

# Knit... with grit

## Politics & the knitting needle

Think of knitting and you may think of booties for babies and warm scarves for wintry days. For some, however, the knitting needle is a tool in their political arsenal, the instrument that allows them to connect with a particular audience and the thing that will eventually help them change their patch of the world.

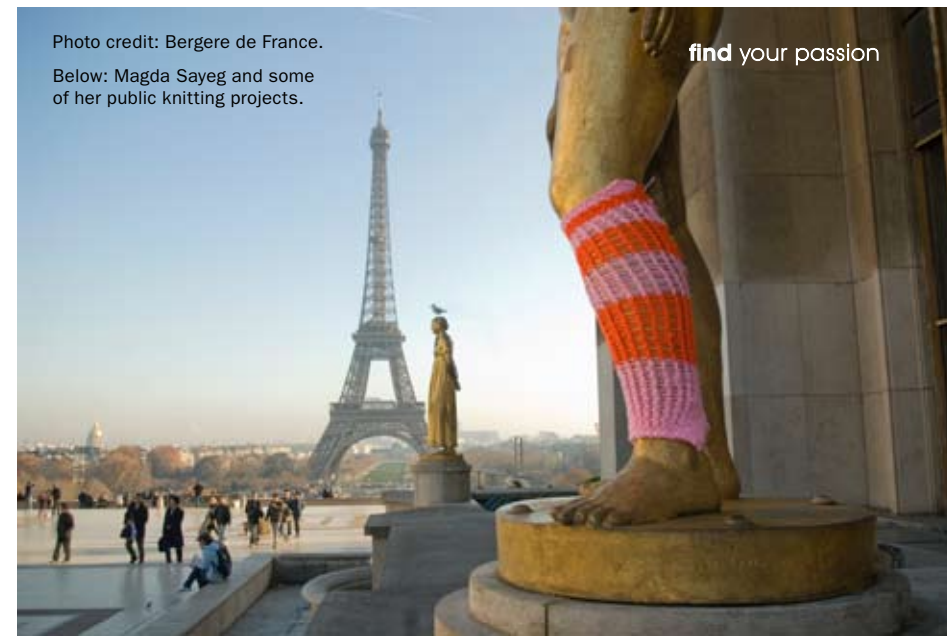


Lisa Anne Auerbach

Photo credit: Bergere de France.

Below: Magda Sayeg and some of her public knitting projects.

find your passion



"No one ever knits out of hate," says Texan, Magda Sayeg. "It's always about love." Magda is the founder of Knitta, the group of daring knitters who, in 2005, began taking knitting to the streets, literally – 'tagging' or marking public buildings or utilities with knitted graffiti and delighting and intriguing the public along the way.

"What I do – sometimes called yarn bombing – puts knitting on its head. It makes graffiti look good and I think people find it charming," says Magda. "There is something nostalgic about knitting, people can relate to it."

Hand in hand with growing renewed interest in craft and handmade items in general, there also seems to be a worldwide trend towards using craft skills, knitting in particular, to do more than decorate or distract.

**"No one ever knits out of hate. It's always about love"**  
- Magda Sayeg

"Save the world through craft? I think that's totally possible," declares New Zealand born, Victorian-based Rayna Fahey. "Right now craft may be the new cool but it has a really strong political history."

With a degree in women's studies and a professional background in politics, this young mother is currently the editor of [radicalcrossstitch.com](http://radicalcrossstitch.com) and a co-founding producer of both the Melbourne Craft Cartel and the Melbourne Revolutionary Craft Circle.

Rayna says that, while she had done extensive study on women's issues, she was "upset" to discover all the stories she'd never heard once she became interested in craft and mixed that interest with her political activism.

"There have been many creative forms of resistance over the years ... When I found out about things like the Greenham Common Women's Peace Camp or the Global Solidarity Quilt I realised women like this knew how to

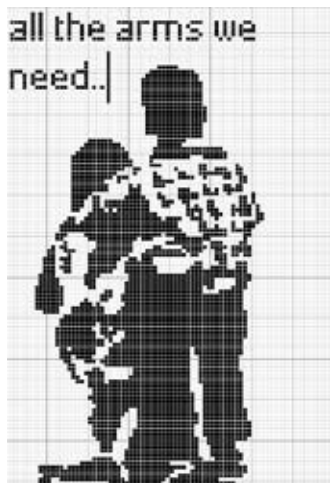


challenge people's ideas of protest," she says.

The Greenham Common Camp was established to protest at nuclear weapons being sited at RAF Greenham Common in Berkshire, England. The camp began in September 1981 when 'Women for Life on Earth' arrived to protest against the Government's decision to allow cruise missiles to be based there. While the last missiles didn't leave the camp until 1991 the camp itself remained in place until 2000 after protestors won the right to house a memorial there.

In 2004 The World March of Women, an international network of 6,000





Works on this page by Rayna Fahey. Clockwise from above left: Alternative Energy Sweatshirt stitched as a fundraiser for the Austin Yellow Bike Project; Sorry Fence - stitched on the day of the Apology, Tattersalls Lane, Melbourne; Rayna Fahey; cross stitch pattern; Free Tibet Denim Jacket stitched during the Olympic Torch Relay 2008; Free Tibet pattern.

daughter, Tara. She already had a political blog (web diary) so decided to add a page about cross stitch. "My web statistics went through the roof. People were craving radical craft," she says.

One of her heroines in the field is American, Betsy Greer, who runs a website called Craftivism. Betsy has an M.A. in Sociology and her master's dissertation was on knitting, DIY culture and community development. At the end of 2008 her book, 'Knitting For Good' was published. The book is a guide to using knitting and creativity to improve your life, the lives of those in your community and the world at large.

"The backbone of craftivism is that craft is powerful," says Betsy. "It can transform yourself, your community and your world if you let it in." Before 2001 Betsy says she was "not crafty at all" but that Craftivism all began when she noticed a "power and a resonance" to the handmade.

"I was at the annual Greenwich Village Halloween parade and noticed these giant hand-crafted puppets of political figures," Betsy says. "As this was a few days away from the Al Gore/George Bush US presidential race



Left: Cross stitch that Betsy did for an international anti-war graffiti cross stitch series she's working on. Above: Betsy Greer.

in 2000, the puppets were made to express dissenting opinions about the views of George Bush ... About the same time I was learning to knit and wondered if I could reproduce that same resonance the puppets had.

**"It (craft) can transform you community and your world if you let it in."**  
- Betsy

"I started writing about craftivism as a sociological experiment, i.e., start using a word that no one uses, talk about it in person and online and then see who picks it up. It's led to hundreds of awesomely supportive emails from people all over the world expressing how craft makes them feel and has helped them for the better."

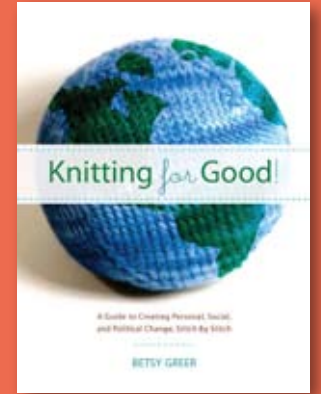
Betsy has an ambitious project underway currently, one that involves - hopefully - travelling all over the world to meet with various groups making radical and political and social craft to explore different avenues that people take with their creativity. "I want to unearth the works that people are doing not only for the sake of letting the world know more about them, but for them to realise that they are not alone in their fight," she says.

Her book shows how craft can help people connect to others in their community and express their own personal style and creativity. One knitter who is something of a poster girl for this trend is Lisa Anne Auerbach who is famous for jumpers, or sweaters, bearing political messages as varied as supporting Barack Obama to opposing the building of a bottle shop in her neighbourhood.

Lisa says her sweaters respond to specific political concerns in an overt way. "Most everything (I make) these days that is shown has some sort of statement in mind." She learned her craft from a library book after finishing graduate school. "I was mostly doing photography at school but when I graduated I lost access to the darkroom," she says. "Knitting stood in as a way to continue an art practice without a darkroom. This was in the days before digital photography."

A publisher, an activist and an exhibiting artist, Lisa's work spans many areas. On one of her websites - Steal This Sweater - her wonderful motto is "Stop making scarves, start making trouble". Recently, however, she has been working on a collection of jumpers and knitted skirts for a

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### Knitting for Good! By Betsy Greer

Reviewed by Rayna Fahey

'Knitting for Good' is a beautifully written tale of the personal, local and global benefits of craft. While this book still contains patterns, the focus is on the story so it is perfect for non-knitting craft lovers.

Through 'Knitting for Yourself', 'Knitting for Your Community' and 'Knitting for The World', Betsy takes the reader on her personal journey as a knitter and as an activist. Starting from her own background in the Riot Grrl DiY scene, we read how a staunch young feminist embraces a traditional domestic craft in a way that enhances rather than betrays her political beliefs.

A major highlight of the book is the sidebar sections written by various people who have inspired the author, complementing the text and truly demonstrating the importance of community within the craft movement. Next time someone scoffs at your crafting, you can proudly raise your chin and declare, "I'm saving the world".

Also notable is the book's production with its gorgeous handmade cover and lovely illustrations. It's a perfect read for overcast Sunday afternoons, accompanied by a cup of tea and your latest craft project within arm's reach.

Available online through [craftivism.com/book.html](http://craftivism.com/book.html).

You can also listen to an interview with Betsy Greer on the Melbourne Craft Cartel Podcast. Visit [craftcartel.com](http://craftcartel.com) and click on 'podcast'.



Left: Lisa Anne Auerbach and model in her 9-11 ensemble. Above: Lisa's sweaters.



website and a movement she hopes can “help users and participants consider the pleasure of hobbyist and pre-industrial craft, compared to the labour exploitation in the global garment industry. It also promotes healthy micro-economies that have fair labour practices.”

The two largest and longest projects she's taken on so far are the Nike Blanket Petition and the Stitch for Senate project ([www.stitchforsenate.us](http://www.stitchforsenate.us)). The Blanket is 14-feet wide and made up of knitted together squares that form a bitmap of the Nike swoosh logo.

The petition is to the global brand Nike who Cat feels needs to improve conditions for its workers. It is made up of handmade 10cm squares, each representing a signature. Participants come from over 30 countries. It began in 2003 and was finished in Istanbul in 2007 and has been touring around. “Next it is going to the Textile Museum in Toronto Canada,” says Cat.

The artist's work combines digital media, craft and activism but it was back in 1999, while working “a lot with computers” that Cat learned to knit. She says she was looking for something “low-tech and hands-on”. “Before long I was combining knitting with computing and thinking about how to engage people with activism through crafting. Now I teach digital media to university art students in Boston.”

used ‘women's work’ such as sewing and embroidery to make many of their incredible banners,” she says.

It's important to me to find the correct language to explore issues. For the most part, using humour helps to make the message more accessible ... my work appears more in the ‘art context’ than in the mainstream craft context.”

### Stop making scarves, start making trouble!

One of the most ambitious projects Lisa has tackled was a knitted yurt, commissioned by V-Day, a global movement to stop violence against women and girls. It had the text of the Vagina Monologues knitted into the design and was 10 feet in diameter.

Fellow USA resident, Cat Mazza, is also unafraid to mix the ‘knitty’ with the gritty. She runs MicroRevolt, a

show in LA, dealing with “a mix of specific and local concerns”.

“The oft-quoted idea – ‘the personal is political’ - resonates with me,” Lisa says. Examples of this include the jumper that says ‘I (heart) my Feral Cat’ on the front and, on the back, says ‘I (spade) my feral cat’. “I made it after a feral left four kittens in our garden,” Lisa explains. “Soon after we spayed the mother cat and found homes for the kittens. Two of them live with us, as housecats, and the feral mother is outside still.”

Another jumper says ‘Where there's drink there's always danger’ and this one refers specifically to a protest against the proposed expansion of a liquor store in Lisa's neighbourhood. “The slogan is from a temperance poster and, in addition to the local reference, I was interested in the way the temperance movement in the US




Cat Mazza's 'Stitch for Senate'. Above: Nike blanket Right: Cat Mazza.

Cat doesn't think craft is inherently political or that crafting is always social commentary but she does say that, in the USA, there's a tradition of political organising within craft circles and this is something that interests her.

“Nothing else has opened up the world for me and given me all these opportunities like knitting,” observes Magda. “Our yarn bombing was written up quite early in Australia but here in the USA we got mentioned on ‘Saturday Night Live’ (TV) after wrapping a pole in New York's Times Square with a fuzzy green sleeve and enveloping a ‘Welcome to Manhattan’ sign in a rainbow tube. The initial energy was very intense, people were very excited.”

According to Magda Sayeg her primary intentions were not consciously political but she now sees them as a form of political statement. “I don't know, at the time there was so much fear out there, I just wanted people to stop and smell the roses. I wanted them to actually see things like stop signs or sign posts that they walk past every day. I remember when I put a hat

with a pom pom on a fire hydrant. All of a sudden this cold sterile thing was just so adorable, charming and cuddly. I wanted to take it home.” 

### To find out more

#### Magda Sayeg

- [www.Knittaplease.com](http://www.Knittaplease.com)
- [www.facebook.com/pages/knittaplease/26807645578](http://www.facebook.com/pages/knittaplease/26807645578)
- See Magda 'knitting a bus' in Mexico [www.mexicoreporter.com/?p=1182](http://www.mexicoreporter.com/?p=1182)

Magda may be coming to Canberra, Australia, later this year to be part of a knitting installation work at the National Gallery of Australia. Keep an eye on [nga.gov.au](http://nga.gov.au) for more information.

#### Rayna Fahey

- [www.radicalcrossstitch.com](http://www.radicalcrossstitch.com)
- [www.craftcartel.com](http://www.craftcartel.com)
- [www.radicalrags.etsy.com](http://www.radicalrags.etsy.com)

#### Betsy Greer

- [www.craftivism.com](http://www.craftivism.com)

#### Lisa Anne Auerbach

- [lisanneauerbach.com](http://lisanneauerbach.com)
- [blog - stealthissweater.blogspot.com](http://blog-stealthissweater.blogspot.com)



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- [www.TheTractHouse.com](http://www.TheTractHouse.com)
- [www.ravelry.com/projects/LisaAnne/my-jewish-grandma-is-voting-for-obama](http://www.ravelry.com/projects/LisaAnne/my-jewish-grandma-is-voting-for-obama)

Lisa is part of a group show called Nine Lives at the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles that runs until May 3. See [www.hammer.ucla.edu/exhibitions/detail/exhibition\\_id/151](http://www.hammer.ucla.edu/exhibitions/detail/exhibition_id/151).

She is in another group show called Craftwerk 2.0 at Jönköpings County Museum in Sweden in Sept 2009. See [www.jkpglm.se/english/english.html](http://www.jkpglm.se/english/english.html).

### Cat Mazza

- MicroRevolt offers a free knit pattern web application called knitPro: [www.microrevolt.org/knitPro](http://www.microrevolt.org/knitPro)
- Stitch for Senate can be accessed at [www.stitchforsenate.us](http://www.stitchforsenate.us).

Forthcoming exhibits include ‘She Will Always Be Younger Than Us’ concurrent with Judy Chicago in Thread Textile Museum of Canada Toronto, Canada until 7 Sep, 2009. See [www.textilemuseum.ca](http://www.textilemuseum.ca).