'Unknitting: Challenging Textile Traditions'
Exhibition Catalog

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Unknитting
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End papers: Mark Newport, Every–Any–No Man: detail, acrylic yarn, 130” x 26”, 2005.
Title paper: Sandra Valenzuela, Media Noche (S), Lambda metallic print, 36” x 27”, 2007.

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

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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 3”, 2008.
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.
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. 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, 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 Yorker, “some four million people in the United States have taken up knitting since 2003.”

A recent cartoon in The New Yorker depicted two angels, each wearing bulky knitted caps, scarves and sweaters, with a caption that read “It was better before God took up knitting.” 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 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.”

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. 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 Revree 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.”

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, “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.

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.15 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.
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.’

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. 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.”

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.”

Adrian Esparza, Medusa 1.1, 98” x 102” overall dimensions, 2008.
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.” 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. 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 232", 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.

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.
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.
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

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.32 Soon, she was exploring silence and waiting, and the 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

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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.

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. 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...”
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 lusciously 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.”

I agree. In the 1940’s, when I was born, the female knitting needle was the symbol of femininity. It was associated with the ‘women’s work’ and was a symbol of subservience. It was a symbol of submission and containment. However, I believe the knitting needle is a symbol of feminine strength and resilience. It is a symbol of resistance against the oppressive norms of society. It is a symbol of the power of women to create something beautiful and functional. It is a symbol of the power of women to make their own worlds and to forge their own destinies.

As Newport’s works demonstrate, this traditional symbolism can be subverted and turned against the very norms that once held it in check. In his knitted superhero costumes, Newport takes the baggy, lumpy, and concealing qualities of traditional knitting and turns them into a form of powerful resistance. He uses the knitting needle, the traditional symbol of femininity, to create a form of masculinity that is strong, resilient, and unapologetic.

The (Super)Heroics of Masculinity: Mark Newport

“Holy knit one, purl two!”

right, top: Mark Newport, Batman, 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.” 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.” 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 (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 date. 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.” 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. He knew that if he could just finish this, he could help.

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

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.” 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. 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. Like Newport, he comments upon the supposedly masculine aspects of heavy machinery, tools, large scale and “protective” materials.
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.
Valenzuela explained the series in a recent catalogue: “The idea came from my fascination with Sanchez Cotan’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 ‘nacho’ = night. Also, the Cuban sandwich called ‘medianoche’, earn[es] its name from the time it was typically eaten, after a night of dancing, to stave off hunger.” 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.” 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.” 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.
1 Alice Nunnem, 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/lsk-ScallPedgePinch.html. For more about the popularity of the poncho, see the USA Today article by Maria Pauette, “Pattern of Interest in Martha’s Poncho,” feature at http://www.natasha.comOUTH/people/2006/03/stevan_ponch.html. Accessed April 12, 2008.

4 This earlier activity, called “naïlbinding,” is a craft that uses an eyed needle to pull string through a loop. It is set of knifeless cutting, and is also referred to as “naabbinding.” See Julie Teckler’s 2006 article online at http://www.vogueknitting.com/issueSpring06/FEAThistory101.html. For more on a past project, see Stardust, An Idle Hand. The Social History of American Knitters (NY: Riverbank Books, 1983/1999) and Richard Rutt, A History of Hand Knitting (Loveland, OH: Interweave Press, 2003).

5 Some recent titles emphasizing the masculine side of the craft include: Anne-Madde and Drew Emborkey’s Men Who Knit & the Guys Who Love Them; 30 Great Looking Designs for Man & His Best Friend (Loveland, Colorado: Nightlock Press, 2007); Kristi Sparkland and John Yall’s The Knitting Mustard: 20’s Proposals for Guys (Brockley, CA: Ten Speed Press, 2007); and Michael-del Vecchio’s Knitting with Raffi: A Hands-On Guide to Knitting for the Modern Man (Kaes, U.K.: Ad Astra, 2006). Also available are titles about men (and mainly by women) such as McFadden’s The Manly Art of Knitting, which is a bi-oral that features a man knitting a hammock with pine cone casti needles, among other things. Promoted and directed by Marv Bates, Jerry Smith and Christina White, it can be seen at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kTIPb9Pp9pA. “Real Men Knit,” a DVD released in September of 2006, is available at www.mtyonline.com.


7 The cartoon, by Bruce Eric Kaplan, was featured in The New York Times (October 24, 2007): 71.

8 Ibid., 169. For more about “Tit-Bits” and “The Secret Society for the Propagation of Fiber Pornography,” see Knit Knit.

9 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.

10 For more about Knots Please, see their website: http://www.knitznplease.com. A discussion of the group, and a pattern for making your own antennae corsage, are included in Saleena Gschandtner’s Knit Knit, 90-93.

11 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.

12 This comment comes from McFadden’s foreword to Gschandtner’s The Manly Art of Knitting, which can be found published in Amy Spencer’s The Crafter Culture Handbook (orig. pub. 1959; New York: Barnes and Noble Classics, 2004), 179-80.

13 According to its website, KnitKnit was launched in 2006 as “…a peer-reviewed on the female experience. BUST tells the truth about women’s lives and presents a female perspective on pop culture.”

14 Nulie took part in an art piece that was published as “Chatting with Knitting’s New Guard” in Vogue Knitting 23/2 (August 2007): 35.


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 This comment comes from McFadden’s foreword to Gschandtner’s The Manly Art of Knitting, which can be found published in Amy Spencer’s The Crafter Culture Handbook (orig. pub. 1959; New York: Barnes and Noble Classics, 2004), 179-80.

18 Charles Dickens, A Tale of Two Cities (orig. pub. 1859; New York: Barnes and Noble Classics, 2004), 179-80.

19 Ibid., 171.


22 Ibid.

23 Terence Gowl, a German artist living and working in the UK, created “Tit-Bits” in 1999 and reproduces their work in make-at-home patterns. More about several “political” knitters can be found in Ellen Warren’s discussion of her work, called “Making Trouble,” which was published in the Chicago Tribune 11/3/2007. It can be found online at http://features.chicagotribune.com/news/story.html?xid=srump/20071103/markmaking_trouble.html.

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


26 Gschandtner, Knit Knit, 113-4.


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 Horst Riege Riege: Knit Knit: Profiles + Projects from Knitting’s Old Guard Speaks Out,” Vogue Knitting 25/2 (August 2007): 88.

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37 Ibid.

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

41 For more about this and other projects by Cole, see Gschandtner’s Knit Knit.

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

43 Tsang is profiled in Gschandtner’s Knit Knit: Profiles + Projects from Knitting’s Old Guard Speaks Out,” Vogue Knitting 25/2 (August 2007): 80.

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


46 Bird.

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

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

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

51 From email correspondence with the author, dated January 27, 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.

Rachel Gomme  
b. 1960, Dumfries, Scotland; residence: London  


Sandra Valenzuela  
b. 1980, Mexico City; residences: 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.

Adrian Esparza  


Jesus and Mary, acrylic, found poster, cut into strips and woven, 36” x 24”, 2008.

Treeline (object resulting from one-time performance on the University of Texas at ElPaso campus, April 9, 2008), cotton/hemp/modal yarn, 36” x 14”, 2008.

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

Adrian Esparza

Otro Lado
Serape, nails
98” x 252”
2008

Aitina

Raincoat
Acrylic on paper
72” x 112”
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

Rachel Gomme

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

Aitina

Anarchy, Tin Tan
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
  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
90” x 24”
2005

Mark Newport

My Batman
Acrylic yarn
77” x 26”
2006

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”
2008

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

Globe
Glass and iron frame
12” x 15”
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

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.