

University of Texas at El Paso

From the Selected Works of Anne M. Giangiulio

2008

'Unknitting: Challenging Textile Traditions' Exhibition Catalog

Anne M Giangiulio, *University of Texas at El Paso*



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Unknitting

Challenging Textile Traditions



This publication accompanies the exhibition *Unknitting: Challenging Textile Traditions* which was organized by the Stanlee and Gerald Rubin Center for the Visual Arts at the University of Texas at El Paso, April 10–August 2, 2008.

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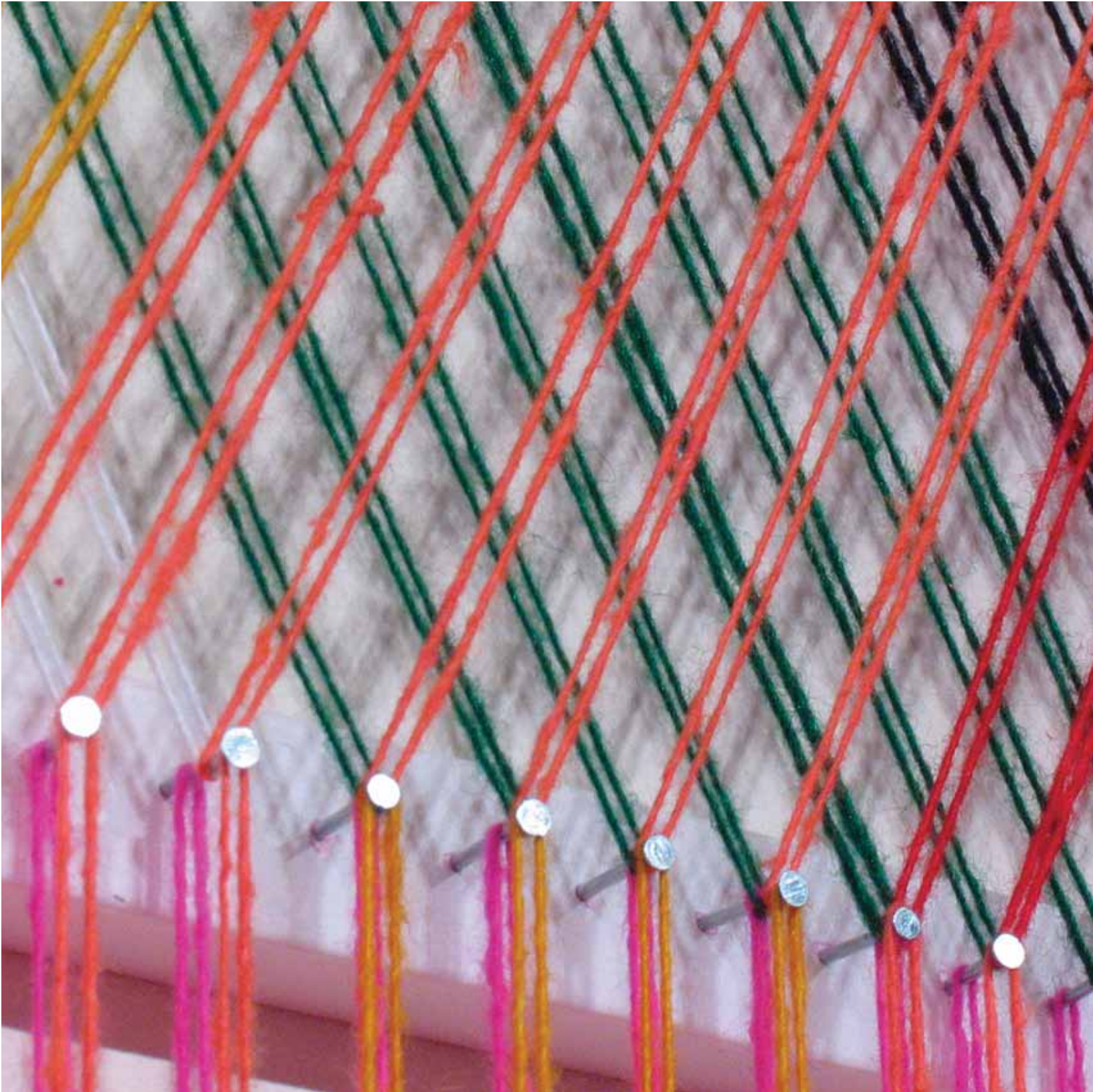
Unknitting

Challenging Textile Traditions

Organized by

Stanlee and Gerald Rubin Center for the Visual Arts
at the University of Texas at El Paso





Adrian Esparza, *Otro Lado*, detail, serape, nails, 98" x 252", 2008.

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foreword

The Stanlee and Gerald Rubin Center for the Visual Arts (the Rubin Center) at the University of Texas at El Paso (UTEP) is entering its fifth year of successful programming. Under Kate Bonansinga's outstanding leadership, the Rubin Center is gaining both regional and national attention for its commitment to bringing the best contemporary art to this U.S./Mexico border region.

The Rubin Center is housed in one of the five structures that comprised our original campus. It was built in 1928 in the manner of Bhutanese architecture, a style that was adopted for our campus in the early 1900's when Kathleen Worrell, wife of the first dean of the then Texas School of Mines and Metallurgy, read an article about Bhutan in *National Geographic*, and was inspired by similarities between the Himalayan setting of the Kingdom of Bhutan and El Paso's mountainous landscape. This architectural connection has resulted in a rich and lasting cultural exchange between UTEP and Bhutan, which just this year became the youngest democracy in the world.

It was Bhutan's rich textile tradition that inspired the Rubin Center to organize *Unknitting: Challenging Textile Traditions*, an exhibition that presents some of the latest ideas about the processes of weaving and knitting. This exhibition of textile-based works by an international group of artists, including UTEP alumnus Adrian Esparza, breaks stereotypes about gender, domesticity and the role of craft in fine art. It is an excellent example of the type of display in which the Rubin Center excels: a small, group invitational that probes a particular theme that is captivating some of today's most accomplished artists. It synthesizes UTEP's commitment to provide both access and excellence to residents of this bi-national region by offering artists' latest work to the general public. Especially exciting is how UTEP students have become intimately engaged with every aspect of exhibition research and presentation at the Rubin Center, and how the Center has fostered learning opportunities for students from many departments across the campus, particularly the Department of Art. By connecting students to the creation of exhibitions, the public to art, and artists with each other, the Rubin Center strongly supports UTEP's educational and outreach missions.

Diana Natalicio

President

The University of Texas at El Paso

Unknitting, as installed in the Stanlee and Gerald Rubin Center for the Visual Arts, 2008.

Unknitting: Some Background

Unknitting: Challenging Textile Traditions is the premier exhibition of the season at the Rubin Center at UTEP, but it developed as a complement to *In the Weave: Bhutanese Textiles and National Identity*, a concurrent exhibition in an adjacent gallery. I discovered three years ago that the Smithsonian Institution planned to highlight the arts of the state of Texas and the country of Bhutan for its 2008 Folklife Festival. The UTEP campus is defined by its unique Bhutanese architecture and its choice location at the western edge of Texas: it bridges the two locales that the Smithsonian had randomly paired. It was a great opportunity for the Rubin Center to emphasize this convergence and to create another one, between our mission—to bring innovative contemporary art to the UTEP and El Paso communities—and the aesthetic of the exterior of our building.

One of the four pillars of Bhutan's economic philosophy of Gross National Happiness (yes, Happiness) is the preservation of culture. The country, which is located between India and China, prides itself on its twelve traditional arts. Of the dozen, which include papermaking, goldsmithing, woodcarving and others, weaving is the one that captured my attention. Bhutanese textile design and technique are similar to those of other cultures, including Mexican and Native American, that predated the European influence in west Texas. This local connection, in addition to the beauty and intricacy of the textiles, steered me to focusing on organizing an exhibition of Bhutanese textiles that would take place during summer 2008, at the same time as the Smithsonian Folklife Festival.



But the Rubin Center is not in the business of exhibiting traditional art forms. Instead we exhibit some of the most innovative art of our time, drawing on a pool of internationally recognized artists, many of whom come to El Paso to create site-specific works that respond to the U.S./Mexico border and the Chihuahuan desert. This is our primary focus, but we have also developed a secondary concentration, which is idea-driven fine craft. Exhibitions such as *Hanging in Balance: 42 Contemporary Necklaces* (2005) and *Multiplicity: Contemporary Ceramic Sculpture* (2006) are part of this. With jewelry and ceramics under our belt, textiles would be a logical medium to explore in a pair of exhibitions highlighting how traditional art (*In the Weave*) can serve as a foundation for forward-thinking expression (*Unknitting*).

Mark Newport, *Sweaterman 2*, detail, acrylic yarn, 81" x 26", 2005.

With this in mind, and with an awareness of the resurgence of knitting among both artists and young professionals (“stitch and bitch” sessions have been all the rage for the past few years in urban environments in the U.S.), Stephanie Taylor, assistant professor of art history at New Mexico State University and a valued colleague, and I together attended *Radical Lace and Subversive Knitting* at the Museum of Arts and Design in New York City in winter 2007. It was while standing there, in this large, survey show that we decided to co-curate a small, group exhibition that explored knitting and textile practice in the creation of fine art. We wanted it to incorporate new media and to draw from a talent pool that reached beyond the United States.

We succeeded.

During the next few months, each of us brought several artists to the table for discussion before we narrowed our list to the four that comprise the exhibition: Adrian Esparza (U.S.), Rachel Gomme (U.K.), Mark Newport (U.S.), Sandra Valenzuela (U.S./Mexico). They knit or unknit as a performative act, and three of them (Gomme, Newport, and Valenzuela) use photography to document that act or its resulting objects. These artists incorporate the traditions of knitting and weaving into the production of idea-driven fine art. Taylor’s essay in the following pages delves deeply into the sources of, and social and cultural implications of, each of the artist’s works.

Several people have been important to the realization of this exhibition. The artists have my deepest gratitude for their hard work and creativity. Stephanie Taylor, herself an avid knitter, pushed the project along at every stage, and has been unflinchingly committed to the idea and the exhibition. Diana Natalicio, President of UTEP; Howard Daudistel, Dean of the College of Liberal Arts; and Gregory Elliott, Chair of the Department of Art, have been supportive of the project and instrumental to its success. Texas Commission on the Arts and the Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts provided financial support. All of them have my thanks.

Kate Bonansinga

Director
Stanlee and Gerald Rubin Center for the Visual Arts

Rachel Gomme, *Treeline* (object resulting from one-time performance on the University of Texas at El Paso campus, April 9, 2008), Cotton/hemp/modal yarn, 34” x 5”, 2008.





Unknitting at the Turn of the 21st Century

Stephanie L. Taylor, Ph.D.

It is a very interesting sociological question why knitting, for the past 200 years or so, has been regarded as the province of malicious, gossiping women or else vacant, half-witted people.¹

Yarnwork seems to be everywhere these days. In the art world, the Museum of Art and Design in New York City sponsored a provocative exhibition in early 2007 called *Radical Lace and Subversive Knitting*. Contemporary artist Andrea Zittel includes crocheted dresses in her series of *A-Z Personal Uniforms* (1991-2002), while Mike Kelly has presented installations such as *Riddle of the Sphinx* and *Lumpenprole* (both 1991) that feature huge panels of knitted fabric. In the world of *haute couture*, Giles Deacon pushes well beyond Chanel's polite knit suits, creating coats, sweaters and accessories featuring oversized stitches as big as your fist,² while in the world of more prosaic fashion Martha Stewart's poncho caused a sensation when she wore it upon her release from jail in March 2005. The poncho, made by a fellow inmate as a going away present for the style doyenne (who publicly pronounced the garment "a good thing") was actually crocheted, but that didn't stop several yarn companies and bloggers from quickly posting knitting pattern knockoffs.³ At the movies, Keanu Reeves' coat won the admiration of many in *The Matrix* (1999), but my attention was drawn to the amazing sweaters he and the other revolutionaries wore.

Mark Newport, *Password*, photo inkjet print, 19" x 13", 2006.
Courtesy of the artist and Greg Kucera Gallery, Inc.

Knitting, which probably originated in the Middle East, is a relatively recent invention, traced by some historians to the Middle Ages. Unlike earlier ways of creating fabric, knitting is characterized by working with two sticks to pull loops of string through other loops.⁴ Despite the fact that knitting may have started as a way of fashioning fishing nets, and was certainly done by male sailors in the historic past,⁵ the practice of knitting has long been relegated to women, especially older women who may have learned the craft at a time when inexpensive machine knits were not available, and who continued knitting into old age as a way of keeping their minds and their arthritic fingers busy. This perception is a far cry from the current status of knitters, who can be male or female, young or old, traditional or radical. According to *The New York Times*, “some four million people in the United States have taken up knitting since 2003.”⁶ A recent cartoon in *The New Yorker* pictured two angels, each wearing bulky knitted caps, scarves and sweaters, with a caption that read “It was better before God took up knitting.”⁷ The question is, what has sparked this new interest in the craft, and

how is 21st century knitting likely to differ from what we have seen in the past? It is my contention that the knitting we see today—whether it be raised to the level of art in a gallery or turned into the focus of a cable network show—is changing the way knitting is and can be understood. It is undoing, or unknitting, preconceived notions about the craft and, in the process, opening up the practice for rejuvenation, reconceptualization and renaissance.

Why Knitting? Why Now?

The trend toward increasing globalization and digitization of culture, which began in the late 20th century, has helped to spread the word about knitting, and has also helped knitters to join geographically and culturally diverse craft communities in cyberspace that would have been difficult, if not impossible, for them to access without this technology. But the benefits of the World Wide Web have been countered by cataclysmic shifts in the real world. This period has also proven to be one of unprecedented



Rachel Gomme, *Knitting a Rothko*, detail, new and recycled yarn, natural and synthetic fibers, 85” W, expanding height, 2006–present.

threat and insecurity. The desire to remain safe at home “nesting” after such events as the terrorist attacks in New York City, Madrid and London and the threatened spread of viral diseases (not only AIDs/HIV but also Ebola and avian influenza, among other things) makes sense. “There is a desire...to look inward, to the home, the homespun, the handcrafted as our personal security is threatened.”⁸

All of these cultural, social and political forces play a role in the current knitting craze. In such times, the handmade object becomes a symbol of something original and imbued with the maker’s touch. It can be seen as something directly related to the maker’s body and personality, and as such it directly challenges the threat of homogenization and lack of intimacy in a contemporary culture marked by increasing technology and uniformity.⁹ Many other trends in contemporary life resist the speed and ease of mechanization—slow food and slow eating, for example—so it makes sense that “slow design” has become popular, too.¹⁰ Artist Robyn Love, of Queens, NY and Canada, thinks that the Do-It-Yourself boom of recent years is “the result of people having no place in ordinary life to work with their hands anymore.”¹¹ Curator David Revere McFadden puts it this way: “Our daily lives tend to be dominated by technology and the computer, and a sense of fragmentation or isolation is commonplace. Knitting has become an important way to reassert the tactile and social pleasures we all crave.”¹²

Some, like Debbie Stoller, also attribute the phenomenon to the growth of interest in feminism seen in academia, where Women’s Studies programs have been proliferating in recent years. “At that time,” she says, in reference to the late 1990s, when she started publishing craft instructions in her magazine *Bust*,¹³ “there were already a number of threads going in the culture that were pointing toward a new generation becoming interested in ‘women’s work’ types of things that had been rejected for a while. And that’s when I found myself feeling more and more interested in these subjects, too.”¹⁴ Certainly, more and more books and websites and DIY programs have begun to adopt a more free-wheeling, feminist and even overtly sexualized approach for the “knit grrl” in each of us.¹⁵

Stoller is probably best known for planting the seeds of what can only be called “The Stitch ‘n Bitch Revolution.” Her original publication, called *Stitch ‘n Bitch: The Knitter’s Handbook*, was released in 2003 and sold over two hundred thousand copies in the first six months alone. She has gone on to publish several other books in the series, including *Stitch ‘n Bitch Nation* (2004), *Stitch ‘n Bitch Crochet: The Happy Hooker* (2006) and *Son of Stitch ‘n Bitch: 45 Projects to Knit and Crochet for Men* (2007). The books coincided with, and no doubt inspired, the formation of several international knitting groups that seem to have taken a light hearted and sometimes politicized approach to the idea of forming communities through craft. For example, the participants in the London Stitch and Bitch group describe themselves as “a London-based knitting group taking over the city we love one new knitter at a time, like a radioactive Godzilla with sticks and string.” They recently sponsored a “Lion Warming Day” where they wrapped all four of the lions at the foot of Nelson’s column in Trafalgar Square with over 550 feet of hand knit scarves to benefit cancer research in the U.K.¹⁶ This type of charity knitting has become ubiquitous in recent years, and is reminiscent of the knitting done in the past with the goal of supplying soldiers at the front with absorbent bandages or warm socks, hats and gloves.¹⁷

Hand Crafts as Political Acts: Adrian Esparza

The visitor watched her fingers for a few moments, and took the opportunity of observing the place in general.

‘You knit with great skill, Madame.’

‘I am accustomed to it.’

‘A pretty pattern, too!’

‘You think so?’ said Madame, still looking at him with a smile, while her fingers moved nimbly.

‘Not for use?’

‘That depends. I may find a use for it one day.’¹⁸

Madame Defarge is one popular representation of knitting that does not rely on the representation of the knitter as a domestic goddess or loving granny. Dickens’ unforgettable character is based upon the notorious “*tricoteuses*,” knitting women who were a notable symbol of the uprising of the peasant classes during the French Revolution. Like Madame Defarge, these women are best remembered as heartless creatures who sat knitting at the foot of the guillotine, “never faltering nor pausing in their [knitting],” as they counted the heads of Monarchists who went to their bloody death during “The Reign of Terror,” which lasted from 1793–1794. The “pattern” that the visitor refers to in the above quote from Dickens’ *A Tale of Two Cities* (1859) is actually a coded language, known only to Madame Defarge, in which she has knitted the information that will soon provide evidence against the much hated upper class against which she and her fellow revolutionaries are plotting. Her husband, clearly in awe of her powers, assures a friend that “...if Madame my wife undertook to keep the register [of which upper class families will be ‘exterminated’] in her memory alone, she would not lose a word of it—not a syllable of it. Knitted, in her own stitches and her own symbols, it will always be as plain to her as the sun. Confide in Madame Defarge.”¹⁹

Adrian Esparza, *Medusa 1.1*, 98” x 102” overall dimensions, 2003.

Adrian Esparza, an artist featured in *Unknitting* who was raised on the U.S./Mexico border in El Paso, also comments upon the politics of class in his art, in which he has embraced materials like recycled t-shirts found at the Salvation Army to express his concerns and ideas about economic and national identity. “He garners much of his source material and artistic inspiration from his borderland experience, and his daily encounter with this political divide seems to nourish his perpetual challenge of generally accepted boundaries and hierarchies,” writes Kate

Bonansinga.²⁰ Working with found objects, he fractures received knowledge and reworks it into new formats that resonate with diverse cultural meanings. “Growing up in El Paso, I had little exposure to historical art. My first exposure was through craft. Early memories include manipulating popsicle sticks, carving balsa wood, making ceramics with my grandmother, and seeing my mother sewing clothing and my uncle building guitars,” the artist says. “Craft laid the foundation for the formal issues that I would later learn in school.”²¹

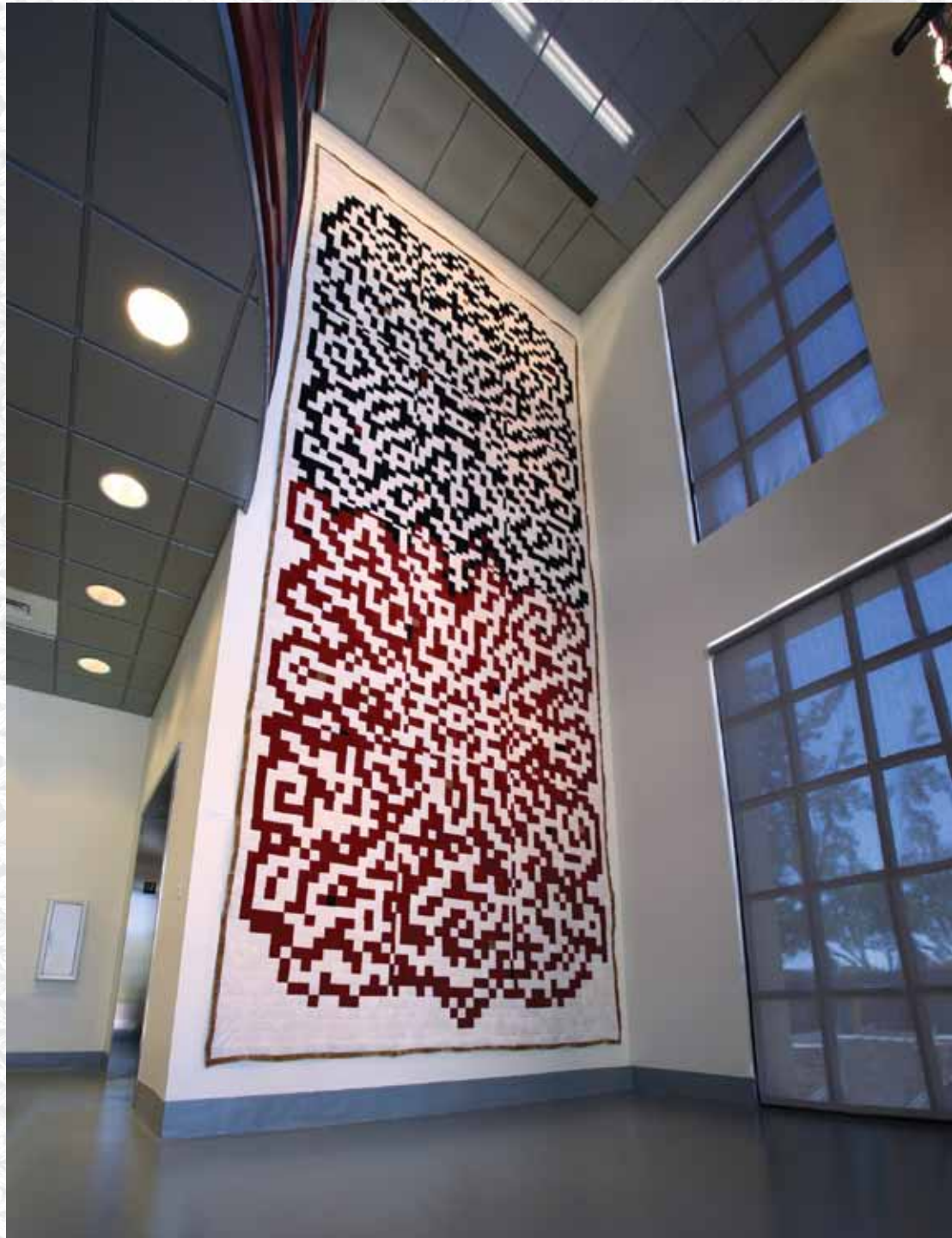


About such works as *Otro Lado* (2008), Esparza says: “The serape pieces are about transformation—about a history that is used in order to construct a new form.”²² But the Mexican serape that he has unwoven and then reassembled into a string art maze of nails directly on the walls of the Rubin Center can also be seen as a challenge to assumptions of race and class. In such works, Esparza changes the construction and meaning of “traditional” Mexican textiles, which have already been drastically changed in order to fit the needs of the (mostly) white tourist trade. He transforms found and cheaply acquired objects like the serape, which can be purchased at the tourist stands of downtown Ciudad Juárez, into high art reminiscent of the Bauhaus paintings of Josef Albers. The El Paso artist who was exposed to hand crafts instead of high art in his childhood continues to speak to those varying traditions and to place value on the supposedly cheap forms of the everyday art that he admires.

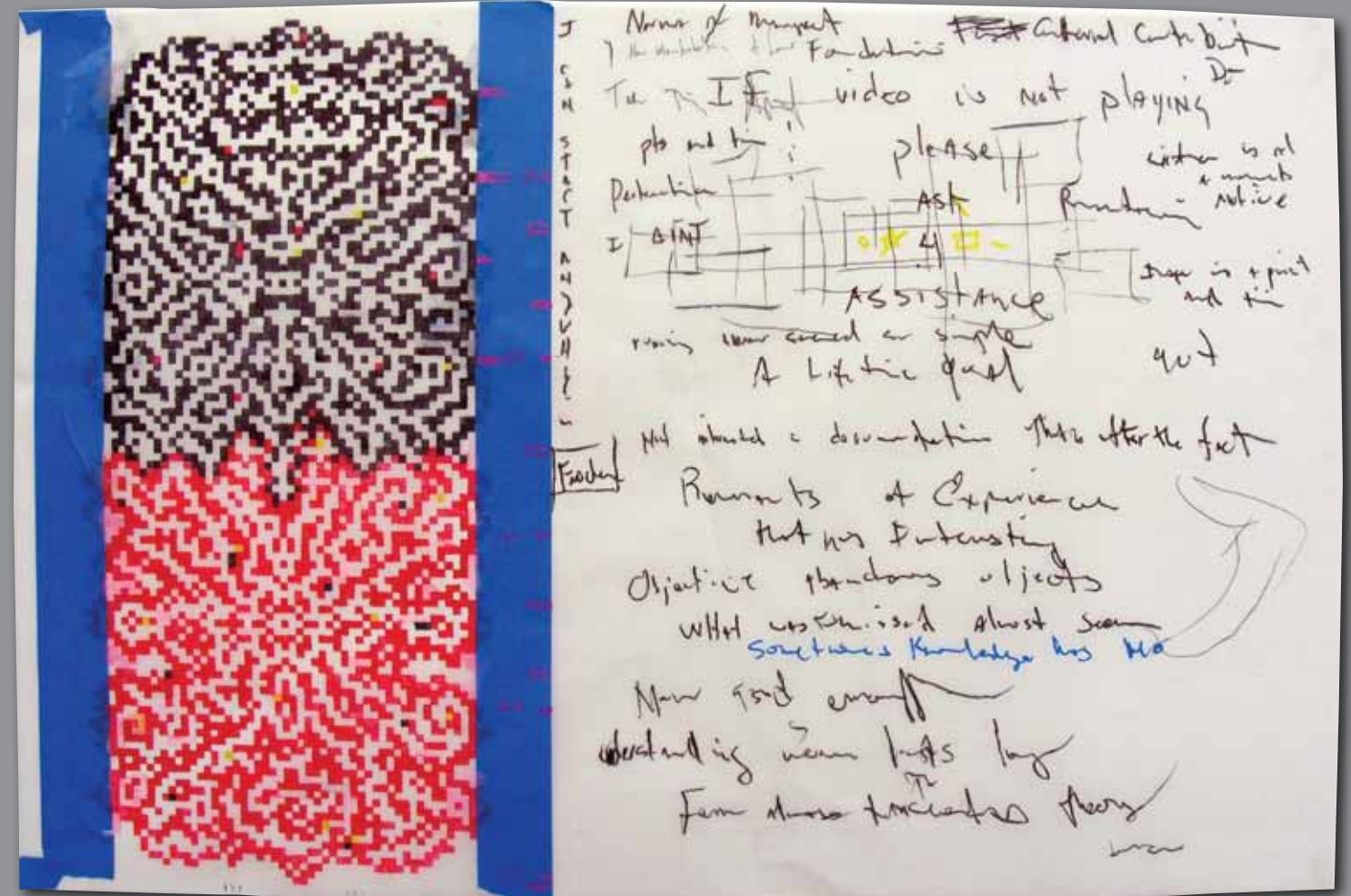
The political nature of contemporary craft practices is another strong trend in the current knitting resurgence, and acts as yet another clue that different attitudes and practices are changing the craft. Esparza’s emphasis on class and nationality reflect current political concerns over immigration and economic status in America, but other artists are using their knitting to make anti-war messages and to act-up on current social issues. For example, Lisa Anne Auerbach runs an online journal called *The Little Red Blog of Revolutionary Knitting*, in which she rants about everything from eating vegan, to conserving energy by riding bicycles, to knitting. Her motto—“Stop making scarves, start making trouble”—sums up the angry, rebellious and hilarious attitude she brings to her craft practice. One of her most moving and trenchant political comments can be seen in the *Body Count Mittens* that she designed, each knitted with information on the current number of American forces killed while fighting in Iraq. The number shifts so quickly that a higher number is often listed on the second mitten.²³ In her own politicized practice, Barb Hunt, an artist in Newfoundland, Canada, knits antipersonnel mines in various shades of pink yarn. She associates the color and texture of these objects with flesh and the domestic sphere, both of which



Adrian Esparza, *Otro Lado*, serape, nails, 98” x 252”, 2008.



Adrian Esparza, *Converting*, crushed polyester velvet, 288" x 128", 2008.



Adrian Esparza, *Preparatory Sketch for "Converting"*, ink and masking tape on mylar, 24" x 36", 2008.

are directly threatened by the use of landmines. "Knitting has traditionally been used to make garments that protect and warm the body, quite the opposite of landmines," she writes.²⁴

Of course, gender politics are a strong trend in current unknitting practices, as well, and several of the artists working with craft today are doing so with the specific goal of upending, or at least confusing, the entrenched expectations that define knitting in the public arena.

Knitting in Public, and Other Strange Things to Do with Yarn: Rachel Gomme

Hercule Poirot, swaying to and fro in the tube train, thrown now against one body, now against another, thought to himself that there were too many people in the world!... Humanity seen thus en masse was not attractive. How seldom did one see a face sparkling with intelligence, how seldom a femme bien en mise! What was this passion that attacked women for knitting under the most unpropitious conditions? A woman did not look her best knitting; the absorption, the glassy eyes, the restless, busy fingers! One needed the agility of a wild cat, and the willpower of Napoleon, to manage to knit in a crowded tube, but women managed it! If they succeeded in obtaining a seat, out came a miserable little strip of shrimp pink and click-click went the pins! ²⁵

Women knitting in public can have profoundly disturbing effects. And so one can't blame Poirot, Agatha Christie's famous Belgian detective, for being put out as he struggles to maintain his balance (and humor) on a crowded underground train: he was definitely accustomed to more luxurious and private transportation arrangements. One can't really take the author to task for putting such nasty thoughts into her fictitious character's head either, since she lavished as much attention on a very sympathetic older female detective (and knitter), Jane Marple.

The traditions associated with knitting often revolve around gender, scale and the context for making and using the crafted objects, and both the interior monologue of Hercule Poirot and the persona of the fluffy old busybody, Miss Marple, knitting as she sleuthed, are instances of social assumptions about the craft. One underlying "fact" about knitting is that it is or ought to be done strictly at home, and yet it has become increasingly "outed" and visible in our time. By taking it out of the interior, and more specifically by extricating it from the domestic environment, knitting engages with new ideas, energies and symbolic meanings.

Rachel Gomme, *Treeline* (object resulting from one-time performance on the University of Texas at El Paso campus, April 9, 2008), cotton/hemp/modal yarn, 34" x 5", 2008.





Rachel Gomme, another artist featured in *Unknitting*, was a member of the London-based “Cast Off” group, started by Rachael Matthews to “reclaim knitting as a positive social force.” Group members knitted socially and publicly in parks, pubs and, yes, even on the tube. They became so well-known that the London daily newspaper, *The Independent*, once referred to the group as “guerilla knitters.”²⁶ For Gomme, it was the way that the knitted work was changed “by bringing this homely, domestic craft into a public space” that interested her in “Cast Off” and other public knitting experiences.²⁷

Gomme is a performance artist who is especially interested in exploring process. She is ambitious, and while her technique is traditional she often uses it in new ways (such as knitting in public, or knitting as she moves through an urban landscape). She has recently begun to use knitting in her work as a practical way to explore the concepts of time, distance and duration. Knitting also allows her to work metaphorically with such concepts as “knitting things” (ideas and objects and experiences) together. She compares the repeated stitches that characterize knitting to “small details or moments” that gradually accrue as lived experiences, and she sees the linear quality of the yarn that is transformed into a fabric as similar to the way that discreet moments of time add up to a more full memory of a particular experience. “I am interested in the way that knitting can represent time,” she says. “The repeated stitches are indicative of how small details or moments gradually build up into something larger.”²⁸

As a trained dancer, Gomme often uses a physically expressive vocabulary, but has more recently become interested in the concept of stillness. Asking herself questions, like “Could dancers still be considered as such if they did not move?,” Gomme and a colleague began to perform works that were about the absence of movement.²⁹ Soon, she was exploring silence and waiting, and the

Knitta Please, *Untitled/Seattle*, natural and synthetic yarn, 2006, photograph by William Anthony.

process of knitting allowed her to physically record the length of these “down times” in the form of a garter-stitched length of fabric. With such works, Gomme presents a challenge to the idea that there is any unused or unusable time in our lives.³⁰

The digital record of her work, such as the performance piece called *This is How Long* (an ongoing work in which she knits during the intervals spent waiting for public transportation), show just how intently quiet and focused Gomme is during her performances. In *Ravel* (July 2006), for example, passers by and people waiting at a bus stop speak to her during her performance, but they are more likely to receive a sphinx-like smile in return than they are to get a comment from the intently focused artist. She is in quiet contemplation throughout the performance, eyes downcast, fingers moving rapidly, needles stabbing in a regular rhythm as she follows a meandering five-kilometer long line of blue yarn through the historic London district of Camberwell. Gomme not only brings this “domestic” craft into the public realm, but she also brings the interior process of meditation into an exterior and public space.

The guerilla group Knitta Please also brings knitting outdoors, but their focus is on the product rather than on the process. They have been dubbed “a gang of knitting *tricoteuses*” by French *Glamour*, but Knitta Please eschews the bloodthirsty anger implied in such a label and, instead, refers to itself as “a tag crew of knitters bombing the inner city with vibrant stitched works of art.”³¹ The anonymous group of crafters, who are based in Houston, take their knitting into public, but only to leave it there as a completed “gift.” If you find a door handle with a knitted covering, if a knitted coaster appears suddenly under your drink in a crowded bar, or if cars along your street suddenly start sporting argyle-patterned antennae cozies, then Knitta Please has been

Knitta Please, *Untitled/Seattle*, natural and synthetic yarn, 2006, photograph by Ryan Schierling.



there. Describing themselves as “a group of ladies of all ages, nationalities and...gender,” Knitta Please has worked all over the world and have tagged everything from taxi cabs to the Great Wall of China. “We go beyond simply wanting attention,” they claim in an online artists’ statement. “We prove that disobedience can be beautiful and that knitting can be outlaw.” Their youthful, punk aesthetic takes knitting to the streets, where just about anything can happen. Like Gomme, they draw public awareness to the craft and to the increasing complexity of its meaning.

Rachel Gomme, *Knitting a Rothko*, new and recycled yarn, natural and synthetic fibers, pencil on gallery wall, 85” W, expanding height, 2006–present.



Knitting out of doors is, in fact, quite traditional. One can observe women knitting as they walk among the rural settings in bucolic paintings as late as the 19th century, and novelistic accounts refer to the practice of keeping one’s yarn in a pouch around one’s waist so that one can continue to work on a garment while moving around.³² Still, that does not compare to Gomme knitting and traveling by foot for hours through a busy neighborhood in London. Nor can it come close to her battling the strong winds typical of El Paso in the spring months in order to create *Treeline* (April 2008), a site-specific work she made especially for the show on the UTEP campus. “Knitting in public is quite important to me,” says Gomme. “I like the idea of bringing this domestic craft, very much associated with ‘women’s work,’ into the public arena...”³³

The (Super)Heroics of Masculinity: Mark Newport

“Holy knit one, purl two!”³⁴

I clearly recall Batman’s crime fighting sidekick, Robin, uttering this famous invective in an episode of the campy television program. And I found myself recalling Robin’s words when I first encountered Mark Newport’s knitted superhero costumes. They aren’t quite right, as any fan of comic books can see: where the costume should be form fitting, sleek, and revealing in order to highlight the superhero’s super physique, Newport’s versions are more likely to be baggy, lumpy and concealing. Where effective and efficient crime-fighting costumes can be folded into small parcels and hidden from the world, Newport’s are heavy and thick, and would not fit under a suit of normal clothes. The contrary nature of these works continue into the metaphorical spaces they inhabit, especially when the artist dons them in performances.

Like Gomme, Newport also expresses a clear understanding of the gendered expectations that come along with knitting, and he has been determined in his efforts to explore and upend them in his work. In earlier series, such as his meticulous and lushly-beaded sports trading cards, he mixed interests typically associated with adolescent males and craft techniques most closely associated with women. “As I grew as an artist I realized that my interest in gender and the use of textile processes offered a great contradiction in the work since most people in the U.S. think of textiles as inherently linked to the feminine and women’s work. So I can challenge those expectations and the traditional notions of masculinity by using those processes.”³⁵

right, top: Mark Newport, *Batmen*, photo inkjet print, 13” x 19”, 2005.
bottom: Mark Newport, *My Batman*, (with detail, right) acrylic yarn, 77” x 26”, 2004.
Courtesy of the artist and Greg Kucera Gallery, Inc.





A clear understanding of gender roles is expressed in Newport's own explanations of his work, in which he describes his childhood ideas of "the ultimate man—the Dad every boy wants, the man every boy wants to grow up to be" while at the same time evoking the acrylic sweaters his mother made for him, that were "meant to keep [me] safe from New England winters."³⁶ Today, in the completed costumes he knits, the performances he films, and the photographs, prints and videos he uses to document and extend those performances, Newport attempts to literally construct a heroic persona through the process of knitting. While doing so, he neatly deconstructs notions of masculinity and femininity through the very same performances and knitted forms.

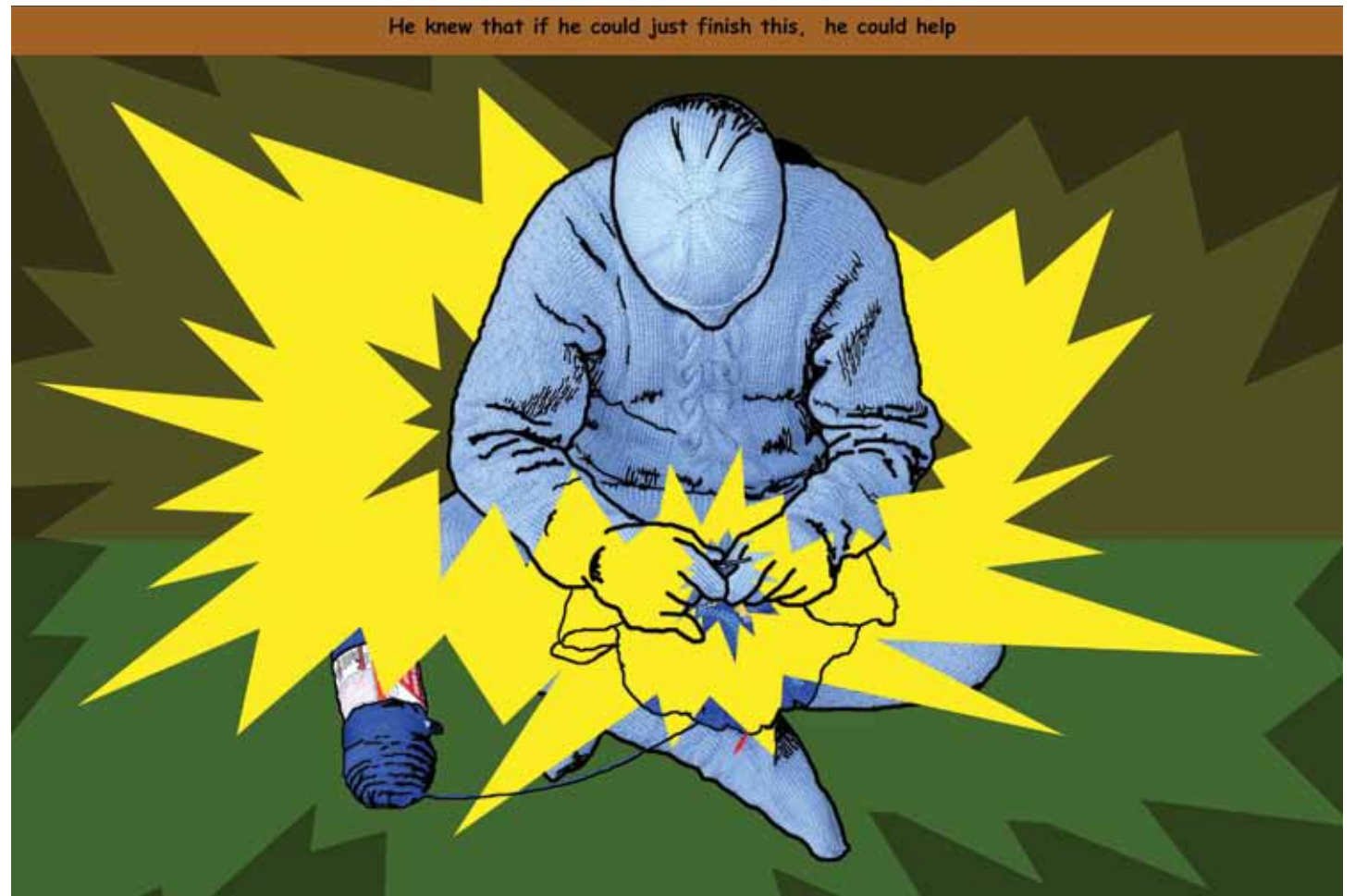
The costumes literally serve as "uniforms [he] can wear to protect [his] family from the threats (bullies, murderers, terrorists, pedophiles, and fanatical messianic characters) we are told surround us."³⁷ And yet Newport's ambition is constantly and pathetically thwarted. The task is simply too great for a single man, no matter how many skeins of yarn he employs and regardless of the size knitting needle he wields. However, like a superhero (or another comic book character named Charlie Brown), Newport never gives up in his attempt to keep those he loves or you, dear gallery goer, from harm. In *Knitting Forcefield I* (2005) he pictures himself frantically knitting a protective force field, doing so while he himself is pitifully naked and exposed. He dons a costume and sits in a rocking chair like Whistler's mother, knitting with the bombastic *William Tell Overture* (the

Mark Newport, *Knitting a Forcefield*, photo inkjet print, 19" x 13", 2005. Courtesy of the artist and Greg Kucera Gallery, Inc.



distinctive theme used to announce the arrival of *The Lone Ranger* on the popular television 1950s show) playing repeatedly in the video loop *Heroic Efforts* (2007). Newport sat quietly knitting during much of the exhibition opening at UTEP, working as quickly as he could while encumbered by the mask and thick mittens of his costume, but even then the Sisyphean nature of his task was evident. He later strolled through the exhibition, giving away small tokens (a mitten, for example) to strangers while cryptically assuring them that "This could help." But he didn't have the time to make enough "protective gestures" for everyone, and so resorted to leaving several perplexed guests with a hand-written IOU for one, to be made and distributed at some undetermined future

**left: Mark Newport knitting at the Rubin Center, 2008.
below: Mark Newport, *He Knew He Could Help*, photo inkjet print, 13" x 19", 2005. Courtesy of the artist and Greg Kucera Gallery, Inc.**





Dave Cole, *The Knitting Machine* MASS MoCA, 2005, acrylic felt, two John Deere excavators, telephone poles. Courtesy of the artist and judi rotenberg gallery, Boston.

date. Perhaps the task of protection is similar to the “task” of performing one’s gender—both are ongoing efforts that shape our actions and thoughts, and both are more difficult than anyone would like to admit.

Mark Newport and Adrian Esparza aren’t the only contemporary male artists who are working with textile processes. Dave Cole, a sculptor in Rhode Island who often uses knitted forms and processes in his large scale works, sees knitting as an “intense and laborious process,” one that symbolizes “the most basic form of labor” he can imagine. He, too, uses it to co-opt “the domestic process to say something about masculinity.”³⁸ One

of his most ambitious works was *The Knitting Machine*, which he constructed for an exhibition at MASS MoCA in 2005. The “machine” was actually two John Deere excavators, each holding a 25-foot long aluminum pole/needle, used in the “knitting” of an 800-stitch, 35 x 20 foot version of the American flag made out of over a mile of acrylic felt.³⁹ Other objects by Cole include an electric blanket knitted out of heavy duty electrical cords, a fourteen-foot tall teddy bear made from lengths of pink fiberglass insulation, and a sweater knitted out of the bullet-proof material called Kevlar.⁴⁰ Like Newport, he comments upon the supposedly masculine aspects of heavy machinery, tools, large scale and “protective” materials.

Mark Newport, *Sunset*, photo inkjet print, 19” x 13”, 2006. Courtesy of the artist and Greg Kucera Gallery, Inc.



Unknitting by Not Knitting: Sandra Valenzuela

Despite the growing popularity of the craft, there are still people who do not knit. Sandra Valenzuela, who identifies herself as a photographer, hired a friend of her mother's in Mexico to knit the "hammocks" that cradle the vegetables and fruits in her surreal photographic series entitled *Media Noche [Midnight]* (2007). "Knitted vintage cloth has always been appealing for me," the artist writes. "I wanted to create hammocks or dresses for vegetables and I thought it was the technique best fitted for the purpose." Valenzuela learned how to knit in order to conceptualize the series, but it didn't work out. "It is important for my artistic practice to collaborate with different people, because I don't think I can be an expert on everything that interests me," she says.⁴¹

Sandra Valenzuela, *Media Noche* (3), Lambda metallic print, 36" x 27", 2007.
Courtesy of the artist and Kathleen Cullen Fine Arts.





Valenzuela explained the series in a recent catalogue: “The idea came from my fascination with Sanchez Cotán’s still lifes and his mystical understanding of form,” she writes. While “*medianoche*” means “midnight” in Spanish, the artist saw many resonances in this word to exploit in her art. She continues: “...‘*media*’ = stockings and ‘*noche*’ = night. Also, the Cuban sandwich called ‘*medianoche*’, earn[s] its name from the time it was typically eaten, after a night of dancing, to stave off hunger.”⁴² The sensuality of Valenzuela’s photographs was apparent at the exhibition opening, where many viewers blushed or burst out in nervous laughter when they came upon her large-scale prints. The “stockings” may be knitted in fun-loving stripes, but even that thick swaddling cannot hide the sexy nature of the forms that they surround. In fact, the “hammocks” tend to emphasize the heft, circumference and curve of the dangling, pendulous objects in a way that encourages the viewer to think not of sustenance or warm woolens, but of peeking phalli and abundant cleavage. They bring to mind the more clinical renditions of breast forms by another contemporary knitter, Toronto-based Beryl Tsang, who has for several years made “Tit Bits,” her name for the falsies she designed for women who have had mastectomies. What started as a real need after her own experience with breast cancer became an opportunity for Tsang to practice knitting as a feminist and “compassionate enterprise.” Her website not only

sells dozens of versions of Tit-Bits (arranged in categories ranging from “Everyday” to “Fancy” to “Floozy”), but it also acts as a center for discussion groups, medical information and directions for “cool creative projects to help with the healing process.”⁴³ The work of these artists help us to realize the many ways that we can feed our hunger, whether it be a craving for food after a long night of dancing or entirely different appetites altogether.

The complex nature of Valenzuela’s employment of knitted forms is apparent. Like the word play she engages in, the knitting can be seen as an expression of cultural and political importance. “I enjoy knitted cloth, as well as differences in production techniques and what they politically imply,” Valenzuela states. Noting an essay by Octavio Paz, in which he compares objects that are mass produced and art objects that are more clearly crafted, Valenzuela states that, “there is a political dimension in everyday objects that seduces me.”⁴⁴

All of the knitters mentioned in this essay, and most especially the four artists featured in this exhibition, are unknitting our expectations about this centuries-old craft. Through their exploration of process, gender, form and symbol, all of the artists in *Unknitting: Challenging Textile Traditions* signal new and exciting trends in a craft that can no longer be relegated to the Miss Marples of the world.

Sandra Valenzuela, *Media Noche* (1), Lamda metallic print, 36” x 27”, 2007.
Courtesy of the artist and Kathleen Cullen Fine Arts.

Endnotes

¹ Alice Starmore, a British knitwear designer and author, in “Knitting’s Old Guard Speaks Out,” *Vogue Knitting* 25/2 (August 2007): 80.

² Ibid., 110.

³ Stewart served time for tax evasion. For an example of the knitting patterns that proliferated online upon her release, see www.lionbrand.com/patterns/khs-ScallopEdgePoncho.html. For more about the popularity of the poncho, see the *USA Today* article by Maria Puente, “Pattern of Interest in Martha’s Poncho” featured at http://www.usatoday.com/life/people/2005-03-08-stewart_poncho_x.htm?POE=LIFISVA. Accessed April 12, 2008.

⁴ An earlier practice, called “nailbinding,” is a craft that uses an eyed needle to pull string through a loop. It is a sort of knotless netting, and is also referred to as “nålbinding.” See Julie Theaker’s 2006 article online at <http://www.knitty.com/issueSpring06/FEATHistory101.html>. For more on knitting’s past, see Anne L. Macdonald, *No Idle Hands: The Social History of American Knitting* (NY: Ballantine Books, 1988/1990) and Richard Rutt, *A History of Hand Knitting* (Loveland, CO: Interweave Press, 2003).

⁵ Some recent titles emphasizing the masculine side of the craft include: Annie Modesitt and Drew Emborsky’s *Men Who Knit & the Dogs Who Love Them: 30 Great Looking Designs for Man & His Best Friend* (Asheville, NC: Lark Press, 2007); Kristin Spurkland and John Valls’ *The Knitting Man(ual): 20+ Projects for Guys* (Berkeley, CA: Ten Speed Press, 2007); and Michael del Vecchio’s *Knitting with Balls: A Hands-On Guide to Knitting for the Modern Man* (Essex, UK: DK Adult, 2006). There are also videos about men (and manly) knitting. “The Manly Art of Knitting” is a brief video that features a man knitting a hammock with pool cue sticks as needles, among other things. Produced and directed by Mayra Baron, Jodi Smith and Christina White, it can be seen at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TfYpBqMgol4>. “Real Men Knit,” a DVD released in September of 2006, is available at www.unconfinedmind.com.

⁶ Ruth La Ferla, “The Knitting Circle Shows Its Chic,” *The New York Times* (July 12, 2007). Accessed August 21, 2007 at <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/07/12/fashion>.

⁷ The cartoon, by Bruce Eric Kaplan, was featured in *The New Yorker* (October 24, 2005): 78.

⁸ Knitwear designer and publisher and designer Erika Knight expressed this sentiment in Sabrina Gschandtnr’s *Knit Knit: Profiles + Projects from Knitting’s New Wave* (New York: STC Craft/A Melanie Falick Book; Stewart, Tabori & Chang, 2007), 57.

⁹ For more on this, see the introduction to *By Hand: The Use of Craft in Contemporary Art*, eds. Shu Hung and Joseph Maglioro (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2007).

¹⁰ Like slow food, slow design relies upon the use of local, sustainable, and often recycled materials. See Penelope Green, “The Slow Life Picks Up Speed,” *The New York Times* (January 31, 2008): D1, D4.

¹¹ *By Hand: The Use of Craft in Contemporary Art*, 102.

¹² This comment comes from McFadden’s foreword to Gschandtnr’s *Knit Knit*, 4.

¹³ According to its website, *Bust*, which began publishing in 2003, “...provides an uncensored view on the female experience. BUST tells the truth about women’s lives and presents a female perspective on pop culture.”

¹⁴ Stoller took part in a group interview that was published as “Chatting with Knitting’s New Guard” in *Vogue Knitting* 25/2 (August 2007): 88.

¹⁵ Some of the recent spate of third (or fourth) wave feminism in the knitting world is reflected in Shanon Okey’s “knit grrl” persona, which is available via blog and call-in radio show. Access <http://www.knitgrrl.com> and <http://www.blogtalkradio.com/knitgrrl> for more information. The DIY network on cable television carries a popular program called “Knitty Gritty” hosted by Vickie Howell, who is “on a personal quest to eliminate the negative social stigma attached to knitting and crafting” by bringing “fresh, fierce and fabulous ideas” to the masses. See <http://www.vickiehowell.com>. Aimee Hagerty Johnson self-publishes a zine called “Slave to the Needles,” which she uses as a forum for social change and social justice as well as for a place to write about knitting. See her profile in Gschandtnr’s *Knit Knit*, 74–7. For some recent and more forthrightly Feminist knitting books, try Jennifer Stafford’s *Domiknitrix: Whip Your Knitting into Shape* (Cincinnati: North Light Books, 2006) or Nikol Lohr’s *Naughty Needles: Sexy, Saucy Knits for the Bedroom and Beyond* (New York: Potter Craft, 2006).

¹⁶ This activity raised over £2500. See the group’s website for their mission statement and photographs of this event: <http://www.stitchandbitchlodon.co.uk>. Accessed April 12, 2008.

¹⁷ The holiday 2006 issue of *Vogue Knitting* included a story on a knit shop in London organizing a project to “Knit a River” for an organization that tries to get clean water to populations around the world and a new book that listed over twenty five knitting charities that were dedicated to “philanthropic crafting.” See *Vogue Knitting* 24/3 (October 2006), 18, 32 and *Knitting for Peace: Make the World a Better Place One Stitch at a Time*, by Betty Christiansen (New York: STC Craft/A Melanie Falick Book; Stewart, Tabori & Chang, 2006).

¹⁸ Charles Dickens, *A Tale of Two Cities* (orig. pub. 1959; New York: Barnes and Noble Classics, 2004), 179–80.

¹⁹ Ibid., 171.

²⁰ “Adrian Esparza’s Notions 256–189,” in *Adrian Esparza* exh. cat. (New York: CUE Art Foundation, 2004), n.p.

²¹ Rita Gonzalez, “Interview with Adrian Esparza,” published online at <http://live.glasstire.com>. Accessed March 14, 2008.

²² Ibid.

²³ Auerbach’s blog can be found at <http://stealthissweater.blogspot.com>. The pattern for her “Body Count Mittens”, which was included in the recent *Radical Lace and Subversive Knitting* exhibition, can be found published in Amy Spencer’s *The Crafter Culture Handbook* (UK: Marion Boyars Publishers, Ltd., 2007). Spencer’s book profiles several “political” knitters and reproduces their work in make-at-home patterns. More about Auerbach can be found in Ellen Warren’s discussion of her work, called “Making Trouble,” which was published in the *Chicago Tribune* 3/31/07. It can be found online at http://featuresblogs.chicagotribune.com/shopping_ellen_warren/2007/03/making_trouble.html.

²⁴ *By Hand: The Use of Craft in Contemporary Art*, 90.

²⁵ Agatha Christie, “The Capture of Cerberus,” chapter 12 of *The Labors of Hercules*, originally published in 1947. Reprinted in *Hercule Poirot’s Casebook* (New York: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1984), 601.

²⁶ Gschandtnr, *Knit Knit*, 113–4.

²⁷ From email correspondence with the author, dated January 31, 2008.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ From comments Gomme made at a public lecture at New Mexico State University, Las Cruces, New Mexico, April 9, 2008.

³⁰ Gomme is working against the notion of “clock time” and “competing with time” that seems to dominate our concept of polite and professional social interactions. Rebecca Solnit attributes the concept of “clock time” to the spread of mass transportation and communication, especially the rail road (and its synchronized schedules), across Europe and America. See her *River of Shadows: Eadward Muybridge and the Technological Wild West* (NY: Viking, 2003).

³¹ For more on Knitta Please, see their website: <http://www.knittaplease.com>. A discussion of the group, and a pattern for making your own antennae cozy, are included in Sabrina Gschandtnr’s *Knit Knit*, 90–93.

³² For example, this is described as a Scandinavian tradition, practiced by the Norwegian immigrant Lena Lingard, in Willa Cather’s great American novel *My Antonia*, which was first published in 1918.

³³ From email correspondence with the author, dated January 31, 2008.

³⁴ The episode, called “Nora Clavicle and the Ladies’ Crime Club” [product code #1719] first aired on January 18, 1968. It features lots of mid-century gender tension and some great references to knitting. Batman, Robin and Batgirl are all trapped in the “Drop Stitch & Co” knitting warehouse, where Nora Clavicle threatens them with a pair of “razor sharp” knitting needles and ties them all up in a diabolical “Siamese human knot.” For a full description of this episode, go to http://www.tv.com/batman-1966/nora-clavicle-and-the-ladies-crimeclub/episode/6921/summary.html?tag=ep_list;ep_title;18.

³⁵ From email correspondence with the author, dated January 27, 2008.

³⁶ Mark Newport, “Artist’s Statement,” dated August 2006.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ *By Hand: The Use of Craft in Contemporary Art*, 40.

³⁹ For more about this and other projects by David Cole, see Gschandtnr’s *Knit Knit*.

⁴⁰ These and other works by Dave Cole can be seen on the artist’s website: <http://www.theknittingmachine.com>.

⁴¹ From email correspondence with the author, dated January 28, 2008.

⁴² From the artist’s statement in *The (S) Files: El Museo’s 5th Bienal* (New York: El Museo del Barrio, 2007), 118.

⁴³ Tsang is profiled in Gschandtnr’s *Knit Knit*, 169. For more about “Tit-Bits” and “The Secret Society for the Propagation of Fiber Pornography,” see Tsang’s website: <http://www.titbits.ca>. A free, downloadable pattern for Tit-Bits is available at <http://knitty.com/ISSUEfall05/PATTbits.html>. Other bits of the female anatomy have recently been knitted up and featured in the national press. For example, actress and comedian Jackie Hoffman performed duets in a cabaret show with a knitted version of her uterus, after having a hysterectomy in 2007. See Ashley Parker, “An Actress Who Wears Her Uterus on Her Sleeve,” *The New York Times* (March 28, 2007): B4.

⁴⁴ From email correspondence with the author, dated January 28, 2008.

Adrian Esparza

b. 1970, El Paso, Texas; residence: El Paso, Texas

Esparza received his BFA from the University of Texas at El Paso and his MFA from the California Institute of the Arts. Recent group exhibitions include *Phantom Sightings: New Chicano Art* at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 2008; *New American Talent: The Twenty-First Exhibition*, Arthouse, Austin, Texas, 2006; *Come Forward: Emerging Art in Texas*, Dallas Museum of Art, 2003. Cue Art Foundation in New York City played host to his solo show *Notions 256–189* in 2004. He earned a year-long residency at the Border Art Residency, La Union, NM, in 2005. His work is in the collections of the El Paso Museum of Art and the Dallas Museum of Art.



Jesus and Mary, detail, found posters, cut into strips and woven, 36" x 24", 2008.

Rachel Gomme

b. 1960, Dumfries, Scotland; residence: London

Gomme received a Professional Diploma in Dance Studies from the Laban Center for Movement and Dance in London. Her recent performance work includes *Second Skin*, for the Coastal Currents Contemporary Art Festival, Hastings, England, 2007; *Ravel*, a site-specific performance commissioned for the Camberwell Arts Festival, London, 2006; and *Self-Portrait*, a video/performance installation, Century Gallery, London, and 291 Gallery, London, 2003. She has been awarded numerous residencies, including a 2005 residency at Queen Mary College, University of London. She is Artist Associate at Chisenhale Dance Space in London.



Treeline (object resulting from one-time performance on the University of Texas at El Paso campus, April 9, 2008), cotton/hemp/modal yarn, 36" x 4", 2008.

Mark Newport

b. 1964, Amsterdam, New York; residence: Bloomfield Hills, Michigan

Newport earned his BFA at the Kansas City Art Institute in 1986 and his MFA at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago in 1991. He held visiting artist positions at the Kansas City Art Institute, Cleveland Institute of Art, and the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, and has lectured throughout the country. Newport's work has been exhibited throughout the U.S., Canada, and countries in Europe, including solo exhibitions at here gallery, Bristol, England; The Arizona State University Art Museum, Tempe, AZ; The Chicago Cultural Center; The Charleston Heights Art Center, Las Vegas, NV; and The Anderson Gallery at Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, VA. Newport is the Artist-in-Residence and Head of Fibers at the Cranbrook Academy of Art in Bloomfield Hills, MI.



Raw Hide Kid, acrylic yarn, 80" x 26", 2005.

Sandra Valenzuela

b. 1980, Mexico City; residence: New York City

Valenzuela earned her BFA from the Centro Nacional de las Artes, La Esmeralda in Mexico City and her MFA from the Pratt Institute in New York City. Her recent solo exhibitions include *Media Noche*, Kathleen Cullen Fine Arts, New York City, 2007; and *Aire Acondicionado*, Galería PRAXIS Mexico City, 2004. She has also exhibited at maco, México arte contemporáneo, 2007, and in the group exhibition *The S Files* at Museo del Barrio, New York City, 2007.



Media Noche (2), Lambda metallic print, 36" x 27", 2007. Courtesy of the artist and Kathleen Cullen Fine Arts.

Exhibition Checklist

All dimensions listed height x width unless noted otherwise.
All works courtesy of the respective artist.
All works by Mark Newport courtesy of Greg Kucera Gallery, Inc.
All works by Sandra Valenzuela courtesy of Kathleen Cullen Fine Arts.

Adrian Esparza

Otro Lado
Serape, nails
98" x 252"
2008

Adrian Esparza

Converting
Crushed polyester velvet
288" x 128"
2008

Adrian Esparza

Medusa 1.1
98" x 102" overall dimensions
2008

Medusa 1.1 includes the following pieces:

Seeing Cobain
Found posters, cut into strips and woven
36" x 24"
2008

Jesus and Jaws
Found posters, cut into strips and woven
36" x 24"
2008

Target Jonh [sic]
Found posters, cut into strips and woven
36" x 24"
2008

Modern Elements
Found posters, cut into strips and woven
24" x 36"
2008

Anarchy TinTan
Found posters, cut into strips and woven
36" x 24"
2008

Mexican American
Found posters, cut into strips and woven
24" x 36"
2008

Jesus and Mary
Found posters, cut into strips and woven
36" x 24"
2008

Rachel Gomme
Knitting a Rothko
New and recycled yarn, natural and synthetic fibers
85" W, expanding height
2006–present

Rachel Gomme

Treeline (object resulting from one-time performance on the University of Texas at El Paso campus, April 9, 2008)
Cotton/hemp/modal yarn and knitting needle
Knitted portion 36" x 4"
2008

Rachel Gomme

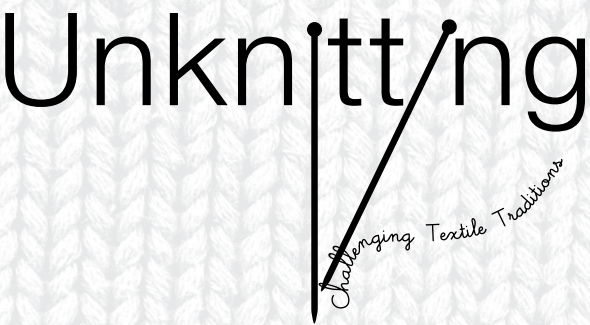
This is How Long
DVD documentation of on-going performance,
3 min. loop
April/May 2006–present

Rachel Gomme

Ravel
DVD documentation of one-time performance, 7 min. loop
June 2006

Rachel Gomme

Flyer for Ravel
Paper, pencil, colored pencil, wool yarn
11" x 8.5"
2006



Mark Newport

The Scout
Color photograph
24" x 36"
2005

Mark Newport

Raw Hide Kid
Acrylic yarn
80" x 26"
2005

Mark Newport

My Batman
Acrylic yarn
77" x 26"
2004

Mark Newport

Every – Any – No Man
Acrylic yarn
135" x 26"
2005

Mark Newport

Sweaterman 2
Acrylic yarn
81" x 26"
2005

Mark Newport

Button Up
Photo inkjet print
13" x 19"
2005

Mark Newport

Knitting a Forcefield
Photo inkjet print
19" x 13"
2005

Mark Newport

He Knew He Could Help
Photo inkjet print
13" x 19"
2005

Mark Newport

Batmen
Photo inkjet print
13" x 19"
2005

Mark Newport

Minute-Man?
Photo inkjet print
13" x 19"
2006

Mark Newport

Password
Photo inkjet print
19" x 13"
2006

Mark Newport

Sunset
Photo inkjet print
19" x 13"
2006

Mark Newport

The Kid
Photo inkjet print
13" x 19"
2006

Mark Newport

Training
Photo inkjet print
19" x 13"
2005

Mark Newport

Heroic Efforts
DVD, 3 min. 19 sec. loop
2007

Sandra Valenzuela

Media Noche (1)
Lamda metallic print
36" x 27"
2007

Sandra Valenzuela

Media Noche (2)
Lamda metallic print
36" x 27"
2007

Sandra Valenzuela

Media Noche (3)
Lamda metallic print
36" x 27"
2007





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