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A thematic analysis of the material culture of artwork using knit as an artistic medium

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A Thematic Analysis of the Material Culture of Artwork Using Knit as an Artistic Medium

by

Rebecca E. Schuiling

Thesis

Submitted to the School of Technology Studies

Eastern Michigan University

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Science

in

Apparel, Textiles, and Merchandising

Thesis Committee:

Subhas Ghosh, PhD., Chair

Julie Becker, M.S.

December 12, 2013

Ypsilanti, Michigan
Dedication

To the loving memory, grace and spirit of my beautiful mother, Carol Jean Barnhill, who is always with me in mind, heart, and soul.
Acknowledgements

I wish to thank my advisor, Dr. Subhas Ghosh, for your continuous support throughout my master's studies and thesis research process, and my thesis committee member, Professor Julie Becker, for your help and encouragement.

I would like to express sincere gratitude to my mentor, Dr. Theresa M. Winge, Assistant Professor in Apparel & Textile Design at Michigan State University. Your expertise, insight, motivation, advice and patience throughout this entire process were simply invaluable. The creation of this thesis would not have been possible without your guidance.

I offer heartfelt thanks to the many friends and family who were always asking how my thesis was coming along and if they could help in any way. Particularly, I wish to thank my sister Sarah Holda, and my father Larry Barnhill, for your encouragement and support through the best of times and the difficult challenges. Your love and friendship are true blessings.

Finally, to my husband Nathan Schuiling, I wish to express my profound gratitude for your unequivocal personal support, great strength, remarkable patience, humor and love. This accomplishment could not have been realized without your continuous encouragement throughout my years of study and research. I am deeply grateful for your belief in my endeavors.
Abstract

This study provides insight and understanding into the artists who use knit as a medium to create art. In a historical context, knitting has had very specific purposes. Gradually, knits and knitting played an important role in a political sense at various points in history. Handcrafts in general surface as the focal point in several art movements. Knitting was included in only scant amounts within these art movements. The reasons for this are explored and illuminated in this thesis. I provide specific examples of contemporary artists who utilize knit materials as a medium, focusing on four pieces of artwork: City of Stitches (2003) by Isabel Berglund, Knitting with Loaded Shotguns (Safeties Off) (2008; 2010) by Dave Cole, Cunty First (2008) by Lisa Anne Auerbach, and Weighed Down (2006) by Lindsay Obermeyer.
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Chapter 1: Introduction and Background

Knitting is making a cultural impact. Within a spirit of inclusion, recent developments in culture and society are leading to a reappraisal of the meaning of art, what constitutes art, where we find art, and who makes art. In the *Culture of Knitting* (2007), Jo Turney notes that “knitting is everywhere; therefore, it represents a democracy of objects, so prolific and mundane that [it is] taken for granted” (2007, p. 5). Turney also suggests that knitting is “highly gendered” and is historically associated with women’s work (2007, p. 5). Knitting, traditionally done in the home, is unseen labor. In a patriarchal society, products created in the home are coded as feminine and amateur. Therefore, knitting is relegated to a marginalized status (see Turney, 2007; Winge and Stalp, 2013). A shift in cultural norms is beginning to investigate the “fluidity of gender” by challenging the stereotypical cultural constructs of gender (Turney, 2007, p. 2). In this same vein, artists are questioning the materials used to make art. By using knit as a medium, artists are embracing the creation of structure for medium, its tactile characteristics, and its sociopolitical connotations.

Consider the artist Movana Chen, for example, who knits “body container” sculptures from strips of magazines, where she examines the relationships between human bodies, clothes, media, and communication (personal communication, 2011). She uses reconstructed paper from magazines and other print media to knit her body containers and garments. Chen creates and explores “a dialogue between visual language and the viewers” (Chen’s website, 2012). She is interested in ways people wear identity(ies) and offers viewers experimentation with the notions of constructed identity by wearing the body containers.

Chen’s knit art extends beyond traditional concepts of knitting in its intent and use of materials. The unique position of her art exemplifies the ubiquitous role of knitting and knit
materials as a medium for the construction of art. Accordingly, my thesis focuses on art created by artists who use knit as their medium.

**Purpose of Study**

This study provides insight and understanding into the artists who use knit as a medium to create art. In a historical context, knitting has had very specific purposes. Gradually, knits and knitting played an important role in a political sense at various points in history. Handcrafts in general surface as the focal point in several art movements, which I discuss further in Chapter 2. Knitting was included in only scant amounts within these art movements. The reasons for this are explored and illuminated in this thesis. I provide specific examples of contemporary artists who utilize knit materials as a medium, focusing on four pieces of artwork: *City of Stitches* (2003) by Isabel Berglund, *Knitting with Loaded Shotguns (Safeties Off)* (2008; 2010) by Dave Cole, *Cunty First* (2008) by Lisa Anne Auerbach, and *Weighed Down* (2006) by Lindsay Obermeyer.

**Justification and Significance**

This study’s significance is multidisciplinary as it subsumes dress, art, and visual and material culture. This research study contributes to scholarship in dress studies. Dress scholars would find this study noteworthy because it reveals that knit can be used for artistic expression. Artists will find this study of importance because a structure typically associated with clothing has the potential to be utilized as a vehicle for aesthetic expression.

Knit as a medium for artistic expression is neglected and/or undervalued. During the Arts and Crafts Movement, domestic crafts such as tapestry, needlepoint, weaving, and embroidery were considered to be true art forms; one laborer created objects with true value, by hand. Knitting, also a handcraft, is barely if ever mentioned and certainly was not part of the products created by Morris and Co. During the process art movement, artists like Robert Morris and Eva
Hesse worked with fiber, but their chosen medium was felt, or found objects, most from woven materials. During the feminists’ art movement of the 1970s, artists used fibers to weave and knit (albeit a much lesser extent than weaving) but were not equated with painters who also used woven canvas as a base for artistic expression.

Much of the research regarding knits pertains to advancements in technology of the creation of knits, specifically technical information discussing warp and weft knitting. There are several scholars who have addressed the history of knitting, such as Anne Macdonald (1988), Susan Strawn (2007), and Richard Rutt (1987). Each of these scholars discusses the lack of research and dissemination regarding knits and knitting within Dress Studies. Unfortunately, much of arts and/or craft movements are also lacking in their consideration of knit because it was relegated to the domestic sphere.

**Research Question**

After reviewing the literature about knit and knitting, I discovered a lack of research in the area of knit being recognized as an artistic medium despite its use as such throughout Western history. Subsequently, my research question guiding this study is: What does knit as a medium offer contemporary artists producing material culture?

**Methodology**

I use a qualitative methodology for this research study, relying on E. McClung Fleming’s Material Culture model for guidance in creating a Material Culture Matrix Instrument and resulting analysis. The qualitative study is supported by an extensive literature review and data secured from four individual examples of knit as an art medium. From the data collected in the Material Culture Matrix Instrument about the four selected pieces of artwork (and their respective artists), I reveal themes and findings about knit as an artistic medium in contemporary culture.
Research Design

I am using a qualitative methodology to examine artwork made from knit, using qualitative descriptors to understand the individual artifacts and the use of the medium as a whole. Furthermore, I use the methodology of material culture to explore knit as medium for artistic expression.

I began with a literature review of art periods and craft movements that include knit and knitters and examine contemporary artists who use knit as an artistic medium. After reviewing the pertinent resources, I formed my research question. Then, I found a methodology (i.e., Material Culture) and theories (i.e., Art for Art Sake and Avant Garde) that suited the expectations for a qualitative research study addressing expressions of knit art (discussed in Chapter 2). From this information I created a Material Culture Matrix Instrument for documenting raw data about the art selected. Next, I selected four pieces of knit artwork for the focus of this research study (criteria discussed in Chapter 4). Finally, I analyzed the artwork and resulting data for themes and findings.

Theoretical Framework

My theoretic framework draws on the theories of Art for Art’s Sake (L’art pour l’art) and the Avant Garde. I used both of these theories as guiding concepts by which to set my analysis of historical art movements and the meanings of artworks within those movements. Artists and critics alike have attempted to define the purpose of art within society, and these divergent theories offer context to various meanings. This research study address these discrepancies as it pertains to understanding knit and knitting within contemporary artwork.
Assumptions

Knitting is often discounted as a medium as it is typically associated with clothing and, therefore, considered superficial or surface. Practitioners of knitters are assumed to be female, and, as such, it is deemed a domestic activity and not given as much value as other objects. Knitting is also associated with the private sphere rather than a public sphere. Objects within the public sphere are typically deemed more valuable as they are considered to be salable commodities. Objects crafted within the home carry tones of amateurism because they do not carry institutional accreditations.

Regarding this research study of contemporary knit artists, I expect to find both male and female artists utilizing knit as an artistic medium. Moreover, this research study focuses tightly on four pieces of artwork that reflect the broader themes found among many, if not all, knit artists. I also expect to find that the knit artists are challenging the ideas of practices and mediums within the public and private spheres.

Limitations

In this study, I faced several limitations. First, due to the global nature of this study and my limited finances, I am not conducting interviews with the artists. Second, some of the artwork selected for this study are not currently on display or located in other countries. Thus, I am unable to examine the each individual artifact firsthand; however, those that I could see in person, I did. Also, I accessed multiple images online to examine various perspectives of the work. Third, frequently, there were multiple versions of information about a given work of art. To address this limitation, I attempted to validate information from at least two sources, but often consulting a third and a fourth to assure accuracy.
Bias

My primary bias regarding this research study is that I am knitter. I knit by hand and on the knitting machine. I am interested in knitted structures for clothing and/or art. I find knitting to be therapeutic. I find the material culture to be multifaceted; it may be used to create clothing, accessories, objects for the home, and art. I enjoy the act of creating something. I find power in the ability to create something rather than simply purchasing a product. I want to understand the process of how individual structures are made.

Subsequently, my intimate connection to knit (and art/design) is a two-edged sword. First, as an insider, I am able to offer insights perhaps unavailable or inaccessible to a non-knitter. For example, in Chapter 2, I provide a detailed description of the act of knitting from a maker’s perspective in order to inform the reader as to the laborious activities that the selected artists engaged. Second, as an insider, I am inclined to deeply appreciate the act of knitting and its outcomes. For this study, I strive to be objective in my assessment of the works I analyze.

Scope

This study examines the artwork of several artists who use knit as a medium for artistic expression. This study does not examine the artists but rather the knit artwork of the artists. In Chapter 2, I give examples of several artists who are using knits as a medium. I place their work within themes that I identified to give context to the four focal artists’ work analyzed in Chapter 4. Of the four focal artists, I give three examples of other work and offer an analysis before focusing on a fourth piece that accompanies a material culture instrument. Finally I compare the four focal pieces and identify themes found throughout.
Summary

In Chapter 1, I introduce and outline the knit art research study. In Chapter 2 I analyze the pertinent literature. In Chapter 3, I discuss Material Culture methodology and research design. In Chapter 4, I introduce the four pieces of art that are the focus of this research and reveal the related themes and findings. In Chapter 5, I offer conclusions and future research ideas.
Chapter 2: Review of Literature

In this study, I was drawn to the artists who work with knit as a medium. I engage in a discussion about the production of knit as a material, fabric, and product created from nothingness. Unfortunately, knit has not been recognized as important or noteworthy historically, despite its technical and artistic contributions. The current craft movement acknowledges the importance of knit, and it is this acceptance that encouraged me to examine knit artwork for its material culture.

In this chapter, I introduce artists who use knits as their medium. First, I explore knitting in a historical context, its general lack of documentation and traditional uses. I introduce knit artists and give examples of their work. This analysis includes chosen media, processes, and themes. I include the overt and subvert emotional content of knit as a medium due to its domestic connotations and begin to explore its sociopolitical ramifications. The artists in this chapter give context to the four focal artists introduced in Chapter 4.

I describe the step-by-step process of creating the knitted structure as a means of understanding the complexities of knit as a medium and define terms associated with knitting, as well as the tools and techniques necessary to create the structure.

I then give a brief discussion of dress and the power of cloth (and knit). I focus on the relationships between dress and knit fabric, specifically its connections to dress and its departures from dress.

Next, I examine the historical content for knits as a medium, including past art movements that included handcraft. Specifically, I consider the context and environment established by historic movements such as the Arts and Crafts movement, and I examine the work of female artists in the 1970s and their use of handcrafts and the subsequent reaction of
second wave feminism. I describe and analyze the contemporary craft scene, or DIY and its acceptance by third-wave feminists.

Finally, I explore the intersections of art and craft. I discuss Clement Greenburg’s theory of L’art for L’art, or Art for Art’s Sake, as well as the theory of the Avant Garde. The ethos of these theories will be defined and analyzed and connected to the art vs. craft hierarchy.

**Artists Who Use Knit as a Medium**

In her introduction to *Knitting America*, Susan Strawn notes that the history of hand knitting can be elusive. Indeed, she notes that Richard Rutt, author of the *History of Hand Knitting*, acknowledged that “information about the history of hand knitting in the United States is hard to find” (Strawn, 2007, p. 9). In journals and diaries, knits and knitting are rarely mentioned because of their common existence in everyday life (Strawn, 2007, p. 9). To further the point, Strawn notes that in his text *A History of Textiles* (1979), Kax Wilson dedicated only one page to knitting (Strawn, 2007, p. 20).

Regardless of the lack of documentation, the traditions and techniques of knitting have been passed from generation to generation. Karen Searle, author of *Knitting Art: 150 Innovative Works from 18 Contemporary Artists* (2008), notes that “knitting as a technique has existed for about 900 years as a practical means of making clothing and household textiles; only rarely has it been used conceptually” (2008, p. 9). In the past decade, knitting has experienced revitalization. Knitters are expanding the creative possibilities associated with the knit structure (Searle, 2008, p. 9). The artists who use knit as a medium are “… part of an ancient lineage of women around the globe who have transformed fibers into clothing to protect their families for tens of thousands of years” (Murphy, 2009, p. 4). Within this legacy and its strong ties to the feminine realm, there is an implicit understanding that cloth and clothing have “…the power of creation” (Murphy,
2009, p. 4). The artist, Katherine Coby states, “we ... ignor[e] half of what knitting can do by focusing on making fabric” (Searle, 2008, p. 56). Coby notes that the knit structure holds infinite possibilities due to its organic nature, and this freedom found within the structure will move the art form forward (Searle, 2008, p. 56).

Artists using knit as a medium are diverse; however, many share several commonalities and themes. Notably, there are many artists interested in exploring the historic connection found in knitting as well as the inherent power of creation with knit as a medium. Carolyn Halliday, for example, became interested in the history that is transmitted through handmade, domestic, textiles. As she became more aware of the historical importance of knitting, her artwork became more symbolic of the “feminine legacy in culture and in textiles”; she states, “It feels like a way to claim, or rewrite women’s history” (Searle, 2008, pp. 81-82, see Figure 1). Artist Helen Pynor, who knits with human hair, has stated that as she knits she wonders about the lives and personal history tied up, metaphorically, in the strands (Nargi, 2011, p. 70). Liz Collins, an artist and educator who uses knitting machines, yarn, and other materials to create textiles, clothing, performances, and installations, has found that she is “motivated by the act and history of knitting itself, [as it is] richly intertwined with gender and labor” (Collins, n.d.).
The social or communal aspects of knitting are of interest to artist Shane Waltener. In a knitting circle, each stitch represents a thought. The resulting fabric structure then becomes a document that traces the history of the event (Shu & Magliaro, 2007, p. 160). Each of these artists draws on the legacy and long history of knits to speak to issues in contemporary culture.

Artist Jim Drain is interested in the semiotics of knit and the ability of the stitches in the fabric to create images in syntax. Cloth can be “read” by the viewer as it provides a place for
social messages and encoded languages (Barber, 1994, p. 149). Drain explores the connection to technology as well as the inclusion of media not traditionally used by artists. In an interview for *KnitKnit* (2008), Drain states,

> 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.” (Gschwandtner 2008, p. 274)

Drain has contextualized his “nerdy fascinations” with historical technologies such as the Atari or Commodore 64 by likening the pixels of the video game to the stitches in knits (Mason, 2010; see Figure 2).

![Image of knitted sweaters inspired by video games](image.png)

*Figure 2. Video game-inspired sweaters. Jim Drain Limited Edition Sweaters.*

The notion of actively disengaging from the technologically saturated modern world is appealing to many artists. By engaging in a slow process of creation like knitting, artists feel connected to the medium through its therapeutic and meditative qualities. Of the therapeutic qualities of knitting, Strawn states, “[k]nitting is simple enough to relax the mind and complex
enough to challenge the intellect” (2007, p. 185). Downey and Conway agree: “[m]aking things with the hand is intelligent, tempered, worthwhile, and to some people, even therapeutic” (2007, p. 10, see Johnson, & Wilson, 2005). Knitting is quite often an intimate act done with repetitive motions, much like a mantra. The feel of the yarn in the hand can be soothing, the repetition of sound as in the clicking of the needles are tactile and auditory examples of this experience. The actual process and the act of knitting is crucial for Pynor, likening “the process to a form of moving meditation” (Nargi 2011, p.71). Inspired by the slow movement, Waltener believes that control over our daily lives can be regained by engaging in a process that has a long production time, such as knitting (Shu & Magliaro, 2007, p. 160, see Wigginton, 1972). Indeed, “while the pace of life has quickened and fashions constantly change, the actual techniques of knitting have remained virtually unchanged” (Macdonald, 1988, p. 360).

Some are connected because of knitting’s associations with the everyday. Artist Francoise Dupre is inspired by Michel de Certeau’s concept of art making in the everyday (McFadden, 2007, p. 88). Certeau investigates the unconscious and repetitive actions of everyday life (de Certeau, 1984). This concept can be connected to the act of knitting through its repetitious actions. Dupre states “My work aims to celebrate the creative skills that are invisible, marginal or being lost through socio economic changes and globalization” (McFadden, 2007, p. 88).

Collins and Waltener explore the performative and collaborative possibilities of knit in public, in itself subversion. In their article, Fabricating Activism: Craft-Work, Popular Culture, Gender, Jack Z. Bratich and Heidi M. Brush state “[k]nitting in public is out of place; it turns the ‘interiority of the domestic outward, exposing that which exists within enclosures,’” or what
Freud called *unheimlich* (when interiors become exteriorized; 2011, p. 237). Bratich and Brush note that the act of knitting in public “rip[s] open the enclosure of the domestic space to public Consumption” (2011, p. 237). Waltener constructs and participates in knitting-based performances and guerilla knitting projects, and organizes group art projects where one large piece is worked (McFadden, 2007, p. 92). His work is process focused, centered on the “exchange between participants rather than the actual piece” (Shu & Magliaro, 2007, p. 160).

*Knitted and Looped* (2011) is a collaborative instillation. Waltener demonstrates various techniques and material manipulations that students [and the public] utilize to knit, adding their own unique design ideas to the existing structure (Bray, 2011).

Collin’s ongoing “performance and site specific project,” titled *Knitting Nation*, “utilizes a team of uniformed machine knitters to build large-scale fabric installations. The project functions as a commentary on how humans interact with machines, global manufacturing, trade and labor, brand iconography, and fashion” (Collins, n.d., see Figure 3). An iteration of this project, *Phase 4: Pride*, took place “over 6 hours, knitters recreated an homage to the original rainbow pride flag,” a symbol of the gay community.
Many artists seek to challenge the norms and standards established within a culture. Minahan and Cox suggest that knitting is being utilized as a subversive vehicle for cultural commentary on gender, politics, and the commoditization of society and technology (2007). Artist Freddie Robbins creates work that focuses on the challenging of stereotypes associated with knitting. Her 2002 work, “Craft Kills,” is a self-portrait of the artist as St. Sebastian being martyred by knitting needles instead of arrows. “It’s a play on how people see craft and textiles, particularly knitting and how it is seen as passive. I’m interested in seeing how it would be if knitting was seen as very violent” (McFadden, 2007, p. 26; see Figure 4). Pynor challenged the viewer by her choice of material, human hair. “Pynor knits sculptures of human organs and body parts using yarn created by strandng together hair sourced from a dealer who supplies wig makers” (Nargi, 2011, p. 69; see Figure 5). “With the knitted organs there is an element of paradox. Hair is a symbol of beauty, but is being used to represent internal organs, often considered ugly and distasteful” (Nargi, n.d.). Furthermore, the notion of knitting with someone
else’s hair confronts the viewer’s comfort level and challenges the idea of acceptable mediums. Yarn created from animal hair is traditionally accepted as a standard knitting material. Why then does the use of human hair, also a protein filament, seem a subversion of material? Rather than being a female hobby, crafting can be interpreted as subversive (Winge & Stalp, 2013).

*Figure 4.* Self-portrait of the artist (similar to Saint Sebastian) stabbed with knitting needles. Freddie Robbins, _Craft Kills_ (2002).
Many scholars have noted the “marginalization of craft on account of societal infatuation with modernity and progress” (Shu & Magliaro, 2007, p. 160). Artist and author Sabrina Gschwandtner notes the interest in using handcraft to create artwork with “social and political components” as a form of “activism [against the] omnipresent, excessive, and high-speed communicative landscape” (Gschwandtner, 2008, p. 273). “Crafting creates slow space, a speed at odds with the imperative toward hyperproduction” (Bratich & Brush, 2011, p. 236).

Frequently, artists using the medium of knit are questioning stereotypical notions of gender and sex, as a protest to war, as an alternative to mass consumption and rampant consumerism, and to bring awareness to environmental issues. In her article *Feminism, Activism, and Knitting: Are the Fibre Arts a Viable Mode for Feminist Political Action*, Beth Ann Pentney states that “[k]nitting may be used for feminist goals because it is grounded in a gendered cultural practice that can readily be politicized for different purposes by different groups and individuals” (2008, para. 3). Mark Newport, Karen Searle, Liz Collins, and Shane Waltener are all influenced by gender and the assumed roles traditionally assigned with gender. Waltener says
that his work is very much influenced by his mother, although she never taught him how to knit, stating, “…boys just didn’t do this” (Shu & Magliaro, 2007, p. 160.)

Searle describes her art “as a metaphor for women’s’ work and women’s lives; all involve scavenging, mending, piecing-together, and adorning” (Searle n.d.). *Body Bags*, for example, represents the aging female form in a society fixated on youth and the idea of the body as a container (Searle, 2008; see Figure 6). Searle’s art emulates the body of an older woman that confronts the viewer, juxtaposed against the reality for many women in Western culture.

![Image of Body Bag III](image)

*Figure 6.* Karen Searle’s *Body Bag III* is made from knit burlap (2008).

Mark Newport hand-knits costumes such as Batman, Iron Man, Spiderman, and the Rawhide Kid. For Newport, “These characters are childhood memories of the ultimate man—the Dad every boy wants, the man every boy wants to grow up to be” (Newport, n.d.). Newport’s artist website states, “The costumes combine the binaries of masculine and feminine. They are “heroic, protective, ultra masculine” yet feminine with the “protective gestures of my mother –
hand knit acrylic sweaters meant to keep me safe from New England winters” (Newport, n.d.; see Figure 8). Newport’s costumes question how different stereotypes of men relate to an activity like knitting by juxtaposing a traditional feminine activity with the hyper masculine ideal of the superhero.

Figure 7. Mark Newport’s Captain America is from a series of knit superheroes (2007).

Knitting has a reoccurring connection to war. “Knitting has become popular during every major American war” (Gschwandtner, 2008, p. 273). In the traditional binary of man in battle and women at home, “during wartime, [female] knitters have used their craft for civic participation and protest” (Gschwandtner, 2008, p. 273). Indeed, The Daughters of Liberty
knitted as a form of resistance to “the strictures of colonial ideology” (Whittaker & Padovani, C., 2012, p. 172). In addition, “[w]omen of the American colonies fought for independence by establishing spinning groups and spinning their own yarn for their knitting to make sure Americans were clothed with the work of their own hands” (Strawn, 2007, p. 15).

Sabrina Gschwandtner organized the Wartime Knitting Circle, an interactive performance within the Radical Lace and Subversive Knitting exhibition (2007), featuring 27 international artists at the Museum of Art and Design in New York City. Her exhibition was surrounded by large machine-knit black and white images based on photographs of World War I soldiers knitting, women knitting hand grenade covers for World War II soldiers, and Vietnam War protesters knitting (McFadden, 2007).

Cat Mazza has staged large scale knitting projects to protest exploitation of labor in sweatshops (McFadden, 2009). Her work titled Knit for Defense (2012) is an exploration using craft to highlight issues of labor and combat. “Knit motifs of tanks, planes, ships and drones animate a cinema of combat, reflecting on war from a pixelated distance” (Knit for Defense, 2012).

In addition to commentary on war, artists have made sociopolitical statements to address environmental issues. In her work Mime for the Gulf War Birds, (2008) Coby knit black plastic bags (a petroleum product and nonrenewable resource) to represent birds trapped in an oil spill (Searle, 2008; see Figure 8). Coby’s piece speaks to the various costs of oil that often result in war and death.

Knit artists are utilizing a historical medium in unorthodox ways to explore, comment upon, and challenge societal norms in an effort to promote new ways of thinking (Whittaker & Padovani, 2012). In addition, rather than purchasing their medium, these artists are creating their
medium and then using that material conceptually. Through the subversion of traditional binaries, knitting is being redeployed as a medium for sociopolitical expression (see Pentney).

To further illuminate the discussion of knit as an art form, in the following section I describe the knitted fabric (or medium) and the tools necessary for the creation of the structure. I define the terms associated with knitting and describe the various styles of knitting.

Figure 8. Katherine Coby’s *Mime for the Gulf War Birds* is a metaphor for an oil spill and its impact on the natural environment (2008).

**What is Knitting?**

At its most basic, knit fabric is a series of loops created most commonly with two needles and yarn or string. Of yarn, Parkes states that “[i]t’s a simple concept, twisting fibers together into a continuous thread of yarn, but the variety of fibers, blends and spins is truly infinite” (Parkes, 2007, p. 7).

The rows of loops that create the width of the fabric are called “courses,” and the columns of loops along the length of the fabric are “wales.” There are two main styles of knitting. Continental knitting is created with the yarn held in the left hand. English knitting is a style of western knitting where the yarn is held in the right hand. “The two methods are often
associated with regional knitting traditions” (Hiatt-Hemmons, 2012, p. 3). There are two basic stitches used to build the knit structure, “knit” and “purl.”

The knitting needle is the tool used to knit, consisting of a tapered end used to penetrate each stitch and a long shaft that holds the active stitches and a “stopper” on the opposite end, which keeps the live stitches from falling off the needle. The width of the needles will define the size of the stitch, which ultimately will define the appearance and coverability of the structure. Double pointed needles are used for circular knitting. These are depicted in a number of 14th century oil paintings, typically called *Knitting Madonnas*, depicting Mary knitting with double-pointed needles (Rutt, 2003), a rare occurrence of documentation. Circular needles are used for working projects in the round, such as a hat or socks, and typically have shorter shafts with a flexible cord connecting the two needles.

To begin, regardless the type of needles (straight, circular, or hooked) one needle is held in each hand with points upward. There are myriad methods of “casting (yarn) on” to one needle. I use the long tail cast on and the English method of knitting. To create the knit stitch, hold the needle with the stitches cast on in your left hand. The stitches have a crown, or top, where the yarn is looped over the needle, and legs on either side of the needle (left and right). Then, insert the right needle into the left leg, so the needle in your right hand is now under the needle in your left hand. When working the knit stitch the yarn should be in the back of the needles. The style in which you hold your hands while knitting varies from knitter to knitter. Essentially the most important factors are comfort and the ability to keep tension on the yarn. I hold the yarn with my pinky finger curved to clasp and keep a tension on the yarn. Wrap the yarn around the needle and then pull the new stitch that you have created through the old stitch that is on the left needle and transfer that stitch to the right hand needle. To create a purl stitch, the yarn needs to be in front of
the needle, and the right needle is inserted into the left leg. The right needle goes on top of the left needle, and the yarn is wrapped from right to left; then the new loop is pulled through the old loop and transferred to the right needle.

The resulting fabric, when compared to woven, is a fabric that can offer more movement, mobility, elasticity, warmth, and insulation. It has superior draping ability, which lends itself well to hanging not only on the body but also in a gallery. Knitting hugs and molds around the body. In fact according to Hamlyn, in her article *Freud, Fabric, Fetish* (2003), “Fabric is malleable. It lends itself to wrapping, draping, and swathing. It restricts direct access to the naked object but also has the ability to suggest, enhance and draw attention to what it covers. It can be a powerful symbol alone or on what it adorns” (2003, p. 11). The knitted fabric can be seen as fetish, in particular because of its malleability to the body. In short, knitting has superior abilities that may be manipulated into infinite forms.

**Dress Studies and Knit**

As previously stated, knit has experienced very limited discussion in dress studies; for this reason, it is necessary to draw out those discussions and illuminate them where possible. Furthermore, the relationships between dress and knit fabric and even the domestic art of knitting are significant. Still, the gaps in knowledge between dress studies and art are noteworthy and will be addressed in this research study.

Dress is defined as any body modification or supplement (Eicher, 2008, pp. 4-5). This definition is particularly useful when discussing the use of knit as an artistic medium as opposed to its position as the primary type of fabric (construction) used for clothing in Western culture. Notably dress falls into a category similar to craft; it is often perceived as “the other.”
Subsequently, knit’s close association with dress, being one of the two primary structures used to cloth the body, further marginalizes the material as an artistic medium. As Turney notes, “knitting is often relegated to the kitsch and the banal” (Turney, 2009, p. 3), similar to clothing and dress. In this section, I discuss the position of knit because of its connections and departures from clothing or dress.

Knit as an artistic medium has powers beyond paint and marble because of its association with clothing and as a fabric of everyday life. Many scholars have commented on the power of cloth. Peter Stallybrass states “Cloth … [is] powerfully associated with memory, or to put it more strongly, cloth is memory” (Stallybrass, 2012, p. 70). Michael Carter states “[c]lothes are the outward manifestation, the external condition, of our sociality [and] our ideas” (2003, p. 6). Indeed, Sophie Woodward notes that the “wardrobe is an externalization of selfhood” (2005, p. 22; see Gell, 1998).

As previously discussed, the knit fabric is laden with historical and feminine connections. In a more contemporary context, the memories associated with knit could also include the t-shirt souvenir from a treasured family vacation; the leotard worn to a dance recital; the Goodwill reindeer sweater worn in irony (or pride); the scarf that was a first knitting project; and a baby blanket knit by a new mother. The knit fabric is the preferred choice for many who want to put on their “comfortable clothes.” Unlike woven fabrics, which due to their very nature stand off the body slightly and require manipulation to fit the body closely, knits are very much a second skin. Knits receive the imprint of our bodies, moving with the body rather than constricting. In Western society in particular, as bodies get larger many begin to wear knit. Alternatively, as people require more freedom of movement and mobility, knit is the structure best suited for this purpose. As formal attire diminishes (i.e., woven fabric is typically associated with formal
silhouettes), knit fabric becomes more dominant. The familiarity with the medium, even if only in a tactile sense, makes artwork created from knit accessible for the viewer. Everyone has intimate experience with the material. Therefore, knit is a medium that is understood by many and can bring art into the everyday simply by its structure.

*Clothing as Material Culture* (2005) by Susanne Kuchler and Daniel Miller is an anthology of research focusing on the social patterns and behaviors associated with fabric/cloth and clothing. Most notably Kuchler’s and Miller’s book has only one discussion about knit—Ludhiana knitted hosiery (2005, pp. 99-101). In this study, I utilize Material Culture methodology and theory to fill in the gaps about knit as an artistic medium within dress studies literature. I also concentrate on understanding knit as an artistic medium.

Dress studies is lacking in its research and discussions about knit. Unfortunately, much of arts and/or craft movements are also lacking in their consideration of knit. Subsequently, in the following sections, I outline the historical art/crafts movements pertinent to this research study.

**The Arts and Crafts Movement**

The Arts and Crafts movement encouraged the creation of “hand made goods in place of machine uniformity” (Cummings & Kaplan, 1991, p. 9) and was founded in pursuit of a holistic lifestyle (Fariello, 2011). The ethos of the Arts and Crafts Movement centered on well-designed affordable everyday objects that were part of a larger social reform (Cummings & Kaplan, 1991, p. 7), essentially a creation of a utopic society through the revival of handcraft. The movement began in the 1880s and continued through 1910 (Racz, 2009), “communicating and promoting the value of the handmade, training crafters, supporting formal handcraft education and the selling of handcrafts” (Turney, 2007).
As Dawkins stated, “Crafts and craftsmanship have a long history of being positioned as a moral corrective to alienating forms of industrial production” (Dawkins, 2011, p. 261; see also Buszek, 2011). The mass consumption and consumer culture spurred by the Industrial Revolution completely altered the making process; “Rather than an individual craftsmen working holistically on a product, factory workers completed a single operation in a series, a system known as division of labor” (Fariello, 2011, p. 27). As a result of this system, “standardization, efficiency and quantity were favored over aesthetic expression and craftsmanship” (Fariello, 2011, p. 27). Several scholars have likened this system to “man being turned into a machine” (Brunton, 2001, p. 220) or the “laborer an appendage to a machine” (Lemert, 1999, p. 41). Many grew “disenchanted by rapid industrialization” (Todd, 2004, p. 11) and the “epidemic of over production” (Lemert, 1999, p. 40). Theorists and designers “stressed the need to restore the dignity of labor” (Todd, 2004, p. 30). In his manuscript “Estranged Labor” (1844), Karl Marx states:

The devaluation of the world of men is in direct proportion to the increasing value of the world of things. Labor produces not only commodities; it produces itself and the worker as a commodity, Labor is not his own, but someone else’s. (Lemert, 1991, p. 31)

Mass produced products, therefore, remove the maker, and accordingly, “… the production is to dehumanize the object” (Turney, 2009, p. 80).

The Industrial Revolution also “severed the natural link with rural crafts and regional styles” (Racz, 2009, p. 9). John Ruskin, social critic and writer, advocated for a “Back to the Land Movement” where buildings were crafted of local material and landscape provided sources of inspiration (Brunton, 2001, p. 221). The rural and primitive were idealized, workshops in idyllic rural surroundings promoted art as a way of life, art societies were established to meet the
needs of the expanding design profession, The Art Workers’ Guild was a forum for the exchange of ideas, and the settlement house movement provided accommodation and group craft classes (Cummings & Kaplan, 1991).

A model built upon the philosophy of Morris and Ruskin and Transcendentalism was initiated in America during the formative years (late 19th century) of the Arts and Crafts movement (Clancy, 2009). However, the Arts and Crafts movement had an uneasy connection to the Industrial Revolution. Indeed, “the movement would only flourish in an age of prosperity created through industrial achievement. William Morris’s life, dedicated to the pursuit of the decorative arts as a reaction against industrialization, was financed by his father, [who was] an industrialist” (Dore, 1990, p. 7). In addition, there was an “obvious contradiction between the ideal of a democratic art and the idle privileged classes who formed his patrons” (Cummings & Kaplan, 1991, p. 18).

The Industrial Revolution also perpetuated gendered stereotypes; “Industrialization created a more explicit notion of separate gendered spaces” (Brunton, 2001, p. 224). Men worked in public; their time and labor was time clock-based and separate from the domestic sphere. In contrast, women worked in private, within the home while “tending to a multiplicity of roles, including familial commitments as well as the creation of craft without a need for a special workshop or studio” (Brunton, 2001, p. 225). Men in the Arts and Craft’s Movement worked with multiple media including architecture, furniture, stained glass, brass, leather, book binding and illustration, rugs, carpets, hand printed wall papers, vase decoration, and fan painting (Dore, 1990). In addition, they created weavings, tapestries, embroideries, and needlework. Countless women handcrafters at this time possessed similar skill sets to their male counterparts (Diadick-Casselman, 2008). Still, the perception of amateurism made feminine crafts unworthy of
professional designation, and a lingering perception that man possessed “inherently superior abilities persisted” (Diadick-Casselman, 2008, p. 16). Women were not permitted to be full members by the brotherhood of craftsmen, and “women who were art school trained were confined to the pursuit of craft as a pastime or as philanthropy or to crafts considered appropriate for their sex” (Cummings & Kaplan, 1991, p. 18). Morris and other men had advantageous social alignments to the “upper echelons of British society,” which left little room for women in the “contested space of artistic legitimacy” (Casselman, 2008, p. 17), only perpetuating a patriarchal ideology.

Similar to the Arts and Crafts movement, the Bauhaus movement aimed to bridge the gap between art, design, and industry. It should be noted that knitting was not included in the creations and products of the Arts and Crafts or Bauhaus movements. However, Elissa Auther states, “[w]eaving enjoyed parity with fine arts, representing an important moment in the elevation of fiber in the aesthetic hierarchy” (2010, p. xxiii). The exact reason for the inclusion of weaving and other domestic arts, while knit was neglected, is unclear. Was it knit’s close association with domestic spheres? Or perhaps, the medium lacked qualities of interest to artists of the period?

Crafts in the 1960s and 1970s


Unlike past movements, “[m]any artists were drawn to fiber in the 1960s and 1970s due to the material’s aesthetic possibility, structural potential and semiotic powers” (Auther, 2010, p.
Accordingly, Elissa Auther states in *String, Felt, Thread, The Hierarchy of Art and Craft in American Art* (2010) that during the 1960s and 1970s:

… challenges to notions of what is art included appropriation of commercial design in the work of Pop artists, the adoption of industrial materials by minimalist sculptors, the introduction of new media such as video, and the emergence of performance, installation and activist based work, all of which gave rise to previously inconceivable forms of content and modes of reception that undermined the concept of the work of art as pure, static and rigorously self-referential. These contestations questioned the boundaries between art and everyday life and had strong associations with “women’s work.”

(Auther, 2010, p. xxi)

Furthermore, the 1970s era of craft conjures images of cozy, macramé potholders, kaftans, and cork sandals (Jeffries, 2011). Fiber artists of the 1960s and 70s, however, disregarded the low cultural connotations variously attached to craft such as utility, femininity, domesticity, amateurism, and “primitiveness.” Instead, they saw in these techniques the potential for artistic expression (Auther, 2010, p. 14). They understood the potential for craft to “defamiliarize cultural expectation and to create new modes of visual appreciation and new cultural interpretations” (Auther, 2010, p. 15).

Associated with Process or Post Minimalist Art, Eva Hesse and Robert Morris used rope, felt, and other industrial materials to create sculpture (Auther, 2010, p. xxii). Feminist artists such as Faith Ringgold, Miriam Schapiro, Harmony Hammond and Judy Chicago, Sheila Hicks and Claire Zeisler openly embraced the medium’s relationship to craft for both “aesthetic and social oppositional ends and to put pressure on the dominant definition of art” (Auther, 2010, p. xxii).
DIY (Do It Yourself)

In her book, *Contemporary Crafts* (2009) Imogen Racz suggests that “craft is more important now than at any time since the Industrial Revolution” (p. 1). An “indie” crafting community with their own brand of utopia is emerging. The current handcraft movement is connected to female handcrafters of the past and is redefining the historical and contemporary significance of domesticity in society (Myzelev, 2009). DIY (Do It Yourself) replicates, in part, ethos of the Arts and Crafts Movement and the 1970s craft movement.

In her 2011 article, “Do-It-Yourself: The Precarious Work and Postfeminist Politics of Handmaking (in) Detroit,” Nicole Dawkins quotes Sabrina Gschwandtner, the creator of the “new-wave” knitting zine, *KnitKnit*. Gschwandtner argues that the knitting resurgence reveals a link to the past and keeps us human in these technologically suffocating times. “Handmade things are more interesting, because they absorb some of the personality of the person making them.” The core values of “autonomy, choice and self-improvement” are encoded in the current handcraft movement (Dawkins, 2011, p. 261). DIY (Do It Yourself) “has embraced the commercial and capitalistic ethos of modern society and has positioned itself as a witty, nostalgically ironic and somewhat aloof response to what the American craft movement represented in the 70s” (Stevens, 2011, p. 52).

“The current political climate in America is harkening a new ‘back-to-basics’ movement. Urban farming, artist collectives, hackerspaces, farmers’ markets, craft fairs and a resurgence of the domestic arts (knitting, sewing, needlepoint, and so on) are all a part of this narrative,” claims Dawkins (2011, p. 261). Many of the individuals involved in the contemporary handcraft movements identify themselves not only as artists but also as advocates of a form of social activism referred to as “craftivism” (Williams, 2011, p. 303). Betsy Greer, who is credited with
coining the term *craftivism* in 2003, argues a guiltless embrace of “home economics” as a choice rather than a requirement associated with either their biological sex or their expected gender roles (Williams, 2011, p. 303). Contemporary craft takes a revolutionary role for women (and men). Instead of knitting, weaving, or sewing because we have to, with all the technology that is available, people are choosing to; “it is in this choice (to spend one’s leisure time making something that could be easily purchased) where there is resistance,” says Williams (2011, p. 303).

According to Myzelev, “Craft provides a conceptual link and helps to redefine the historical and contemporary significance of domesticity in society” (2009). According to Pentney in her 2008 article, “Feminism, activism, and knitting: Are the fibre arts a viable mode for feminist political action,” The Riot Grrrl movement, “which emerged out of the punk scene in the United States in the early 1990s, and also influenced the trajectory of third-wave feminist politics, aesthetics, music, and engagement with popular culture, has also left its mark on contemporary DIY culture, and the effects can be seen in contemporary knitting” (Pentney, 2008, para. 5). Riot Grrrls produced zines that discussed knitting and encouraged creativity in spite of artistic skill or training. The emphasis was placed on the creation of personalized, one-of-a-kind objects and a reliance on a word-of-mouth network for sustainability in a marginal marketplace (Pentney, 2008, para. 5).

The process of bringing domestic craft (feminine) into the economic (masculine) realm has been positioned as a third-wave feminist endeavor (Dawkins, 2011). Third-wave feminism “… is an expression widely used to talk about the contemporary moment in self-identified feminist thinking and practice in North America (Canada and the US) and to distinguish this moment and its emphasis from second-wave feminism” (Brathwaite, 2002, p. 335). “Third-Wave
feminists are reclaiming domestic arts that have been shunned because of their association with oppressive domestic labor by many Second-Wave feminists” (Chansky, 2010, p. 681). “Knitting in particular can be used for feminist goals because it is grounded in a gendered cultural practice that can readily be politicized for different purposes by different groups and individuals” (Pentney, 2008, para. 3).

Second-wave feminists feared that handcrafts were moving women once again toward “feminine arts,” as depicted by the dissatisfied housewife stereotype described in Betty Friedan’s book, *The Feminine Mystique* (1964). In response to this critique, Debbie Stoller, co-founder of the third-wave magazine *Bust* as well as author of *Stitch’n’ Bitch*, asserts,

.. these people who looked down on knitting, were not being feminist at all. In fact, they were being anti-feminist, since they seemed to think that only those things that men did, or had done were worthwhile. Why couldn’t we all – men and women alike- take the same kind of pride in the work our mothers had always done as we did in the work of our fathers? (Stoller, 2004, pp. 27-29)

Accordingly, Stoller advocates the reclamation of the domestic arts as a way to “fuse fun with politics and women’s community building through do-it-yourself (DIY) culture” (Pentney, 2008, para. 1). Knitting, redeployed for feminist goals, has the power to subvert traditional binaries bound up in gendered and heterosexist norms (Pentney, 2008, para. 9).

Gen X and third-wave feminists have a strong sense of semiotics. [They] see the inherent difficulty or perhaps impossibility of changing the world through direct political action; change remain subversively masked within their culturally fluent use of irony, satire and parody. (Stevens, 2011, p. 55)
DIY crafters like to play mix-and-match with various aspects of our cultural heritage (Buszek, 2011). Turney states that artists are moving away from binaries of male and female into an arena that is largely characterized by bricolage and identity formation (2007, pp. 77-79). Dick Hebdige, in his book *Subculture, the Meaning of Style*, points to specific subcultures that are dismissed, denounced, and treated as threats to public order. These groups challenge the political order by consuming and creating designed objects that raise the possibility of subverting the political system through style found in subcultures (Clark & Brody, 2009, p. 193). Hebdige states that concept of bricolage can be used to explain how subcultural styles are constructed (1979). In his book *The Savage Mind* (1962), French anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss defined “bricolage” as an ordering, classification, or arranging into structures the minutiae of the physical world. The structures, “improvised” or “made-up” or ad hoc, are responses to an environment. These created structures “explain” the world through the medium of things (Strauss, 1966).

**Art for Art’s Sake**

In this section, I introduce the theory of L’art pour L’art (Art for Art’s Sake) as a tool for better understanding the artists (included in this study) who use of knit as a medium. In addition, I connect this theory to the avant garde and discuss art versus craft.

According to Clement Greenberg, L’art pour L’art (Art for Art’s Sake) theory states that art should be completely autonomous; art should be free of function or purpose other than to simply be art (Greenberg, 1961). Historically, “[t]he emergence of the hierarchy of craft originates in the Renaissance, when the first claims were made for painting and sculpture as ‘liberal’ rather than ‘mechanical’ art” (Auther, 2010, p. xii). Likewise the theory of “L’art pour L’art (Art for Art’s Sake) became popular among French bohemian artists in the 1830s”
(Calinescu, 1987, p. 45). Art for Art’s Sake “became a rallying cry for artists who had become weary of empty Romantic humanitarianism and felt the need to express their hatred of bourgeois mercantilism and vulgar utilitarianism” (Calinescu, 1987, p. 45).

Greenberg’s theory has further precedent; consider Immanuel Kant’s discussion of art in *Critique of Judgment* (1790). Kant suggests “the paradoxical concept of art’s purposiveness without a purpose, thus affirming art’s fundamental disinterestedness” (Calinescu, 1987, p. 45).

In other words, Kant suggests art does not need a purpose to exist; therefore, art should not make socio-political statements.

Furthermore, Greenburg maintained that art is understood through viewing, not touch; it is driven as an aesthetic without specific function beyond being art (Buszek, 2011). Supporting Greenberg’s theory is the notion that “[l]earning through seeing is somehow felt to be superior over touch, a more legitimate way of knowing the world” (Hemmings, 2012, p. 3). (I address this more completely in my analysis in Chapter 4.)

On the contrary, Louise Mazanti notes that within “a capitalist society, there is a danger of design becoming too instrumentalized … and danger of art not finding a way to become instrumental, in order to actually get involved in the real world outside its autonomous zone” (Mazanti, 2011, p. 71). Understandably, artists want freedom over their creations; but at the same time, the notion of art for art’s sake hampers artists who want to make socio-political statements. Accordingly, Mazanti argues “[a]utonomy is incompatible with social responsibility” (2011, p. 73).

Subsequently, I gently utilize Greenberg’s theory of art for art’s sake in this study to comprehend the position of “art” that uses a medium (i.e., knit) where its labor is self-referential
in every stitch and compels the viewer to touch it. I also draw on this theory’s connections to the avant garde to reveal the socio-political positions of the artists in this study.

The Avant Garde

Mazanti reports that German critic Peter Burger’s Theory of the Avant-Garde (1974) “strive[s] toward reintegrating art and life: to revolt against the sociocultural power structures in order to reconstruct society in terms of new ideals. This could be done only by deconstructing the very idea of an autonomous art that modernist critics had claimed as these movements primary legacy” (Mazanti, 2011). Avant garde was an oppositional reaction to the prevailing theory of “art for art’s sake.” Accordingly, [t]he concept of the avant garde, “both politically and culturally was little more than a radicalized and strongly utopianized version of modernity” (Calinescu, 1987, p. 95). Avant garde opened the door for artists beyond fine arts. Avant garde art movements included Constructivism, Dada, Surrealism, Conceptual Art, and Pop Art. Rather than art being removed from everyday life, it could be a “lived experience” or even the subversion of the hegemonic laden narratives that exclude diversity by their use of nontraditional materials.

In addition, Mazanti notes that the Arts and Crafts Movement is “characterized as avant-garde in its artistic and social devotion … that gradually developed into the practice of craft in the twentieth century. In the Arts and Crafts Movement there is a direct relation between art and life which is manifested in the object” (Mazanti, 2011, p. 74). The theories of art for art’s sake and avant garde attempt to categorize art (and perhaps, craft). Crafters attempt to defy categorization and straddle both of these theories by using traditionally functional materials that could serve revolutionary means or simply exist as art.
Art versus Craft

Further categorization happens when defining the distinctions between art and craft. In response, Buszek states “[t]here is no clear line portioning craft from art. Notions of what constitutes ‘craft’ and ‘art’ form a fluid continuum as part of the larger spectrum of material culture” (2011, p. 24). While modern artwork is usually held to the autonomous, the work of craft is considered to be supplemental, pastoral and amateur (Adamson, 2007, p. 4). Furthermore, “[f]ine art is oriented toward optical effect; craft is organized around a material experience” (Adamson, 2007, p. 4).

An example of this debate is the following:

Piet Mondrian’s painting and Anni Albers’ weaving are usually seen as a work of art and a work of craft respectively—one is a textile, the other a textile with paint on the surface. Mondrian’s painting is aggressively autonomous, which is to say self-standing, not to be touched. It is intended as an object of purely visual contemplation. By contrast, Alber’s weavings were originally meant to decorate a room, to serve a functional purpose. Her wall hanging appeals not only optically, but also through its tactile juxtaposition of contrasting materials. To see it is not enough. (Adamson, 2007, pp. 4-5)

It is difficult to dismiss the fact that this example also highlights the traditional trappings and tropes associated with making/creating and gender. Adamson notes “[c]oded as feminine or even as ‘ethnic,’ craft is seen as inferior to the hegemonic category of art” (2007, p. 5). Consequently, crafters and their crafts are “generally erased from traditional art historical narratives” (Robertson, 2005, p. 297).

“Craft by contrast is characterized by a connection to an interest or purpose” (Auther, 2010, p. xii). While the practice of fine arts is an occupation that is not concerned with profit,
craft is considered laborious and demands compensation (see Kant, 1790). Thus craft products are utilitarian: “People eat off craft objects, sit on them, wear them, however, beyond these functions cutting edge craft uses these roots in order to consider issues about our contemporary world” (Racz, 2009, p. 1).

There are differences between art and craft; however, each term has its limits. Perhaps there needs to be a new category that would allow creative works to exist without hierarchy. Art could be utilitarian, and craft could exist with its own autonomy.

**Summary**

I conclude this chapter by considering Greenberg’s theory that fine art is better because it is aesthetically and inspiration based, whereas craft is laborious and done for monetary value, and therefore is “less than” or lower in the hierarchy, as are working people, or people that create the objects that are worn. The Avant Garde theory challenges the art for art’s sake theory by championing the reintegration of art and life and for the inclusion of many unorthodox materials used to comment on socio-political issues.

Here, I offer two quotations to consider in regard to understanding the complexities of knit, its inherent material culture, and its potential as an artistic medium. According to Thorstein Veblen, in his essay "Dress as an Expression of the Pecuniary Culture," in *The Theory of the Leisure Class: An Economic Study of Institutions* (1899)

… apparel is always in evidence and affords an indication of our pecuniary standing to all observers at the first glance [by] showing that the wearer can afford to consume freely and uneconomically, it can also be shown in the same stroke that he or she is not under the necessity of earning a livelihood [through] any kind of productive labor. (1899, p. 111)
In other words, as Michael Carter states in *Fashion Classics from Carlyle to Barthes*,

> What disgusts Veblen about the world in which he finds himself in is that everything seems to be the wrong way around. Those men and women, who perform useful tasks, or make useful things, are regarded as inferior to those persons who, by birth or wealth, are able to exempt themselves from what he calls the industrial process. Those who consume without producing seem always to be held in the highest regard. (2003, pp. 44-45)

Contemporary artists are returning to making, to useful tasks, to slow processes. They are returning to historical processes of creation. Veblen and, by extension, Carter note that material products, especially cloth and dress, demonstrate value of the wearer by extension of the choice and display of said products, which can be powerful statements on society.

In this chapter, I introduced knit and craft and/or art movements that more often neglected knit as a medium. I also discussed theories used in this research study. In Chapter 3, I discuss my methodology and methods. In Chapter 4, I reveal my findings. In Chapter 5, I summarize my research study focusing on artists who utilize knit as artistic medium.
Chapter 3: Methodology

In the previous chapter I introduced knit artist and related literature, as well as theoretical frameworks for this study. In this chapter, I introduce the methodology used in the knit artist study. Specifically, I present my research design and justification for the study. Accordingly, I discuss my use of qualitative research framed by Material Culture methodology and methods for researching artists who use knit as an artistic medium. In addition, I share my resources for data collection.

Research Design and Justification

In this study, I examine four pieces of artwork from artists who use knit as their medium. I analyze each piece according to Fleming’s Material Culture methodology. Accordingly, I created a twenty-unit matrix instrument for documenting each piece of artwork, which includes the following categories: history, material, design, construction, function, identification, evaluation, cultural analysis, and interpretation (see Fleming 1974).

My research design focuses on qualitative research methodology and methods. Qualitative research “is an inductive process of building from the data broad themes to a generalized model of theory” (Kawamura, 2011, p. 24). I use a qualitative research approach because it addresses the human phenomena or experience (Lichtman, 2010, p. 12). It allows us to understand meanings behind and associated with the knit artwork.

My interest in this research area relates to my personal connection to knit. I am a knit designer and artist. From my experiences, I understand knitting is a skill that is acquired through both (formal and informal) education and practice. It is technical and creative in its methodology. When I design, I draw on my left and right brain to make strategic choices regarding color, texture, shape, needle size, and so on. Knitting is a time commitment that requires embracing
failures and successes all in the same row. It is these experiences with knit art and design that contribute to my insider perspective and establish my personal bias for the medium.

**Material Culture Methodology**

For this study, I use Material Culture as a methodology. Henry Glassie states, “Material Culture is culture made material” (1999, p. 41), and Judy Attfield explains that “Material Culture is how people make sense of their world through physical objects” (2000, p. 1). Furthermore, and where “the values and practices of society are enacted” (Bristow, 2012, p. 45).

Specifically, Material Culture is the “tangible yield” of “human thought and action,” or in other words, they are “works that stand as accomplishments of human possibility” (Glassie, 1999, p. 41) I draw on E. McClung Fleming’s discussions of Material Culture as a methodology. Fleming states that “[e]very culture, however primitive or advanced, is absolutely dependent on its artifacts for its survival and self-realization” (Fleming, 1974, p. 153). Subsequently, “[t]o know man [sic] we must study the things he [sic] has made. Study of artifacts is therefore a primarily humanistic study, and the records of his [sic] actions in time” (Fleming, 1974, p. 153).

The assumptions associated with Material Culture are:

1) Works by individuals reflect patterns and beliefs of the culture as a whole.

2) Humans assign meanings to artifacts in order to construction their cultural world.

3) Objects are read or interpreted symbolically (for meanings).

4) Artifacts are culture- and time-specific.

For this study, the limitations associated with Material Culture as a methodology are:

1) no access to the actual artifacts

2) focus on artifact to the near exclusion of the artist

3) my bias as a knit designer and artist.
I am relying primarily on my interpretation of the artifact and not talking to the artists about their specific works of art. Subsequently, I depend on online and printed sources for continuous analysis and interpretations of the specific pieces chosen for this research.

Methods

I use qualitative inductive research methods to explore the art created with knit as a medium. Specifically, I selected four works of art that use knit as a medium for analysis. I use Material Culture methodology to reveal the meanings for that selected artwork.

I began with a literature review about artists who use knit as a medium (discussed in more detail in the next section). I also gathered images of knit artwork and researched their corresponding artists, from which I selected four pieces to be the focus on this research study. I chose to analyze the following works:

1. *Knitting with Loaded Shotguns (Safeties Off)* (Dave Cole, 2008);
2. *Cunty First* (Lisa Anne Auerbach, 2008);
3. *City of Stitches* (Isabel Berglund, 2003); and

In addition, I created a twenty-unit matrix instrument from Fleming’s model of five properties and four operations. My twenty-unit matrix instrument (see Appendix A for blank instrument) allowed me to qualitatively analyze each of the four artifacts selected for this study. The instrument includes Fleming’s five basic properties of an artifact—history, material, design, construction, and function—and his four operations—identification, evaluation, cultural analysis, and interpretation.

The analysis of the selected artwork reflects the meaning units or themes suggested from the interpretation of the pieces and the data collected with the matrix instrument. Furthermore, I
utilize Art for Art’s Sake and Avant Garde theories for unpacking the meanings embedded in these knit works of art.

**Sources for Data and Research**

For this study, I relied on books, photographs (digital and hardcopy), artifacts, gallery exhibitions, websites, brochures, and news articles for research data. All of the knit artifacts’ images were originally viewed in books and ultimately secured from online sources for analysis and interpretation. The four artists whose work was selected for this study were contacted for quotations to accompany their selected artwork image as a caption. These quotations were solicited after analysis was complete and, therefore, were not factors in the ultimate analysis and interpretation.

The findings of this study significantly reflect the Material Culture methodology. Specifically, the assumptions and limitations as outlined in this chapter suggest knit artwork can only be understood for its meanings according to the parameters established in this study.

**Summary**

In summary, the methodology of Material Culture examines artifacts as objects of human culture for their meanings. In this study, I explore and analyze four knit artworks to reveal deeper meanings that reflect the social and cultural landscape.

In Chapter 4, I discuss my findings for this knit art research study. In Chapter 5, I summarize and conclude my research study.
Chapter 4: Findings

Knit as a medium for art is unique in that it has not been traditionally included in the Western art canon and even in craft movements. Artists that use knits as a medium for artistic expression also use its negative connotations to express socio-political ideologies. I am drawn to the ways in which each artist approaches a similar knit structure to produce drastically different art objects.

In this chapter, I present my findings for art that uses knit as a medium research study. I begin by introducing four individual artists whose works I focus on in this study. I include for each artist a material culture instrument complete with details about each piece of artwork. I conclude with my research findings that center around four themes found in the selected artwork: art versus craft, labor, socio-politics, and gender.

Artists and Artwork

For this study, I selected four works of art that utilize knit as a medium; City of Stitches (2003), Knitting with Loaded Shotguns (Safeties Off) (2008), Cunty First (2008), and Weighed Down (2005). These works were drawn from four individual artists: Isabel Berglund, Dave Cole, Lisa Anne Auerbach, and Lindsay Obermeyer. The criteria I used for selection of the artwork included:

1) knit used as a medium for the creation of artwork
2) created by an established artist (i.e., publications, exhibitions, reviews, etc.)
3) artists relevant to the contemporary arts and crafts movements (i.e., artists present in multiple media arenas, especially social media)
4) artwork rich with content and subtext
5) artwork that challenges and embraces knitting tropes.
Furthermore, specific artworks were selected for their representations of individual genres, as well as representing knit as an art medium in general.

Isabel Berglund

Isabel Berglund is a Danish artist who uses knit as a medium almost exclusively. Berglund spent her formative years in an artists’ commune and graduated from Central St. Martins with a master’s degree in Fashion Knitwear. In addition to being an artist, Berglund teaches workshops at festivals and lectures at design schools about knitwear.

Berglund is an artist who explores novel concepts by sculpting with knitting needles and yarn. She creates art that ranges from large-scale installations to sculpture that resembles furniture to kinetic art wearing knit. It is noteworthy that Berglund challenges notions of traditional knitwear and craft.

Accordingly, Berglund told Sabrina Gschwandtner “[t]he word craft doesn’t seem serious. It sounds like you are just doing something at home, making something without thinking about what you are doing. Am I a knitwear designer or an artist?” (Gschwandtner, 2007, p. 21). While Berglund’s quotation suggests craft lacks thoughtfulness, craft research study suggests crafters are thoughtful in their creative products, often creating works that challenge the boundaries of craft and art (see Winge & Stalp, 2013). On the other hand, Berglund and other artists of her ilk are most likely frustrated at the marginalization and subjugation of their work.

To better understand Berglund as an artist I explore three of her works. I begin by examining Closet Knitter (2010), which is an all-white knitted wardrobe that, when opened, exposes an all-white knitted wig, garment, and chair. Regarding Closet Knitter, Berglund “questions when a work belongs in a certain category and why” (Berglund website, n.d.; see Figure 9). The knit artist’s work is continually placed at an intersection of competing
categorizations, such as art, fashion, craft, and design. The name of the piece is also of interest. The term “closet” or “closeted” conjures images of a person who is hiding his or her identity, a part of a subculture outside of the mainstream. This idea is reminiscent of the craft and art hierarchy. It is almost as if the act of knitting is embarrassing, something to be done in a closet.

Figure 9. Closet Knitter is an all-white knitted wardrobe with figure (Isabel Berglund, 2013).
Figure 10. *She Keeps Spiders in her Pocket* is an all-white knitted wardrobe with dress and knitted lines resembling spider webs (Berglund, 2011).

*She keeps spiders in her pocket* (2011; see Figure 10) is an all-white, completely knitted sculpture within a wardrobe that can open and close. Berglund’s use of the wardrobe is reminiscent of the fictitious stories in the *Chronicles of Narnia* (C. S. Lewis, 1950-1956). The dress is suspended almost as if dancing and is held by knit tentacles that resemble the filaments in spider webs. A sense of innocence is suggested by embracing spiders as playmates rather than scary creatures who hide in dark corners.
Floating Pearls (2011) is a red or coral knitted structure suspended from the ceiling by single strands of yarns forming peaks and valleys (see Figure 11). The knitted work pools at the floor, conveying the sense of the fabric melting and dripping. One also wonders where the pearl-like shapes come from, as if someone was wearing this piece and doffed his/her knit garment and pearls.
In the following section, I introduce the artwork by Isabel Berglund considered for this study—*City of Stitches* (2003). I draw my findings from the data collected using my Material Culture Matrix Instrument (see blank instrument in Appendix A) inspired by E. McClung Fleming’s material culture model.

Table 1

*Instrument 1: City of Stitches (2003), Isabel Berglund.*

---

**Material Culture Matrix Instrument**

Rebecca E. Schuiling, 2013
Artifact: City of Stitches
Date of Work: 2003
Image:
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Identification</th>
<th>Evaluation</th>
<th>Cultural Analysis</th>
<th>Interpretation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>History</td>
<td>Park Cocoon Enclosure Carnival Ride Absorbed into the walls Overtaking, Enclosure</td>
<td>Covers a room – envelops the viewer or participant Encourages viewer to become participant</td>
<td>Knit object-expectation for it to be functional, although you can wear it, you cannot wear it outside of the room</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Material</td>
<td>Size 17 or 19 needles Large, heavy yarn</td>
<td>Knitted with traditional knitting needles and yarn Used white yarn,</td>
<td>The tree is a tree even though it is not made of wood, leaves are not made of leaves</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In her work *City of Stitches* (2003), Isabel Berglund is drawing on the postmodern construct established in Paul Auster’s novel, *City of Glass* (1985), where the protagonist contemplates ways of seeing the city through his eyes and through others’ eyes. The work is
A Thematic Analysis of the Material Culture of Artwork Using Knit as an Artistic Medium

entirely constructed from white heavy yarn on large gauge needles. The knit structure covers the walls; erected in the center of the piece is a thirteen-foot abstract tree, knit with brown, black, and green yarn. In addition there are clothing-like structures that are attached to the wall that viewers can wear, thus becoming part of the artwork.

My interpretation of City Stitches (2003) is that the clothing attached to the walls serves as a way for the viewer being the focal point and not being the focal point, mirroring Auster’s protagonist of being and not being, seeing and not seeing, viewing and being viewed in the city. The artists encourages the viewer to interpret the tree as the focal point because it is the only element knitted in color; she forces the viewers who choose to wear the garments attached to the walls to view the tree as the focal point and to become focal points themselves. Furthermore, the knitted clothing suggests that which is warm and soft, unlike the cold hegemonic construct of a typical city.

Dave Cole

Dave Cole is an American artist whose studio is based in Providence, Rhode Island. He graduated from Brown University with a Bachelor of Arts degree in 2000. Cole knits with nontraditional, hyper-masculine materials and frequently “tackles ambitious political and historical subjects with a great deal of material ingenuity” (Israel, 2011).

Sabrina Gschwandtner notes, “Dave’s early forays into knitting were linked to productivity. Diagnosed with ADHD [Attention Deficit Hyperactive Disorder], Dave use[s] the craft of knitting to stay focused” (2007, p. 39). Distractions become quieted by the “countless repetitive motions” required when knitting (Gschwandtner, 2007, p. 39).

Cole creates sculptures using knitted material. He has knit with diverse materials such as fiberglass, Kevlar, and rubber. Cole’s sculptures are “such time consuming and laboriously
difficult tests of his own perseverance that they border on the obsessive” (Gschwandtner, 2007, p. 39). Ultimately, [Cole] “seeks to provoke a response that progresses from intrigue over his unusual material choices to a sense of wonder over the labor involved” (Gschwandtner, 2007, p. 39). Regarding his own work, Cole states:

I like the idea of knit because it is a very intense, laborious process…. there is something compelling about taking a long time to make something. The process becomes important. A basic element of my work is that I’m subverting the feminine process [more than the idea] that I am subverting the masculine material. It’s more like I am co-opting the domestic process to say something about masculinity.” (Shu and Magliaro, 2007, p. 40)

David McFadden, the curator for the Radical Lace & Subversive Knitting exhibit, states that Cole understands a “simple idea or pun, expressed through a traditional handcraft technique, [can] convey several layers of meaning” (McFadden, 2007, p. 56). Furthermore, McFadden notes that Cole strives to make his art accessible. Indeed, Cole has noted that conceptually driven art has on occasion

[g]one beyond esoteric and elusive and into the realm of being intentionally offensive.

One of the central challenges of making art is to engage the viewer, and when art is more and more abstract this becomes difficult. I don’t think the solution is to alienate and offend (McFadden, 2007, p. 56).

Gschwandtner notes that Cole’s work “present[s] contradictory ideas in a single form and co-ops the craft to move into bigger, louder, more toxic and heavy duty materials” (2007, p. 40). For example, Cole knit a fourteen-foot-tall teddy bear made from rolls of fiberglass insulation (Gschwandtner, 2007, p. 41). Cole challenges the traditional assumptions of a female knitting a soft and comforting teddy small enough for a child to hold; however, his over-sized
teddy bear lacks warmth and comfort. Still, the piece appears to be something that the viewer would want to embrace, but the reality is fiberglass is itchy and toxic. (I discuss this piece in more depth later in this section.)

To contextualize the work of Dave Cole, I examine three of this works. I begin with *The Knitting Machine* (2005). Over the Fourth of July weekend in 2005, Cole attached twenty-foot utility poles to two excavators to knit an American Flag out of acrylic felt (see Figure 12). The event took place at the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art (MASS MoCA). Regarding this piece, Cole states

The Knitting Machine combines the feminized domestic American tradition of knitting with the grandiose gesture of construction usually associated with masculine labor. The Knitting Machine challenges familiar notions of labor and production, while expressing a complex understanding of patriotism. (August 27, 2005)

The work is also an important symbol of process; in fact, every single stitch that is created has to be orchestrated with precision, as traditional knitting does, except in a much larger, heavier, and public context.
Figure 12. The Knitting Machine is the American flag knit with PVC pipe and excavator (Cole, July, 2005).

In 2008, Cole’s exhibition entitled All American featured a series of children’s clothing knitted and sewn by the artist from the Kevlar lining of a bulletproof vest used in the Gulf War. Kevlar is a specialty application fiber that can literally stop bullets. Traditional applications of Kevlar include body armor and reinforcements for industrial applications where superior strength and impact resistance are desired. Cole juxtaposes the baby clothing, associated with the feminine through childbearing and knitting, with the masculine realm of war and military paraphernalia. The “work implies an indoctrinating [of] our youth for battle. These seemingly
playful corruptions of the symbols of childhood are perhaps Cole`s most alarming sculptural forewarnings” (Miller, 2008). An uneasy tension is created for the viewer imagining the baby wearing the clothing one layer (of Kevlar) away from weapons and violence (see Figures 13 and 14).

*Figure 13. The All American Series features Kevlar Hoodie; Kevlar Snowsuit; Kevlar Onesie (Cole, 2008).*

*Figure 14. An installation view of the All American Series (2008).*
In 2003, Cole created *The Fiberglass Teddy Bear*. Cole had to wear a Hazmat suit in order to knit the large pieces of fiberglass panels with his arms as the knitting needles. Cole co-opts and subverts the familiar in this piece. A mundane, domesticated object such as a teddy bear typically functions as a means to soothe a child, as a companion to hold, to hug, and to touch. This piece gives the illusion of softness, of inviting the viewer in with its fuzzy, soft, and enveloping appearance. Although it is large, one does not get a feeling of intimidation from this piece; however, its tactile properties make this teddy bear the direct opposite of a plaything.

In the following section, I introduce the artwork by Dave Cole considered for this study—*Knitting with Loaded Shotguns (Safeties Off)* (2008-2010). I draw my findings from the data collected using my Material Culture Matrix Instrument (see blank instrument in Appendix A) inspired by E. McClung Fleming’s material culture model.
Table 2


<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Material Culture Matrix Instrument</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rebecca E. Schuiling, 2012</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Artist: Dave Cole</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Artifact: Knitting with Loaded Shotguns (Safeties Off)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Size of Work: 72 x 66 x 10 inches</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Date of Work: 2008</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Image:</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Identification</th>
<th>Evaluation</th>
<th>Cultural Analysis</th>
<th>Interpretation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>History</strong></td>
<td>Shotguns</td>
<td>Male artist working with hyper masculine materials</td>
<td>Resembles guns that cross above a mantle Resemble needles</td>
<td>What is the meaning of guns being used for knitting needles?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Grandpa’s mantle,</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Knitting with Loaded Shotguns (*Safeties Off*) (Cole, 2008; 2010) is a piece within the exhibition titled *Unreal City*. This piece appears to be in progress, as live stitches are left on the "knitting needles," which are actually shotguns. The idea of the stitches being "live" and or "active" (in knitting terms, this means that the piece could unravel at any point as the stitches

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Material</th>
<th>Shotguns, spun statuary bronze</th>
<th>Not typical fiber used to knit Guns not typical knitting tools</th>
<th>Guns are not hand guns or guns typically seen in this use Statuary bronze atypical Big enough to be a blanket that covers a bed</th>
<th>Why statuary bronze? Bronze used to make statues a more expected form of art Bronze usually hard, but when spun to fiber it is softer</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Design</td>
<td>Two guns barrels facing eachother, diagonal</td>
<td>It’s not a garment It resembles other knitting in process</td>
<td>Resembles a banner, scroll, knitting in process (knitting still on the needles)</td>
<td>Hard and soft between gun and fiber, feminine and masculine binary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Construction</td>
<td>Knitted with 12 gauge shotguns</td>
<td>Yarn is unique Needles unique Stitches are uneven due to nature of creation</td>
<td>Resembles knitting</td>
<td>Knitting was completed while safeties were off, act of knitting could have killed the artist</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Function</td>
<td>Art Hangs in Gallery</td>
<td>Why does the work pool on the floor? Is it supposed to look like knitting as it pools in your lap?</td>
<td>It’s a piece of art, looks very different than other pieces of art Looks utilitarian Looks domestic</td>
<td>Visual contemplation</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
have not been bound off, or closed) is reminiscent of the fact that the artist knit this piece without the safeties on, so, essentially, the gun was live while working the piece. According to the Dodge Gallery website:

Cole's new work is about history, war, and industrialization. Time erases and renews all things. The title, *Unreal City*, is a direct reference to T.S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land*, addressing the brutal, yet impartial course of time, an agent of birth and death. It is about the permeability of grandeur, the temporality of human accomplishment. The subject of the rise and the fall also brings to mind American Hudson River painter, Thomas Cole. His series of paintings titled "Course of Empire," depict the transition of a landscape from untouched nature, to increased development, to an erected city, to the destruction of its monuments and buildings, and finally, to the return of nature. Human contribution, and human vulnerability to the impartial course of life, is the crux of this exhibition.

(K Dodge Gallery)

*Knitting with Loaded Shotguns (Safeties Off)*, in particular, highlights the sense of human vulnerability as the knitting for this piece was completed while the safeties were off; essentially the act of knitting (pointing the barrels of the guns toward the face) could have killed the artist.

Cole knit this piece using spun statuary bronze, “a metal that is traditionally used to make statues and monuments” (Dodge Gallery, n.d.). By choosing this medium, Cole is exploring the human need to document personal triumphs. An event is intangible; therefore, we as humans feel the need to create something tangible to commemorate an event (e.g., trophies, statues, and medals). Memories are not enough; physical evidence of accomplishment is necessary.

In addition, Cole continues to explore contradictions of structure and material. Knitting is traditionally thought of as a passive and safe activity usually done within the home. Here, the
work is hyper-masculine due to shotgun knitting needles and statuary bronze fibers as yarn. In addition, the shotguns are placed in a configuration similar to guns over a mantle, a symbol of triumph over nature. The yarn material, although made pliable for knitting, is from a typically hard metal material, in contrast to traditional yarns, which are soft, easy to transport, and pleasing for intimate contact with skin. Again, the work may be read as metaphors for the feminine and masculine dichotomy.

**Lisa Anne Auerbach**

Lisa Anne Auerbach is an American artist based in Los Angeles, California. Auerbach received her Master’s of Fine Art in 1994 from Art Center College of Design in Pasadena. She is an Assistant Professor of Art in Photography at Pomona College. Auerbach’s work combines her interest of photography, knitting, and small publications (Peters, 2010, para. 3). Indeed, Auerbach is an activist who generates self-published zines and blogs (Dambrot, 2006, p. 44). Her work addresses issues of “environmental sustainability, urban transformation, the importance of community and home and the role of individuals in a political landscape” (Peters, 2010, para. 3) “through craft, irony, art and progressivism” (Dambrot, 2006, p. 44).

Brook Hodge of the New York Times notes that Auerbach pursued knitting as a formal art-making strategy for the reasons mentioned previously and due to its accessibility. The artist herself has stated that knitting is “portable and I can do it anywhere” (2011, para. 1). Critic Shana Nys Dambrot of Fiberarts Magazine notes that Auerbach “…recast[s] knitting from its traditional role …. to an idiomatic armature on which to pin sociopolitical commentary (2006, p. 44). In other words, Auerbach may literally wear her clothing as a billboard of her political beliefs.
Auerbach is best known for her knitted sweater-and-skirt works with assertive slogans knitted into the body of the garments (Hodge, 2011, para. 1). Art Review critic Andrew Berardini likened Auerbach’s sweater sets, patterned to fit the artist, to “uniforms of a particularly subversive leftist cheerleading squad” (Berardini, 2008, p. 118). Berardini continues,

Auerbach picks up where many feminist artists left off in reclaiming traditional craft to fit a high art concept...[she brings] DIY into the gallery in a way that’s conceptually savvy and activist driven, without being too heavy handed in its polemic. (Berardini, 2008, p. 118)

Critic Keith Recker agrees, “Turning what is usually identified as “women’s work” to overtly socio-political ends is beautifully transgressive, much in the vein of artists such as Judy Chicago (Recker, 2009, para. 3-4).

In a postmodern context, Auerbach’s work questions and defies categorization. Julia Bryan-Wilson, in her article Lisa Anne Auerbach’s Canny Domesticity, notes that,

Auerbach’s work is body based (meant to be worn) but are displayed within art contexts, raising question about the institutionalization of fashion and the displacement of “functional” crafts into fine art spaces.” (Bryan-Wilson, 2012, p. 293)

Stereotypes, institutions, formulas, and assumptions are continually challenged by Auerbach’s work. Accordingly, Sabrina Gschwandtner states that “Auerbach suggests that knitting can be a new form of broadcasting; handmade, personal and slow... but also fashionable, empowered and enduring” (2007, p. 11).

I selected three works by Auerbach to highlight aspects of the artist’s work: You Don’t Need a Weatherman (2005), Jefferson/Adams 1800 Campaign Sweater (2008), and Keep Abortion Legal (2006). All three of the works selected are sweaters. Before I analyze the works,
I discuss why Auerbach finds the knitted sweater to be a rich medium in which to explore sociopolitical issues.

Auerbach stated that she is inspired by the music group Cheap Trick, in particular the sweaters worn by lead singer Rick Nielson (Searle, 2008, p. 105). In the following quotations, the artist explains in her own words why she was drawn to the use of sweaters as an artistic medium rather than other items of clothing:

What struck me about his sweaters was the friction between the permanence of the material and the liveliness of the language and content. Unlike T-shirts, sweaters are worn for decades, and handed down through families. In ten years, the sweater would still function as a warm garment, but the text would ground it in time (Auerbach, n.d.).

Auerbach also stated:

People don’t read it immediately like they do a T-shirt. And I like that the material can seduce you, even if you don’t like the words, or even notice it. And, if they like the sweater itself, they might get interested in what it says (Oksenhorn, 2008, para. 9).

People other than dress scholars may discount the importance of a sweater and its abilities to be communicative of social mores; however, Julia Bryan Wilson argues,

Sweaters have a dense public life within American popular culture with regards to taste, class and social identity. [For example], critical race theorists have argued that Bill Cosby’s multicolored, chunkily textures sweaters from the Cosby Show (1984-1992) served to visually emphasize that his character was a non-threatening black man (2012, p. 291).
Much like the use of color and pattern used to “comfort” the viewer in the case of the *Cosby Show*, Auerbach uses recognizable visual associations (visual, tactile, and memory) to draw in the viewer; then, the impactful text is read and realized.

*Figure 16. You Don’t Need a Weatherman* is a knit sweater inspired by a 1960s activist group and a Bob Dylan song (Auerbach, 2005).

According to Auerbach’s artist statement regarding her work, *You Don’t Need a Weatherman* (2005), the sweater was knitted with political slogans that were borrowed from the Weathermen, a.k.a. Weather Underground, a late 1960s radical left political group founded on the campus of the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor. The artist juxtaposes Vietnam era politics to U.S. involvement in Iraq (Auerbach, n.d.). The *Weathermen* took their name from Bob Dylan’s song *Subterranean Homesick Blues*—“You don’t need a weatherman to know which way the wind blows” (Auerbach, n.d.). Auerbach knitted this phrase into a weather map on the sweater and replaced traditional weather symbols such as “H” or “C” (i.e., hot and cold, respectively) for other acronyms concerning U.S. government involvements overseas. GSAVE stands for “Global Strategy Against Violent Extremists,” and GWOT stands for “Global War On
Terror” (Auerbach, n.d.). Auerbach presents her social commentary through the knit sweater while subverting traditional expectations of motifs, making the unexpected text and symbols even more impactful.

Figure 17. Jefferson/Adams 1800 Campaign Sweater is inspired by the presidential campaign from 1800 (Auerbach, 2008).

In 2008, Auerbach created a series of sweaters that were part of a show at the Aspen Art Museum in Aspen, Colorado. The sweaters were exhibited in the windows of nineteen local businesses. Additional sweaters were shown at the Aspen Art Museum, where viewers were able to check them for four-hour blocks of time to wear around town (Auerbach, n.d.). For the sweaters’ texts, Auerbach selected campaign slogans from over 200 years of American history. From the Jackson/Clay 1832 campaign: *Let The People Rule, The Bank Must Perish*, and from the McKinley/Bryan 1900 campaign: *Equal Rights to All, Special Privilege to None/Prosperity at Home, Prestige Abroad* (Auerbach, n.d.). By highlighting these campaign slogans, Auerbach shows how the “slogans have, or have not, changed, in 200 years.” Similar sweaters could be
A Thematic Analysis of the Material Culture of Artwork Using Knit as an Artistic Medium

created to address political opinions regarding the Occupy Wall Street movement, to marriage equality, to U.S.’s involvement overseas.

The first sweater in the series is the 1800 election, Jefferson versus Adams. Jefferson’s slogan was: Is it not high time for change. Much like the examples given previously, these campaign slogans could literally be applied today, such as Obama’s campaign slogan: Change You Can Believe In. Auerbach states,

You think things are new, that ideas have changed. But they’re just representing the same things in history. I wanted people to see that this campaign is just another one in the long chain of history. (Oksenhorn, 2008, para. 19)

Figure 18. Lisa Anne Auerbach’s exhibition at University of Michigan Museum.

In 2009, Auerbach exhibited 24 of her machine-knit sweaters at the University of Michigan Museum of Art (see Figure 18). The sweaters were hung from the ceiling on plastic molds (Sharpe, 2009). The images and texts on the sweaters ranged from commentary about complacency, I Used To Be Part of the Solution (2009) to What’s All This Talk About Dying for
Revolution (2005-2009) to My Jewish Grandma Is Voting for Obama/Chosen People Choose Obama (2008). Among these pieces is a sweater with the text: "KEEP ABORTION LEGAL" knitted across the bustline, which directly communicates the artist’s socio-political beliefs.

Comprehending these textual messages relies on the understanding that all

[h]uman beings communicate what they learn through symbols, the most common system of symbols being language, which [are] verbal symbols. Fashion/dress study scholars are primarily interested in the nonverbal dimension of this theory since clothing is a nonverbal mode of communication. (Kawamura, 2011, p. 27)

Dressing and modifying the body represents who we are and what we believe. We learn the language of clothing simply by being members of societies. We understand, simply by silhouette, color, and texture, how to classify human beings into groups, subcultures, memberships, classes, rank, and identities. Frequently a bold ideological statement is placed on a vehicle bumper sticker; however, it is less common to literally wear your beliefs on your sleeve.

Figure 19. Keep Abortion Legal is a sweater inspired by socio-political debates regarding abortion laws (Auerbach, 2006).
In the following section, I introduce the artwork by Lisa Anne Auerbach considered for this study—*Cunty First* (2008). I draw my findings from the data collected using my Material Culture Matrix Instrument (see blank instrument in Appendix A) inspired by E. McClung Fleming’s material culture model.

Table 3

*Instrument 3: Cunty First (2008), Lisa Anne Auerbach.*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Material Culture Matrix Instrument</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rebecca E. Schuiling, 2013</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Artist: Lisa Anne Auerbach</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Artifact: Cunty First</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Date of Work: 2008</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Image:</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

![Image of Cunty First artwork](image-url)
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Identification</th>
<th>Evaluation</th>
<th>Cultural Analysis</th>
<th>Interpretation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>History</strong></td>
<td>Sweater Skirt Set Yellow, Navy Blue? Yellow text “hot mess” Yellow images of guns</td>
<td>Short, shows legs Billboard-esque proclaiming political leanings</td>
<td>Text has relationship to political culture around the 2008 election Sweater sets out of fashion</td>
<td>Statements that have political ramifications Reflect the artists options of Sarah Palin On display in Aspen during the Democratic convention held in Denver and visitors to the museum were allowed to check out the sweaters and wear them around town</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Material</strong></td>
<td>Machine Knit Stockinette Stitch Finer gauge of needle for text to be clear and legible</td>
<td>Materials are similar to materials used to make clothing but in this case is meant as art</td>
<td>Yarn resembles commercial quality sweaters and garments</td>
<td>The two colors are necessary, as this is how the text is visible and constructed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Design</strong></td>
<td>Bias skirt Resembles a cheerleader outfit Yellow and dark blue</td>
<td>Seems to be a sweater and skirt, recognizable garments, however, semiotic, with text Undervalued as art because of its associations with clothing</td>
<td>Stereotypically feminine silhouette Innocuous materials used to make volatile statements</td>
<td>Complete evisceration of Sarah Palin on personal and professional life</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Construction</strong></td>
<td>Perceptual opposites</td>
<td>It is a garment and it is art Breaking rules of where art goes and where it is displayed Quite possible devalues work by letting it leave the art gallery</td>
<td>Garment as Art</td>
<td>Machine Knit Fast Can quickly be made for topical issues</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Function</strong></td>
<td><strong>Garment worn for political expression</strong></td>
<td><strong>Its intended role is to be art primarily but as the artist wears the piece, and she has let others wear the pieces, there is now a competing categorization, is it art, fashion, design, craft? Has more emotional responses to texts on the piece because they are so politically charged</strong></td>
<td><strong>Immediately read as garment, not immediately read as art Intended function is to be art, garment and sociopolitical</strong></td>
<td><strong>Billboard for artists belief Meant to be thought provoking, making viewer question their position Getting out her own angst</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Lisa Anne Auberbach’s *Cunty First* (2008) is a knitted sweater dress and a critique of Sarah Palin, the 2008 Vice Presidential candidate with presidential candidate John McCain. This is a black sweater dress with gold lettering, stars, and pistols. The sweater dress was part of a series of garments that were displayed by suspension in various art galleries. Despite the fact that the sweater and skirt set meet the criteria of clothing, this sweater dress is meant to be a piece of art. I chose this artifact as a part of my study because of its nonverbal communication and visual impact. Through symbols, in this case, text emblazoned across each sweater, “Auerbach uses her knitting as a platform for political call to arms rather than a form of community building” (Gschwandtner, 2007, p. 9). Accordingly, “Her work can be worn over the shoulders or on exhibition walls” (Gschwandtner, 2007, p. 9).

**Lindsay Obermeyer**

Lindsay Obermeyer is an American artist based in Chicago, Illinois. She received her Master of Fine Art degree from the University of Washington in Fiber Art and her Master of Arts in Teaching from the National-Louis University. Obermeyer is an adjunct instructor at the
A Thematic Analysis of the Material Culture of Artwork Using Knit as an Artistic Medium

National-Louis University and Northern Illinois University. Believing education will enrich her art practice, Lindsay teaches children through the Beverly Arts Center and Evanston Art Center in Illinois. Her designs include six instructional books, and her writing was published in *Fiberarts, Knit.1, and Reinventing Textiles: Gender and Identity* (Obermeyer, n.d.).

Obermeyer’s work consists of performative art and conceptual garments serving as metaphors. Common themes emerging from her work are the relationship between mother and child and the connection of textile to traditional roles of women. I highlight three works: the *Red Thread Project* (Ongoing), and two pieces from her exhibition titled *Women’s Work* series: *Blood Line* (2006) and *Twisters* (2006).

In 2004, Obermeyer established the *Red Thread Project*, a non-profit organization that involves donated knitted hats attached to a half-mile long red l-cord (Kaspar, 2012). After the hats are knitted and attached to the thread, volunteers wear the hats and move in choreography to experience the connection to one another. The hats are then donated to charities assisting cancer patients, foster children, the elderly, and the homeless (The Red Thread Project n.d). Accordingly, Obermeyer’s artist statement acknowledges the importance of philanthropy to her art:

Hope is the overriding theme of all my work. It is needed to endure the daily bombardment of negative news – terrorism, recession, tsunamis, global warming. Hope requires a leap of faith, a sustained belief in a better world.” (Lindsay Obermeyer, n.d.)

The Red project has involved thousands of knitters around the world and the creation of more than 7,000 handmade hats donated to charity (Obermeyer, n.d.). For Obermeyer, “knitting is a perfect metaphor for society. When a stitch is dropped, the fabric may unravel. Ignore or shun connections to others and one's community becomes less stable” (The Red Thread Project, n.d.).
Figure 20. The Red Thread Project is a red icord that connects to knit hats, which participants may wear (Obermeyer, 2006).

Obermeyer uses connections and continuity of stitch and structure as a metaphor throughout her work. For her series titled Women’s Work?, Obermeyer likens the knitted garment to the mother/baby bond which can “stretch, rip, fray, or unravel as the child grows and matures. It is in a perpetual cycle of mending and loosening until death creates the final separation” (Obermeyer, n.d.). For the work, Obermeyer was inspired by a text titled Women’s Work: The First 20,000 Years: Women, Cloth, and Society by Elizabeth Wayland Barber.
Figure 21. *Blood Line* is a metaphor umbilical cord (Obermeyer, 2006; Photograph by Larry Sanders).

The *Blood Line* sweater, knitted with red yarn, has a machine knit rayon cord attached near where the naval would be if on a body. Clearly, the red cord (blood line) is a metaphor for an umbilical cord. Obermeyer also noted her interest in the idea of a thread as metaphor for life (Obermeyer, n.d.). We are connected to life and death through a “thread,” made metaphorical in Greek mythology, made real in the connection from mother to baby through the umbilical cord. Correspondingly, Barber notes:

Many ancient myths that revolve around women’s textile arts function on the basis of analogy. For example, fate, to the Greeks, was spun as a thread. Both thread and time were linear, both easily and arbitrarily broken. One could argue that, since women were the people who spun, the spinners of one’s destiny would have to be women. These
divine female spinners were called the Moirai, or Apportioners, and are often mentioned in Greek literature as being three in number. Klotho, “Spinner,” who spun the thread of life, Lachesis, “Allotment,” who measured it out, and Atropos “Unturnable,” who chose when to lop it off. (1994, p. 235)

Figure 22. Twirlers is a pink sweater with symbolic reference to motherhood (Obermeyer, 2006).

As Elizabeth Wayland Barber noted, knitting as a creative pursuit is compatible with childcare demands as it is reasonably child-safe, easy to set down and pick up at any point, and easily done within the home (Barber, 1994, p. 30; see Obermeyer, n.d.). Obermeyer’s piece Twirlers (2006) highlights the heavy demands of motherhood and the “unending” giving a mother gives to her child (Women’s Work? series, 2012). Threads/Yarns protruding from the “breasts” twist and extend from the body of the sweater and pool on the floor. The thread is twisted, reminiscent of perhaps the guilt a woman faces when tending to all the roles she must
fill in her career, marriage, friendships and the time taken to fill those roles, all while fulfilling the role of being a mother.

In the following section, I introduce the artwork by Lindsay Obermeyer considered for this study—*Weighed Down* (2006). I draw my findings from the data collected using my Material Culture Matrix Instrument (see blank instrument in Appendix A) inspired by E. McClung Fleming’s material culture model.

Table 4

*Instrument 4: Weighed Down (2006), Lindsay Obermeyer.*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Material Culture Matrix Instrument</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rebecca E. Schuiling, 2012</td>
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<tr>
<td>Artist: Lindsay Obermeyer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Artifact: Woman’s Work – Weighed Down</td>
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<tr>
<td>Size of Work: 20” x 19” with 50” sleeves</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Date of Work: 2005</td>
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<td>Images:</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>History</strong></td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Material</strong></td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Design</strong></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Construction</strong></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Function</strong></td>
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</table>
A Thematic Analysis of the Material Culture of Artwork Using Knit as an Artistic Medium

| question is it art? | Because it looks like clothing | for struggles that women face in contemporary culture | Weights metaphor for all the burdens that weight women down |

Obermeyer’s work *Weighed Down* (2006) offers a visual metaphor for the burdens and responsibilities that weigh on women. It is knit from shades of pink mohair, a luxurious and fuzzy yarn with superior tactile qualities. The shape of the piece resembles a sweater with elongated arms, at the end of which are weights. The hand-knit structure is similar to a gauge used for knit sweaters, including ribbing at the neckline, waistline, and sleeve ends.

**Themes**

Based on the information collected in the Material Culture Matrix Instrument and analysis of each selected artwork using knit as a medium, themes emerged from the data. I focus on four themes revealed during my research of knit artwork: art versus craft, labor, socio-politics, and gender.

**Art versus craft.** Jo Turney offers discussions about the distinctions between art and craft, stating: “[w]ithin crafts criticism, the imperfection of the maker’s touch has been central to the discourses that separate craft from fine (and mechanical) arts” (2007, p. 80). It should be noted that there are also imperfections in fine art objects. The reason that craft imperfections are noteworthy is due to the fact that machine made objects replaced handmade crafts; and crafts were then frequently compared to similar machine made objects. Crafts offer unique characteristics of the maker’s hand, suggesting an “authentic” object.

In addition, Auther further asserts that “[w]ithout any institutional authorization as an artwork, [craft activities] carr[y] tones of amateurism” (Auther, 2010, pp. 4-5). Western academic institutions embrace the fine arts model and theories such as Art for Art’s Sake, while
relegating crafts and craft skills to the margins. Craft is often placed in low or common culture realms because craft often tackles everyday objects and is rarely seen in art spaces, such as galleries and museums.

Furthermore, the knit artwork examined in this research suggested that the division between art and craft is often reflected in choice of mediums/materials and approach/skills/techniques. Similarly, Louise Mazanti found that craft is perceived as being “too focused on the aesthetic of a specific material” and that it “has never been able to set the agenda for a contemporary culture…” (Mazanti, 2011, p. 72). The theme of art versus craft emerged during this knit art research study. I examine *City of Stitches* by Isabel Berglund and *Knitting with Loaded Shotguns (Safeties Off)* by Dave Cole for their connections to the theme of art versus craft.

Isabel Berglund exemplifies the art versus craft theme in her work, *City of Stitches*, where she forces the viewer to engage with the actual stitches of the knit (craft skill) within the gallery installation (art space). Berglund’s piece is literally installed and attached to the art space’s walls. Still, she offers viewers the opportunity to don skirt or scarf or vest in the exhibit, reinforcing the functionality of the knit garments attached to the walls. The latter suggests “craft,” while the former suggests “art.”

In *Knitting with Loaded Shotguns (Safeties Off)*, Dave Cole knits with loaded shotguns using statuary bronze yarn. While the material choice would suggest an art sculpture or statue, the technique of knitting is from the craft realm. Furthermore, the shotguns reflect common culture objects that may be seen hanging above a fireplace in a home or domestic setting. Cole also has created a “functional” object by knitting a blanket; however, statuary bronze may be
uncomfortable against the skin, and it is hung on a gallery wall where it is unusable. Cole allows
the blanket to pool on floor, which is uncommon for fine art objects hung on a gallery wall.

Overall, both of these artworks reveal the theme of art versus craft in that they blur the
lines between art and craft while at the same time challenging both. Reflecting Turney’s
observations about crafts, both *City of Stitches* and *Knitting with Loaded Shotguns (Safeties Off)*
have evidence of the maker’s hand in the irregular and at times imperfect knit stitches. The
artworks examined in this research study suggest the distinction between art and craft is
subjective and context-specific. Perhaps, there needs to be questioning about these arbitrary
categorizations and resulting inclusions or exclusions.

**Labor.** Karl Marx stated “Labor produces not only commodities; it produces itself and
the worker as a *commodity*” (1844, p. 33). Knit fabric is a laborious and time-consuming process;
knitting is a repetition of stitch after stitch after stitch. The artworks selected for this study
represent endless hours of labor knitting. As previously stated, there are multiple steps necessary
to create even one knit stitch, and it reflects the chosen material, tools, and skills. The labor is
visually evident within the knit stitch(es). The theme of labor emerged during this knit art
research study. I examine *Knitting with Loaded Shotguns (Safeties Off)* by Dave Cole and
*Weighed Down* by Lindsay Obermeyer for their connections to the theme of labor.

Dave Cole represents knitting process with unexpected tools (i.e., shotguns) and materials
(i.e., statuary bronze) in *Knitting with Loaded Shotguns (Safeties Off)*. It is evident in the size and
imperfections of the stitches that Cole used the actual shotguns to knit the blanket structure.
Knitting with objects other than knitting needles adds labor and time to the process. Shotguns
lack a tapered end, requiring adjustments in technique move stitches on and off the barrel. The
statuary bronze yarn would present difficulties in its movement across the barrels of the shotguns, requiring continuous modifications.

Cole must have had hyper-focus on his technique of knitting because he using loaded shotguns that could have fired during the process. Labor, in this case, is more about mental exertion than physical. Each stitch imbued an understanding of technique in this high-risk process; that is, the stitches represent concentration, fear, intensity, stress, and exhilaration.

He purposefully added labor to an already time-consuming and labor-intensive process. Cole had a choice of tools, materials, and outcomes; at the crossroads of each choice he continued to add more levels of difficulty. It is almost as if Cole is challenging himself to invest more and more in this artwork. *Knitting with Loaded Shotguns (Safeties Off)* symbolizes Cole’s labor in commitment to the process of knitting with challenging and unorthodox tools and materials.

*Knitting with Loaded Shotguns (Safeties Off)* suggests a work-in-progress because the knitted work hangs from its knitting needles (i.e., shotguns). The piece implies continuous and ongoing labor because there are still “live” stitches on the shotguns. The viewer is left to wonder if Cole would take the piece off the gallery wall and just continue the act of knitting. Even the abstract rectangle shape of the knitted material suggests that it could be any length or any object.

*Weighed Down* by Lindsay Obermeyer symbolizes the labor of women within her series aptly named *Women’s Work?* The piece resembles a female sweater with weights at the ends of long arms. The weights and stretched long arms symbolize the physical and emotional labor that women typically experience in Western culture. As previously stated, women cope with a wide array of demanding roles while often placing their own health and happiness is a secondary
position. Most distinctly this piece suggests the ultimate labor and role of a woman, that of childbirth.

Obermeyer’s choice of materials (i.e., shades of pink mohair) gives the piece a feminine and fuzzy quality. The mohair symbolizes women’s role as sex objects, implying the continuous labor she must put forth because there are external and consequently internal pressures to always be young and beautiful.

Analyzing _Knitting with Loaded Shotguns (Safeties Off)_ and _Weighed Down_ revealed the theme of labor. Subthemes found within the theme of labor are metaphor, material, and method. All of the knit artwork examined in this study suggests metaphoric and symbolic constructs. Each artist used various materials uniquely appropriate for his or her inspirational vision and artistic objectives. The method for each piece that was knit was time-consuming and laborious.

**Socio-Politics.** Knitting and the resulting knit material have controversial socio-political positions in Western culture. Subsequently, knit is a vehicle in which to express and disseminate socio-political beliefs. Accordingly, Sabrina Gschwandtner stated, “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 (2008, p. 273). The theme of socio-politics surfaced during this knit art research study. I examine _City of Stitches_ by Isabel Berglund and _Cunt First_ by Lisa Anne Auerbach for their connections to the theme of socio-politics.

Isabel Berglund’s _City of Stitches_ reflects the theme of socio-politics in her re-envisioning the city as a soft, knitted space. If knits were to take over a city, everything would be nicer and softer. The knit garments attached to the walls that viewers may wear are like an embrace (or hug) from the city’s walls.
While it may not be Berglund’s primary objective, *City of Stitches*’ focal point is the large brown and green knit tree, which has undertones of an ecological socio-political statement where trees, instead of a building or commerce, are the city center. Moreover, the use of white yarn for the entirety of the city (beyond the tree) symbolizes purity and cleanliness, further promoting an ecological cityscape.

In *Cunty First*, Lisa Anne Auerbach tackles the professional and personal persona of the vice presidential candidate Sarah Palin from the 2008 McCain and Palin presidential campaign. In this sweater and skirt set, Auerbach mocks the overuse of specific terms by spoofing on their meaning and context. For example, Palin was quoted as saying she was a “maverick” and “drill baby drill.” Auerbach’s drew inspiration from these quotations, which she then knitted into her own socio-political phrases: “FIERCE TRANNEY MAVERICK TRAIN WRECK” and “SHILL BABY SHILL.” Additionally, the piece includes phrases such as “HALF BAKED ALASKA” and “CUNTY FIRST,” revealing Auerbach’s vitriol with Palin and her candidacy for a presidential race.

*Cunty First* reveals Auerbach’s political agenda, as well as unpacks her socio-politics leanings with her use of her art to disseminate propaganda. Since the structure of knit forces the artist to incorporate the text’s lines into the knitted stitches, the text reads pixilated until the viewer is at an appropriate distance. The knit garment draws the viewer closer into it, where s/he may notice the socio-political statements.

The theme of socio-politics is evident in the work of Berglund and Auerbach. Both artworks challenge status quo; however, the directness of their approach varies. Berglund is more subtle and abstract, while Auerbach forces the viewer to read her socio-politics. Furthermore, both pieces ask the question: when is it appropriate to have discussions about socio-politics?
Gender. Knitting, often considered the domain of women or the domestic, is worthy of artistic recognition; however, it is still understood as women’s work and therefore pejorative. Knit art carries with it many of the same stereotypes, bias, and encumbrances. The theme of gender emerged during this knit art research study. I examine Weighed Down by Lindsay Obermeyer, Cunty First by Lisa Anne Auerbach, and Knitting with Loaded Shotguns (Safeties Off) by Dave Cole for the theme of gender.

Weighed Down by Lindsay Obermeyer addresses the multiplicity of Western (and perhaps global) women’s roles. This is visually communicated with Obermeyer’s knit weights at the end of arms in shapes that resemble punching bags. Two possible interpretations emerge from examining this artwork. First, the weights women endure are represented by punching bags, suggesting a heavy burden. Second, women are empowered to use the weighted punching bags at the end of their sweater sleeves to metaphorically hit back at society.

On the other hand, the weights at the end of the sleeves render the garment useless, reflecting the notion of women’s hopelessness and hands being tied with regards to gender equality. The knit sweater’s lack of function implies the woman is useless because of her managing the heavy burdens at the end of the sleeves. The flaccid nature of the sweater further implies the woman’s impotence and lack of agency in Western culture.

As stated in the labor theme, Weighed Down is knit from fuzzy pink mohair yarns, which metaphorically suggests the sexuality of a woman. This is further evident in the shape of the sweater. The texture and color of the piece, as well as its shape, imply Freudian undertones of female genitalia. Obermeyer’s piece suggests through gender that women have a completely different set of burdens and issues weighing them down than men do.
In *City of Stitches*, Isabel Berglund subtly suggests the theme of gender by knitting a white pristine cityscape with matching garments attached around the central object of a knitted brown and green tree. While the city is typically considered a masculine construct, Berglund creates a soft and feminine version of the city in *City of Stitches*. The cold construction elements of cement, steel, and glass are replaced with warm materials of yarn knit into large gauge stitches.

Berglund also suggests gender when she includes garments as part of the installation piece. Knitting and the construction of garments are stereotypically considered female pursuits. The garments attached to the walls of *City of Stitches* envelop and consume the viewers willing to wear the knit scarf, skirt, or vest. The consumption of the viewer into the artwork parallels the conspicuous consumption of the shopper in the city, again the epicenter of commerce. The shopper is traditionally thought to be female, or shopping is considered a gendered practice leaning toward females.

It should be noted that “[a]fter the Industrial Revolution, when European textile mills attracted both male and female workers, the exclusively male knitting guilds declined, and hand knitting endured as essentially a female household occupation, a tradition exported to America” (Macdonald, 1988, p. xvi). In various ways, Cole challenges notions that knitting is a woman’s activity (or craft) in his piece *Knitting with Loaded Shotguns (Safeties Off)*. First, Cole is a male who knits and creates knit artwork. The activity and outcome defy the stereotypes of women being the traditional practitioners of knitting in Western culture. Second, he embraces non-traditional materials, such as Kevlar, fiberglass, and lead, for knitting his pieces. Third, Cole uses hyper-masculine elements in his artwork. For example, *Knitting with Loaded Shotguns (Safeties Off)* included shotguns as knitting needles, which he loaded with ammunition, making them
lethal. Furthermore, the shotgun is a phallic symbol and when loaded has the potential to expel the buckshot.

One of the consequences of industrialization to Western culture is the explicit notion of separate gendered spaces: men in the public and women in the private (Brunton, 2001). In time, the public sphere was more valued than the domestic sphere because there is monetary value associated with and assigned to public activities, such as trade, commerce, business. Patricia Thompson notes that there is a need to address the gap between public and private spheres and, subsequently, the genders regarding the unpaid and undervalued work often done by women (Thompson, 1988).

As previously stated, knitting is commonly considered a domestic activity done by women for leisure without financial compensation (Stalp & Winge, 2008). Consequently, knit and knitting carry gendered notions and burdens. The artists in this research study challenge those stereotypes by creating art for public spaces (i.e., galleries and museums) and knit as an occupation. It is not surprising that the artwork examined in this research reflects the challenges and struggles of the artists who embrace knit as a medium.

Findings

In this research study I examined four pieces of art that used knit as a medium, from which emerged four themes. Here, I develop a deeper discussion for each theme as I construct the overall understanding of knit as an artistic medium as seen in City of Stitches, Knitting with Loaded Shotguns (Safeties Off), Cunty First, and Weighed Down.

The theme of art versus craft was best discussed examining City of Stitches by Isabel Berglund and Knitting with Loaded Shotguns (Safeties Off) by Dave Cole. I found the division between art and craft often reflected in choice of mediums/materials and
approach/skills/techniques. Traditionally in the Western art canon the acceptable forms of fine art include painting and sculpture. Consequently, knit and knitting fall well outside the realm of art according to the traditional cannon. Furthermore, knitting was not considered worthy of inclusion in the Arts and Crafts movement, despite the fact that William Morris started the movement built on the framework of handcrafts. Thus, the artists and their artwork represent a change in the art paradigm to be more inclusive of knitting and knit objects.

In addition, the artworks in this study blurred the lines between art and craft while at the same time challenging both. The pieces show evidence of the maker’s hand in the irregular and at times imperfect knit stitches. The artworks suggest that the bias for art or craft is subjective and context specific. As a result, I question the arbitrary categorization and resulting inclusions or exclusions within the art and craft realms.

I analyzed *Knitting with Loaded Shotguns (Safeties Off)* and *Weighed Down*; both of these artworks revealed the theme of labor. Subthemes found within the theme of labor are metaphor, material, and method. All of the selected artworks for this study visually represent labor. Knitting is a laborious and time-consuming process. The artworks selected for this study represent countless hours of labored knitting, with numerous decisions necessary to create even a single knit stitch, informed by the chosen materials, tools, and skills. Accordingly, the theme of labor is visually evident within every knit stitch.

The theme of socio-politics is evident in the most of the artwork selected for this study. I, however, focused on the *City of Stitches* and *Cunty First* as examples of the theme socio-politics. Although both artists vary in their approach, both challenge status quo. In these artworks, knitting and the resulting knit material are shown to be a vehicle for these artists to present their socio-political positions and challenge accepted norms in Western culture. As a result, knit art
A Thematic Analysis of the Material Culture of Artwork Using Knit as an Artistic Medium

with its autonomous position may be used to represent and disseminate socio-political ideologies, and is as valid as art that exists without socio-political agenda.

I examine *Weighed Down* by Lindsay Obermeyer, *Cunty First* by Lisa Annee Auerbach, and *Knitting with Loaded Shotguns (Safeties Off)* by Dave Cole for the theme of gender. Unpacking these artworks revealed the continued gender bias. Furthermore, the artists face challenges and struggles using knit as a medium because of its connections to domestic spheres and the resulting stereotypes, bias, and encumbrances. The artists in this study challenged stereotypes and bias by moving knit into art and public spaces, thus redefining the traditional connotations surrounding knit and knitting.

All of the knit artwork examined in this study suggests metaphoric and symbolic constructs, which revealed four significant themes: art versus craft, labor, socio-politics, and gender. I found each theme informed the others in their connections and intersections. For example, I had difficulties not discussing gender within the labor theme, and the theme of socio-politics seemed pervasive in all of the themes. Overall, these themes present a holistic narrative about knit as an artistic medium.

**Summary**

In this chapter, I presented my findings for knit artwork. I began by introducing four individual artists whose works I focus on in this study. I included for each artwork a Material Culture Matrix Instrument, complete with details about each piece of artwork. I concluded with my research findings based on the four themes found in the selected artwork: art versus craft, labor, socio-politics, and gender. In Chapter 5, I offer my conclusions on the knit art research study.
Chapter 5: Conclusions

Knit material is commonly thought of as fabric for clothing, not as an artistic expression. In this study, I aimed to examine four pieces of artwork that used knit as a medium. The themes revealed in this study demonstrate the importance of knit as an artistic medium.

In this chapter, I provide an overview of my research study and findings. I also address the “so what?” question regarding significance and importance of this study. Then I discuss the implications of the study to academic disciplines as well as popular culture. Next, I share the research limitations I encountered during various phases of my research. I conclude this chapter with a discussion of possible considerations and directions for future research in this area.

Study Overview

I began this study with a literature review of past arts and crafts movements, including handcrafts, as well as an examination of contemporary artists who use knit as an artistic medium. From this review, I formed my research question. Then I selected material culture as the methodology for this study, which suited my expectations for a qualitative research study. In addition, I used Art for Art’s Sake and Avant Garde theories to further inform my examination of past art movements and their similarities and distinctions to the Contemporary Craft Movement. For this study, I created a Material Culture Matrix Instrument for documenting raw data about the four pieces of art selected for this study. The data were coded, and analysis revealed four themes, which led to my findings.

After the extensive literature review of past art movements, I discovered a lack of research in the area of knit being recognized as an artistic medium. Subsequently, my research question guiding this study was: What does knit as a medium offer contemporary artists producing material culture?
I chose to analyze the following works:

1. *Knitting with Loaded Shotguns (Safeties Off)* (Dave Cole, 2008);
2. *Cunty First* (Lisa Ann Auerbach, 2008);
3. *City of Stitches* (Isabel Berglund, 2003); and

The criteria I used for selection of the artwork included:

- knit used as a medium for the creation of artwork
- creation by an established artist (i.e., publications, exhibitions, reviews, etc.)
- artists relevant to the contemporary arts and crafts movements (i.e., artists present in multiple media arenas, especially social media)
- artwork rich with content and subtext
- artwork must challenge and embrace knitting tropes.

The artwork selected was representative of knit as an art medium and also of individual genres.

**Findings Overview**

I used E. McClung Fleming’s artifact examination model of five properties—history, material, design, construction, and function—and four operations: identification, evaluation, cultural analysis, and interpretation. Based on Fleming’s model, I created a twenty-unit matrix instrument (blank and completed versions in Appendix A and B, respectively.) The Material Culture Matrix Instrument allowed me to qualitatively analyze each of the four artifacts selected for this study. The subsequent analysis of the selected artwork reflects the themes that emerged from the interpretation of the pieces.

Four significant themes were identified from the artwork. All of the pieces suggested metaphoric and symbolic constructs. The themes were art versus craft, labor, socio-politics, and
gender. Each theme overlapped and informed the others. These themes provide a narrative that speaks to the reasons these artists choose knit as an artistic medium.

**So What?**

This study is significant because it illuminates the idea that knit is not just for the domestic realm, that it can be, in fact, used as a vehicle for expression. This notion is multidisciplinary as it intersects with dress, art, and visual and material culture. This study contributes to dress studies as it reveals that knit may be used for artistic expression as well as clothing. In addition, a structure that is typically associated only with clothing is added as a potential medium for the artists seeking to find a new mode of expression.

The Arts and Crafts Movement was built upon the elevation of domestic crafts including needlework such as tapestry, needlepoint, and embroidery. Weaving was also celebrated as a true art form. Luminaries of the movement deemed the object created by one laborer to be more authentic than mass-produced goods. Although a handcraft with a long tradition, knitting is rarely, if ever, mentioned as a recognized handcraft within past craft (or art) movements. The feminist art movement of the 1970s acknowledged artists returning to materials typically associated with the feminine realm as a means for socio political expression; however, their chosen medium was typically weaves/wovens, not knits/knitting.

Research pertaining to knits is usually focused on the technical aspects of knits, specifically technological advancements in the production of warp and weft knitting. Several scholars also focused in the history of knitting, such as Anne Macdonald (1988), Susan Strawn (2007), and Richard Rutt (1987). Each of these scholars discusses the lack of research and dissemination regarding knits and knitting within dress studies. Unfortunately, much of arts
and/or craft movements are also lacking in their consideration of knit because of its early relegation to the domestic sphere.

**Study’s Implications to Dress Studies and Beyond**

In dress studies, knits are reduced to clothing such as t-shirts and leggings, and knitting is a leisure activity. The discipline does not readily acknowledge knit as an artistic medium. Still, dress studies scholars are not surprised to find knit being adopted and co-opted by artists. Unfortunately, the medium of knit suffers from the same biases common to other apparel textiles and related activities.

As an instructor in Apparel and Textile Design within an Art Department, I am constantly reminded of the gap between design and art disciplines. The discipline of art recognizes non-functional creations as “art” but expects the mediums to fit within the canon. The discipline of design demands function and relies heavily on digital outcomes. Neither discipline readily acknowledges or pursues knit structures as mediums for artistic or functional outcomes.

Within popular culture, knit is embraced more than in the academic spheres. For example, the practice of guerilla knitting or yarn bombing emerged in the late 1990s and was perceived as a crime. Still, more and more people participate in this activity and even post their works and outcomes on social media. Academia is slow to embrace these new creative forms of artistic expression, whereas popular culture is a ready vessel for the insertion of new and creative forms.

**Limitations of the Study**

This study had numerous limitations. Each of the artists, for example, could have an entire dissertation or monograph written about them. In this study, I examined four pieces of
artwork (instead of the individual artists) in order to understand the use of knit within a manageable study. The artworks selected were also impacted by availability.

In this study, I examined four pieces of artwork. Throughout the process of analysis, I discovered that documenting the material culture of four pieces of artwork was an overwhelming task. Moreover, the thematic analysis of each piece and collation of data for final emergent themes from all of the artworks revealed that fewer pieces were necessary for the study’s outcomes.

Limitations regarding the themes are reflected in my difficulties focusing on themes individually and not allowing them to become unclear in their overlaps and commonalities. For example, the theme of gender was evident within the labor theme. Also, the theme of socio-politics seemed pervasive into all of the themes.

**Future Research**

Future research of knit as an artistic medium may be better served to examine an individual artist or individual work and its implications for dress studies, as well as art. This would allow the researcher to tightly focus emerging information. The themes revealed in this study support the need for additional research in this area.

In this study, I found it necessary to move beyond the established art versus craft paradigm. Unfortunately, this was not always possible because of knit being entrenched in the metanarrative of its history: not part of the art canon. Instead future research should include micronarratives that are more inclusive to gender, material, and structure (see Lyotard, 1984).

**Summary**

This study reveals that knits offer artists a new medium, which addresses and critiques culture. Not only are these artists creating conceptual works to address issues commonly
associated with gender, labor, and sociopolitical issues, but they are also using a medium (i.e.,
knit) entrenched and stereotyped by these same issues. The art objects further the narrative of
inclusion over exclusion, the leveling of the hierarchy of art versus craft, and the acceptance that
art can be autonomous and address issues of social responsibility.
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isabel-berglund/


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APPENDICES
# Appendix A

## Material Culture Matrix Instrument

Rebecca E. Schuiling, 2012

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Identification (Description)</th>
<th>Evaluation (Judgment based on other works of its kind)</th>
<th>Cultural Analysis (Object within contemporary culture)</th>
<th>Interpretation (Meaning of artifact in relation to our own culture)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>History</strong> (When and Where Conditions and Functions of Object)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Material</strong> (What the object is made of)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Design</strong> (Principles and Elements)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Construction</strong> (Techniques used)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Function</strong> (Uses or Roles)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix B

Material Culture Matrix Instrument
Rebecca E. Schuiling, 2013
Artifact: City of Stitches
Date of Work: 2003-2005
Image:
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Identification</th>
<th>Evaluation</th>
<th>Cultural Analysis</th>
<th>Interpretation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>History</strong></td>
<td>Park Cocoon Enclosure Carnival Ride Absorbed into the walls Overtaking, Enclosure</td>
<td>Covers a room – envelops the viewer or participant Encourages viewer to become participant</td>
<td>Knit object-expectation for it to be functional, although you can wear it, you can’t wear it outside of the room</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Material</strong></td>
<td>Size 17 or 19 needles Large, heavy yarn</td>
<td>Knitted with traditional knitting needles and yarn Used white yarn</td>
<td>The tree is a tree even though it is not made of wood, leaves are not made of leaves</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
A Thematic Analysis of the Material Culture of Artwork Using Knit as an Artistic Medium

| Design | Knitted room
17 or 19 gauge
Large heavy yarn
13 ft tree in the center
Knitted garments stitched to the “walls” of the piece that viewers can put on | It is not a garment, despite having the ability to be worn | Resembles a tree Art that is wearable resembles garment | What does it mean that the landscape is white, the tree is green and brown, almost a cartoon version of a tree |
| Construction | Knitted with size 17 or 19 gauge needle White, green, brown yarn | Size is impressive Traditional knit material, although not a traditional fine art material | Resemble garments, although they are more like harnesses, Strap you to a wall, like the carnival ride Roundabout | Garter stitch technique, quicker construction that Stockinette Unexpected use (in gallery, as a tree) |
| Function | Art Hangs in gallery Covers the walls | Art in a gallery that you are allowed/supposed to touch | Supposed to be overwhelming Surrounds you, engulfs you Recognize pieces that are attached as wearable | How do you see the art piece differently when you are part of it |
### Material Culture Matrix Instrument

**Rebecca E. Schuiling,** 2012  
**Artist:** Dave Cole  
**Artifact:** Knitting with Loaded Shotguns (Safeties Off)  
**Size of Work:** 72 x 66 x 10 inches  
**Date of Work:** 2008  
**Image:**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Identification</th>
<th>Evaluation</th>
<th>Cultural Analysis</th>
<th>Interpretation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>History</strong></td>
<td>Shotguns Grandpa’s mantle,</td>
<td>Male artist working with hyper masculine materials</td>
<td>Resembles guns that cross above a mantle Resemble needles in</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Material</td>
<td>Shotguns, spun statuary bronze</td>
<td>Not typical fiber used to knit Guns not typical knitting tools</td>
<td>Guns are not hand guns or guns typically seen in this use Statuary bronze atypical Big enough to be a blanket that covers a bed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------------</td>
<td>--------------------------------</td>
<td>-----------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Design</td>
<td>Two guns barrels facing each other, diagonal</td>
<td>It's not a garment It resembles other knitting in process</td>
<td>Resembles a bAnnee, scroll, knitting in process (knitting still on the needles)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Construction</td>
<td>Knitted with 12 gauge shotguns</td>
<td>Yarn is unique Needles unique Stitches are uneven due to nature of creation</td>
<td>Resembles knitting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Function</td>
<td>Art Hangs in Gallery</td>
<td>Why does the work pool on the floor? Is it supposed to look like knitting as it pools in your lap?</td>
<td>It’s a piece of art, looks very different than other pieces of art Looks utilitarian Looks domestic</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Material Culture Matrix Instrument

**Rebecca E. Schuiling, 2013**  
**Artist:** Lisa Anne Auerbach  
**Artifact:** Cunty First  
**Date of Work:** 2008  
**Image:**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Identification</th>
<th>Evaluation</th>
<th>Cultural Analysis</th>
<th>Interpretation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>History</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sweater Skirt Set</td>
<td>Yellow, Navy Blue?</td>
<td>Short, shows legs Billboard esque-proclaiming political leanings</td>
<td>Statements that have political ramifications Reflect the artists options of Sarah Palin On display in</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yellow text “hot mess”</td>
<td>Yellow images of guns</td>
<td>Text has relationship to political culture around the 2008 election Sweater sets out of fashion</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Aspen during the Democratic convention held in Denver and visitors to the museum were allowed to check out the sweaters and wear them around town.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Material</th>
<th>Machine Knit Stockinette Stitch Finer gauge of needle for text to be clear and legible</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Materials are similar to materials used to make clothing but in this case is meant as art</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Yarn resembles commercial quality sweaters and garments</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The two colors are necessary, as this is how the text is visible and constructed</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Design</th>
<th>Bias skirt Resembles a cheerleader outfit Yellow and dark blue</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Seems to be a sweater and skirt, recognizable garments, however, semiotic, with text</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Undervalued as art because of its associations with clothing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Stereotypically feminine silhouette Innocuous materials used to make volatile statements</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Complete evisceration of Sarah Palin on personal and professional life</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Construction</th>
<th>Perceptual opposites</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>It is a garment and it is art Breaking rules of where art goes and where it is displayed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Quite possible devalues work by letting it leave the art gallery</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Garment as Art</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Machine Knit Fast&lt;br&gt;Can quickly be made for topical issues</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Function</th>
<th>Garment worn for political expression</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Its intended role is to be art primarily but as the artist wears the piece, and she has let others wear the pieces, there is now a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Immediately read as garment, not immediately read as art</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Intended function is to be art, garment and sociopolitical</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Billboard for artists belief Meant to be thought provoking, making viewer question their position</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>competing categorization, is it art, fashion, design, craft? Has more emotional responses to texts on the piece because they are so politically charged</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Material Culture Matrix Instrument

Rebecca E. Schuiling, 2012  
Artist: Lindsay Obermeyer  
Artifact: Woman’s Work – Weighed Down  
Size of Work: 20” x 19” with 50” sleeves  
Date of Work: 2005  
Images:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Identification</th>
<th>Evaluation</th>
<th>Cultural Analysis</th>
<th>Interpretation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| History        | Knit Sweater  
But it does not function as a sweater, it is a visual metaphor  
Large balls weighing down the sleeves  
Why are they ball shape, rather | Doesn’t function as a sweater because the sleeves lack openings due to the weights at the end | Knit object-expectation for it to be functional, although you can wear it, you cannot wear it and have use of your hands | Feminist concept  
Sweaters are not usually considered to be fine art |
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Material</th>
<th>Hand Knit Mohair</th>
<th>Knitted with traditional knitting needles and yarn. Not sure material used to create weights.</th>
<th>Mohair is a premium fiber, expensive. Two different colors, pink and hot pink. Blatively feminine colors.</th>
<th>Why Mohair? Why Hand Knit? This piece is already going to be placed into the “other” category, or considered less than, so a very expensive material is perhaps to elevate the piece. Unfulfilled desire in that the piece is soft, fuzzy, warm, pink, but you are not supposed to wear it.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Design</td>
<td>Balls on sleeves look like punching bags. Its structure and form is a sweater which is clothing, but this is art.</td>
<td>Resembles a woman’s or girls’ sweater. Modest sweater. Weights resemble punching bags.</td>
<td>Pink coded as feminine. Darker pink in weights serves as focal point.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Construction</td>
<td>Stockinette Stitch, Mohair yarn. Smaller gauge needles. Traditional knit material, although not a traditional fine art material.</td>
<td>Hand Knit, higher value. Mohair higher value.</td>
<td>Conspicuous Consumption. Stockinette Stitch Rib knit at neck, wrist and waist. Looks like a dainty women’s sweater, but is supporting heavy weights.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Function</td>
<td>Art. But makes you question is it art? Because it looks like clothing. Art-visual metaphor.</td>
<td>Weights meant to be visual metaphor for struggles that women face in contemporary culture.</td>
<td>Pink sweater means feminine. Weights metaphor for all the burdens that weight women down.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>