forgotten) and I was charmed. I started to knit during breaks from the dense theory I was reading for school; stitching, I was completely concentrated on the rhythm of my hands and my frenetic mind would go empty. Within a few months,



Sabrina Gschwandtner, *A History of String*, 2007. Dimensions variable. Hand embroidered cotton floss on cotton fabric, one wooden standing embroidery hoop, zoetrope, video (color; sound, RT = loop). Image courtesy of Sabrina Gschwandtner and the Museum of Arts and Design, New York.

although I had been rigorously devoted to experimental and avant-garde film during all four years of college, handcraft had become my guiding creative format.

I'd knit or crochet something, leave it, come back, rip it up, fix it, wear it, add some other material, hang it up, leave it, project film onto it, record that, edit it, show it, give it away and start over. Even when I'm not working with knitting as my actual medium

or technique I'm still working with it as a single thread out of which emerges a surface, a fabric, a narrative, an outfit, a pattern, a text, a recording, and even, despite my seemingly erratic way of working, a form that encompasses all of these things.

### Knitting is Sculpture

Stitching was how I first conceived of working with film as a sculptural material. For an early project, I sewed onto 35 mm slides that had come back from the lab blurry and unusable as the documentation I'd intended. I found that when the sewn slides were projected, the pattern of the thread and the holes left by the sewing needle became the foreground imagery, instead of the photographic image on the slide. The fan of the slide projector blew the loose threads in all directions, which also caused an unusual kind of animation. The slide projector's automatic focus mechanism struggled to focus on the three-dimensional thread hanging in front of and behind the slides and it sometimes gave up, leaving the viewer to inspect a blurry field in between thread and image. I selected a group of eighty slides, put them into the carousel and let them project for ten seconds each in a continual loop. This was the piece; all the ways in which the slide projector abstracted and activated a non-narrative about space. In conceiving of an approach to filmmaking that was in part defined by the craft ethos of mending and recycling but still devoted to the history of avant-garde cinema, I was able to expand on the potential for the projected image, but place it within the context of handcraft.

## Knitting is Participation

The more I worked with handcraft materials, the more I came to think about the social spaces they implied. I swung from making quiet, sculptural spaces to creating sites of conversation. I realized that knitting had potential to reach out to a different audience and that collective crafting and dialogue could be part of the art experience: it could catalyze a different kind of exchange, outside of traditional art audience boundaries. This reflected a new interest in the public sphere and in creating artwork with social and political components.

I started thinking about handcraft as a site of resistance—to an oppressively commodity-based art market and to an omnipresent, excessive, and high-speed communicative landscape—but also as a site of empowerment and activism. Knitting has, after all, become popular during every major American war.<sup>1</sup> During wartime, knitters have used their craft for civic participation, protest, therapeutic distraction, and even direct attack.<sup>2</sup>

For my piece *Wartime Knitting Circle*, an interactive installation created for the Museum of Arts & Design's 2007 exhibition "Radical Lace and Subversive Knitting," I wanted to exploit these different uses of wartime knitting in order to incite political conversation between different kinds of people. Knitters represent a diverse audience group in terms of age, race, politics and economics (for every knitter using qiviut, spun copper, or other high-priced yarns there is a knitter making clothes out of economic necessity).

The installation consisted of nine machine-knitted photo blankets—which in 2005 became a popular way for families



Sabrina Gschwandtner, *Phototactic Behavior in Sewn Slides*, 2007. Dimensions variable. Cotton thread, 35 mm slides, Kodak Ektapro 9020 slide projector. Image courtesy of Sabrina Gschwandtner.

to honor their relatives who had been deployed to Iraq and Afghanistan—depicting images culled from newspapers, historical societies and library archives that all showed different ways knitting has been and is being used during war. The installation provided a space and materials for knitters to work on wartime knitting projects; it was also a



Artist Sabrina Gschwandtner at Rachael Matthews' house in London (with Rachael's bunny Rfid), 2007. Photo: Jason Spingarn-Koff.

place for them to consider the role their handcraft could play in the Iraq war: Knitters were allowed to bring in their own projects, or they could choose to work on one of four wartime knitting patterns that were provided. The patterns included Lisa Anne Auerbach's Body Count Mittens,<sup>3</sup> which memorialize the number of US soldiers killed at the time the mittens are made; a simple square to be used for blankets, which were either mailed to Afghans for Afghans<sup>4</sup> or to US soldiers recovering in military hospitals; balaclavas to be sent either to troops in Iraq and Afghanistan or to Stitch for Senate, microRevolt.org's war protest project;<sup>5</sup> and USS Cole Slippers, sent to troops on ships. Many of these items were knit by several different people; one knitter would cast on, add a few stitches or rows, then put the project down and later another knitter would advance the piece.

I witnessed several heated arguments at the knitting table and I participated in one of them.

A visitor comment book included in the installation recorded some of what happened when I wasn't there:

Political associations made for a more interesting group knitting experience.

*Devon Thein*

Added a bit to the helmetliner—Kay worked a square, of course. *Ann Shayne*

Knitting in public is a radical act. *Bonnie Gray*

My earliest memories are the clack of knitting needles (on the therapeutic theme)—my grandmother knitted continuously as we sat in the air-raid shelters in Scotland 1942–45. *S. Holton*

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### **Knitting is Community**

When I started KnitKnit in 2002 it was a very personal format for my thinking through the connections between handcraft and fine art. I had been making one-of-a-kind knit and crochet clothes by hand and selling them to boutiques in Manhattan for about



Sabrina Gschwandtner, *Wartime Knitting Circle*, 2007. Dimensions variable. Machine knit cotton, cotton tablecloth, wooden table and chairs, wool yarn, knitting needles, tape measure, scissors, stitch markers and other knitting notions. Image courtesy of Sabrina Gschwandtner and the Museum of Arts and Design, New York. Photo: Alan Klein. Phyllis Rodriguez, sitting with Sabrina, is also pictured in one of the photo blankets on view as part of the installation.

two years when I decided that I wanted to return to art making. I interviewed two friends who had come to handcraft, like me, after studying fine art in college and I put that text into a very rough, photocopied and stapled booklet with spray-painted stencils. KnitKnit became a biannual 'zine that took different formats each time and included contributions by all kinds of artists, designers, writers and makers: producing KnitKnit, distributing it, and organizing KnitKnit launch events and art exhibitions were ways to create a far-flung community of people interested in displacing the boundaries between art and craft.

When I initiated a KnitKnit book in 2006, I purposely situated it as a craft *and* an art endeavor, working with a craft book editor at Abrams, a publishing house that also makes and distributes art books. With the publisher committed to sending the book to major chains, art bookstores and yarn shops, I chose to profile a mix of knitters making clothing, sculpture, graffiti, therapy, protest and performance, juxtaposing political and conceptual gestures with functional and technical achievements.

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## Knitting is Writing

This is why so many knitters blog; they're dauntingly aware that making a sweater is, in a way, writing history. As Jim Drain told me when I was interviewing him for my book, "...knitting is a living tradition—it's physical knowledge of a culture. Knowledge of language dies so quickly. It's awesome to find a sweater and look at the language of it—to see how it's made, what yarn was used, and how problems were solved. A sweater is a form of consciousness."<sup>6</sup>



Sabrina Gschwandtner, *Wartime Knitting Circle*, 2007. Dimensions variable. Machine knit cotton, cotton tablecloth, wooden table and chairs, wool yarn, knitting needles, tape measure, scissors, stitch markers and other knitting notions. Image courtesy of Sabrina Gschwandtner and the Museum of Arts & Design, New York. Photo: Sabrina Gschwandtner.

My 2007 video, *A History of String*, includes a chapter on quipus, which are recording devices from the Inca Empire. Quipus are beautiful bundles of twisted and knotted colored threads that were continuously tied and retied and presumably read by touch and sight. Each part of the quipu—length, color of string, number of knots, and type of knots—is thought to contain meaning. Because the Spanish destroyed as many quipus as they could find during their colonial conquest, only about 600 pre-Columbian examples survive, preserved in private and museum collections. Although quipus are generally believed to contain numerical information, some anthropologists are working to translate them into language, reading them as three-dimensional binary code (similar to the way



Sabrina Gschwandtner, *Wartime Knitting Circle*, 2007. Dimensions variable. Machine knit cotton, cotton tablecloth, wooden table and chairs, wool yarn, knitting needles, tape measure, scissors, stitch markers and other knitting notions. Image courtesy of Sabrina Gschwandtner and the Museum of Arts & Design, New York. Photo: Sabrina Gschwandtner: Women war workers make knitted woolen jackets to cover the glass flasks of number 74 grenades (commonly known as “sticky bombs”) at a factory workshop in Britain.

computers translate eight-bit ASCII into letters and words).<sup>7</sup>

One has to wonder how future generations might read our sweaters if written and photographic records of them are lost.

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**Knitting is Gift**

I co-curated (with Sundown Salon founder Fritz Haeg and producer Sara Grady) a salon called the KnitKnit Sundown Salon in 2004. The daylong event included a meeting of the Church of Craft, an exhibition of art and craft works, a film/video screening, a performance and several impromptu fashion

shows, among other happenings. It wasn't just the quality of the work inside the geodesic dome where the event was held, nor the abundant activities there that made the salon so memorable; it was the complete reciprocity with which the work was given and received. For eight hours on a cold February day in Los Angeles, the KnitKnit Sundown Salon existed as a utopian, three-tiered marvel of handmade wonders and a communal undertaking that gave me hope for the rise of a new social order.<sup>8</sup>

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**Knitting is Pleasure**

As my mentor Leslie Thornton wrote to me by email:

I know I've told you this, many women my age must tell you the same thing, but making things, sewing, designing all of my own clothes, knitting, even making beads, but that was much later, when the train to Providence was driving me crazy, so anyway, I was saying, in this very long sentence, possibly the longest I've ever written in my life, I made things nearly constantly when I wasn't in school, studying, going to rock concerts or sleeping, playing kickball, or riding my bike or picking flowers in our huge beautiful yard or catching frogs, from the age of three on.

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**Knitting is Home**

Through my friend Alysa Nahmias, who had at the time just started her architecture degree at Princeton, I learned of Gottfried Semper; the nineteenth-century architect and theorist who asserted that woven and knitted materials effectively separated inner



and outer life to create what we know as “home.” After a trip to a library, where I read more of his writings, I ended up reprinting one of his texts in *KnitKnit*'s third issue. Brian Sholis, an art critic, wrote an introduction to the issue that included the following lines: “Semper not only rehabilitates arts and crafts, integrating them more fully with our understanding of architecture and other fine arts; he also smudges the line between ‘advanced’ and ‘barbaric’ contributions to culture, reincorporating the contributions of minority citizens to the achievements of ancient Greece, Egypt, and beyond.”<sup>9</sup>

At a “Stitch In” at the Jersey City Art Museum in October 2007 I gave a short talk about war and handcraft. It concluded with a recollection of someone telling me that she thought women did housekeeping/homemaking activities with a kind of irony these days. I asked how the audience felt about that. It really got people going—everyone has an opinion about their home. One by one people spoke up and their responses ranged from detailed explanations of 1970s fiber art to Martha Stewart’s design influence on the marketplace to the agony of making a decision about whether to hire a housekeeper to ideas about post 9/11 nesting.

Swedish critic Love Jönsson put this forward during a recent lecture: avant-garde art proposes an access to the everyday that craft, through its traditional link to utility and material culture, already has. Young artists working with handcraft do not need an art world seal of approval, he said, and in reevaluating the craft tradition they have emphasized that:

- making things by hand is joyful; and

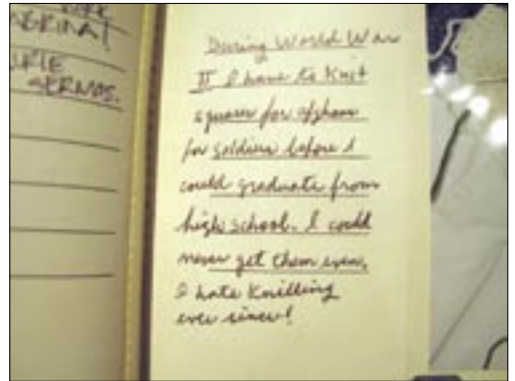
- “the functional object is the most interesting one.”<sup>10</sup>

Whether knitting is high architecture, hip Home Ec, functional art, or a reaction to terrorism, it is helping us think through our notions of domesticity.

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### Knitting is Media

It’s true that people pick up crochet hooks as an escape from the computer. In the face of everything fast and glinting, they want something real—a reinjection of the artisanal or some sense of the integrity of labor. But handcraft will usually send them to the web, which is a contemporary Whole Earth Catalog if you know where to look. When crafters go online searching for instruction



Sabrina Gschwandtner, *Wartime Knitting Circle*, 2007. Dimensions variable. Machine knit cotton, cotton tablecloth, wooden table and chairs, wool yarn, knitting needles, tape measure, scissors, stitch markers and other knitting notions. Image courtesy of Sabrina Gschwandtner and the Museum of Arts and Design, New York. Photo: Sabrina Gschwandtner.



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they usually end up commenting on other crafters' blogs or posting to myriad threads on craft community boards. In contrast to the lifestyle associated with the professional craftsperson of the late twentieth century (which is still the academic craft model), DIY crafters fluidly use technology to market and sell their work and participate in their communities. As artist and knitwear designer Liz Collins has remarked, "putting together a MySpace page is not that different from collaging or quilting. You're using different materials, to different ends, but along the way you're starting with matter and transforming it into something else, using your hands and your brain."<sup>11</sup>

Knitting is a site, and it can and should be used as a form of broadcasting, just like the Internet, television, or any other public media.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Allison Smith, *The Muster* (New York: Public Art Fund, 2007).

<sup>2</sup> Anne MacDonald, *No Idle Hands: the Social History of American Knitting* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1990).

<sup>3</sup> See [www.stealthissweater.com/patterns/mittenpattern.pdf](http://www.stealthissweater.com/patterns/mittenpattern.pdf).

<sup>4</sup> See [www.afghansforafghans.org](http://www.afghansforafghans.org).

<sup>5</sup> See [www.stitchforsenate.us](http://www.stitchforsenate.us).

<sup>6</sup> Sabrina Gschwandtner, *KnitKnit: Profiles and Projects from Knitting's New Wave* (New York: Stewart, Tabori and Chang, 2007), p. 52.

<sup>7</sup> Sabrina Gschwandtner, "A Brief History of String," *Cabinet* 23 (Winter 2006): 38–41.

<sup>8</sup> Fritz Haeg (ed.), *Sundown Salon 2001–06 In Words and Pictures* (New York: Evil Twin Productions, 2008).

<sup>9</sup> Brian Sholis, "Writings of Nineteenth Century Architect Gottfried Semper," in Sabrina Gschwandtner (ed.) *KnitKnit* 3 (January 2004): 1.

<sup>10</sup> Urban FIELD symposium, University College for the Creative Arts, Farnham, England. November 14, 2007.

<sup>11</sup> Julia Bryan-Wilson (ed.), "The Politics of Craft," *Modern Painters* (February/March 2008): 78–83.