

New Worlds: Frontiers, Inclusion, Utopias



Claudia Mattos Avolese
Roberto Conduru
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Claudia Mattos Avolese and
Roberto Conduru

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Crafting Relational Activism: Political Potentials of Communal Making in Contemporary Australia

Katve-Kaisa Kontturi
University of Melbourne

Introduction

In this essay, I will discuss three community art projects run by Australian contemporary artists. These case studies showcase a variety of techniques and methods of communality, ranging from demonstrating with crocheted banners to Indigenous basket-weaving and further, to the communal knitting of a big welcome mat. In their respective ways, all the case studies focus on the material and bodily ways in which the projects bring together people of different social and ethnic backgrounds. I'm interested in how these projects may enhance multicultural collaborations and might even help, in their own humble way, to build more sustainable futures for communities struggling with deep inequalities. I've personally participated in all of the projects. Importantly, my experiences in participating in these craft activities have led me to reconsider what can be thought of as activism.

When understood conventionally, activism is regularly associated with loud and ardent messages, outspoken charismatic leaders, and forms of protest such as mass demonstrations, processions, rallies, strikes, and sit-ins. My experience in communal craft-making has, however, made me look for different, more subtle conceptualizations of activism. "Craftivism" as a contemporary form of activism that makes use of the medium and techniques of craft has been seen as an alternative to more conventional forms of activism.¹ According to Sarah Corbett,² the attractiveness of craftivism lies in its quiet and unthreatening mode of expression, which is as slow and delicate as its process of making. Yet politics is readily there: although political messages and opinions might be soft or quotidian in form and often filled with humor, they are, in any case, clear and explicit. If craftivism is something that is explicitly political, then some of my cases might extend current limits and understanding of craftivism.

This essay considers craftivism from the theoretical perspective of new materialism as an approach that embraces subtle and volatile relational materialities, micromovements, and agential capacities of matter.³ In a new materialist vein, this

1 Betsy Greer, ed., *Craftivism: The Art of Craft and Activism* (Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 2014).

2 Sarah Corbett. *A Little Book of Craftivism* (London: Cicada, 2013), 3–7.

3 Milla Tiainen, Katve-Kaisa Kontturi, and Ilona Hongisto, "Framing, Following, Middling:

essay suggests that politics does not only happen on the macropolitical level of laws or mass demonstrations. In fact, politics might even be more efficiently exercised on the micropolitical level of subtle bodily movements and relations because these affect bodies most immediately.⁴

Finally, it is important to acknowledge that this essay is part of a broader research project titled *Affective Fabrics of Contemporary Art: Stitching Global Relations*. In this project, multicultural craft activities are studied alongside cross-continently travelling fashion exhibitions and contemporary artists, who deploy fabrics and clothing in their political art-making. In the project, the concept of “affective fabrics” refers both to concrete woven or knitted fabrics and to the social-material relations that these fabrics facilitate. In other words, affective fabrics configure an intensive—and political—space of relation.

Margaret Mayhew’s *Prayer Rugs* (2014–2015)

Prayer Rugs is a series of demonstration banners crocheted by Melbourne-based critical thinker and textile artist Margaret Mayhew. Mayhew’s banners are informed by her work at an inner-city detention centre, where she runs weekly art classes for asylum seekers as part of Melbourne Artists for Asylum Seekers (MAFA).⁵ Her artwork is a response to refugees in detention asking her to pray for them: the banners spell out “freedom” in Arabic, Persian, and Tamil. As a non-believer, Mayhew decided to perform her prayers in a material form.

When I interviewed Mayhew about her art classes, she told me that her primary aim was to create a smooth, open space for creation⁶ – a space for freedom for the people trapped in the inhumane system of Australian immigration politics, where

Towards Methodologies of Relational Materialities,” *Cultural Studies Review* 21, no. 2 (2015): 14–46; Rick Dolphijn and Iris van der Tuin, *New Materialisms: Interviews and Cartographies* (Ann Arbor: Open Humanities Press, 2013).

4 Erin Manning, *Relationescapes: Movement, Art, Philosophy* (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 2009).

5 Margaret Mayhew, “Crafting Asylum: Text, Textiles and the Materiality of Hope.” Paper presented at the 6th International Conference on New Materialisms: *Transversal Practices: Matter, Ecology, Relationality*, Victorian College of the Arts, The University of Melbourne, September 27–29, 2015

6 Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 1987), 474–500.



1. Demonstrating with *Cutantiram: The Colours of Freedom Rug*. Turku, Finland, 2015. Photo by the author.

asylum seekers may find themselves accused of terrorism and whole families may be transported thousands of miles away and back again without any explanation. Under such extreme conditions of restriction and vulnerability, asylum seekers feel that only prayer can help them.

Interestingly, Mayhew's methods of creating this space of freedom included teaching simple art techniques. But where technique is conventionally understood to be about controlling matter, molding it according to certain rules, here, learning a technique becomes a technique of existence, a technique of becoming.⁷ It offers a possibility to relate one's body to something, to work with one material or another, and to be creative in a safe environment. I feel that her idea of smooth space was also transposed to her rugs.

My participation in this project began when I joined the *Refugees Are Welcome* rally and got the chance to carry the banners with Mayhew in Melbourne in October 2014. The following year,

⁷ Brian Massumi, *Semblance and Event: Activist Philosophy and the Occurrent Arts* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), 167–70.

I demonstrated with the *Cutantiram: The Colours of the Freedom* (2015) banner (Fig. 1)—which bore a text in Tamil—in a rally supporting multiculturalism, diversity, and solidarity in Turku, Finland. It was intriguing to see how attracted people were to the banners, and how affectionately they treated them. They wanted to touch them, took numerous photos, and asked to join us in carrying them. This raised a series of questions: Was it the softness of the yarn that appealed to people? Or did the message not feel too outspoken, as it was indispensably integrated into the crocheted fabrics? In any case, the crocheted banners provide an example of how craft can draw people who are “relative strangers” closer together—an expression used by Joanne Turney in her book, *The Culture of Knitting*.⁸ To sum up, Mayhew’s is not only activism of smooth space, but also a soft activism of relation that is most powerful in its striking colors, inventive patterns, and soft textures of crocheted yarn.

The Tjanpi Desert Weavers Master Class (2014)

The second craft project that incited me to rethink what can be considered activist practice was a basket-weaving master class run by Tjanpi Desert Weavers at the Victorian College of the Arts, University of Melbourne, in July 2014. The Tjanpi Desert Weavers are a group of Indigenous Australian women from the Central Desert, the so-called Red Center. As people who are invited to give master classes usually are, these women are masters of a certain technique: basket-weaving. They excel in fiber art. Tjanpi women held the class just before the opening of the Tarrawarra Biennial, a contemporary art exhibition organized in cooperation with the prestigious Melbourne Art Fair, in which they were likewise invited to participate alongside major Australian artists. In 2015, their work was also presented at the Australian Pavilion during the 56th Venice Biennale.

Let me now describe what happened during the master class. When we—that is, art students and teacher-researchers—entered the class, we didn’t quite know what to expect. The briefing was very brief indeed: we learned that our teachers were in Melbourne for the first time and that for them, Melbourne felt as outback as their desert was to us. They had travelled



2. Crafting with the Tjanpi Desert Weavers. Victorian College of the Arts, University of Melbourne, 2014. Photo by the author.

thousands of kilometers, and they didn't speak much English. Moreover, they had brought all the materials we needed with them: the grass we would use had grown in the red desert earth.

Fascinatingly, there were no verbal instructions or concrete illustrations of how to proceed and no technologies involved other than the needles passed to us, and grass and fiber piled everywhere around us. I sat next to a teacher called Molly, and without many words, she grabbed some fiber and started a basket by making the first knot. Soon she started to integrate the grass and weave the fiber around it: there was a basket silently in the making.

To learn how to weave, we couldn't but follow our teacher's skillful hands—her body in movement, her body moving with the basket in becoming. Occasionally when a student's basket-weaving got too tangled in the very beginning, our teacher shook her head, laughed a bit, and grabbed the beginnings of the basket to undo and redo it in a looser weave.

Observing Molly and other students around me, I learned a lot. We worked in almost complete silence; we didn't chat, we didn't make friends as one usually does when crafting together (Fig. 2). Individuals were not really the issue: all we did was focus on learning to work with the fiber, to feel the fiber, and, in more practical terms, on when to add the grass filling to make the basket beautifully round. We learned by making and following each other and our teacher weaving fiber. By doing that, we learned more than just making baskets. Through working side by side, elbow to elbow, rhythmically repeating the phases of basket-making, we wove not only certain fiber objects, but each other, closer together.

Of course, inequalities dividing Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians could not possibly be overcome during one or two master classes: life expectancy, income, education, and employment for Australian Indigenous people lag far behind that of non-Indigenous people. But still, something happened in the course of that class: as our bodies worked closely together, as they learned from each other, the sensation of possibility of collaboration quietly emerged.

This is what I would call a subtle sort of relational activism, one based not on grand gestures or loud demands, but on bodily relatedness, and hence on the increasing feeling of communality. Erin Manning and Brian Massumi's philosophies of relation⁹ and event help to understand how the tiniest, almost imperceptible connections and relations are, in the end, the most important ones in our lives. I will come back to their thinking when discussing my third case.

Kate Just's *Big Welcome Mat Project* (2014)

Some weeks after participating in the Tjanpi Desert Weavers master class, I participated in another community-based craft project led by Kate Just, a U.S.-born contemporary artist living in Melbourne who specializes in knitted sculptures. The project took place in and was funded by the City of Greater Dandenong, which, since 2002, has been one of Australia's official "refugee welcome zones." The aim of this public project was to bring together local people of multiple ethnic back-

9 Erin Manning and Brian Massumi, *Thought in the Act: Passages in the Ecology of Experience* (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 2014).

grounds by collaboratively producing a *Big Knitted Welcome Mat* (the title of the project).

I joined the project after it had already begun, so I benefited from being surrounded by people who already knew what they were doing. I hadn't knitted for years, and my sole language of knitting was Finnish. Therefore, I struggled a bit to get going and became all the more confused when I realized that knitting terms also differed according to American and Australian/British conventions. But soon the confusion transformed into an invigorating discussion of how "knit" and "purl" were expressed in different languages, and when and how it was that we had learned to knit—whether the process took place in Australia, Chile, Finland, Malta, Italy, Singapore, Russia, or China.

Side by side, and each in their particular way, we knitted together, and also learned from each other, trying new stitches and designs. But this time we were not silent. As we sat and knitted, we chatted about our everyday practices, about love, partnership, food, and cleaning, but also about differences in our lives. The giant doormat, with its more than one hundred squares of multiple textures and different stitches, witnessed this process: it bore witness to our differences.

This comes close to what Joanne Turney claims in her book, *The Culture of Knitting*: "Knitting is a great leveler: the one activity or practice that can bring people together and overcome difference, creating harmonious environments in which sociability is at the forefront."¹⁰ Turney also suggests that what knitting circle members might gain from participation in their group is an understanding of their personal role in the community; they will find their place within a lineage and can also establish a sense of utopia.

When I thought about how the mat had come to embody diversity, difference, and close connection, I remembered how we had received clear instructions of what to do. Indeed, in comparison to the Tjanpi Desert Weavers master class, we were provided with a detailed how-to: the red squares were supposed to be 20 x 20 cm in size, and 104 of them were needed to construct the mat. Although there were clear rules, I didn't feel

restricted. Later, I understood that knitting instructions worked as *enabling constraints*. In Erin Manning and Brian Massumi's relational philosophy, *enabling constraint* means something that triggers action and does not restrict creativity, but rather, encourages it within certain limits.¹¹

It was through these enabling constraints of measurement and quantity that our knitting project brought together bodies of women of different ages and multiple ethnic and social backgrounds in a way that wouldn't have been otherwise possible. Intriguingly, it was only once we were putting the mat together and attaching the letters forming the word "welcome" that we worked most closely together. We had to climb around the table, stretch our arms, and twist our necks. Without the project and its material restrictions, we would never have worked in such close bodily proximity. That is, we wouldn't have learned to relate our bodies to each other in such an intimate manner while staying relative strangers to one other.

Although I share Turney's genuinely affirmative understanding of what communal crafting *can do*, there are significant differences in our thinking. I would not claim that crafting can overcome differences or create harmony. Rather, if a greater extent of communality is achieved, it is because people have learned to open their bodies and to feel how their relation to other bodies is both constitutive and indispensable.

This is what Erin Manning¹² and other philosophers of relation describe as *individuation*: The concept comes from the French philosopher Gilbert Simondon. For Simondon, individuation is about non-hierarchical subjectivity in relational becoming. To emphasize individuation's relational aspect, Manning speaks of *individuation's dance*. Dance is a bodily activity that necessitates moving one's body in relation to another body, be it another dancer, the nonhuman body of the floor, the rhythm of music, or all of them together. Importantly, in Manning's account, bodies are "always more than one"—this is precisely because they are open and in a continuous process of relational becoming.

11 Manning and Massumi, *Thought in the Act*, 111–14.

12 Erin Manning, *Always More than One: Individuation's Dance* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013).

Crucially, feminist philosopher Elizabeth Grosz notes that Simondon's understanding of individuation has consequences for social activism.¹³ If we understand social divisions of genders, races, classes, and ethnicities neither as forms nor structures, we might be able to see that what forms collectives is not only the shared oppressive environment, but, as Grosz suggests, some sort of internal resonance that relates us to each other in more subtle ways.

Conclusion

To sum up, what I'm interested in is the potentiality of communal crafting to make people feel how their relation to other bodies is both constitutive and indispensable. Working this way does not *erase* differences; rather, it teaches us how we can cope with them, relate to them, live and work with them toward new futures. This is how communal craft-making works as relational activism.

13 Elizabeth Grosz, "Identity and Individuation: Some Feminist Reflections," in *Gilbert Simondon: Technology and Being*, Arne de Boever, Alex Murray, Jon Roffe, and Ashley Woodward, eds., 56–76 (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012): 54.

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Katve-Kaisa Kontturi

Dr. Katve-Kaisa Kontturi is a McKenzie Postdoctoral Fellow at the University of Melbourne. Her research focuses on the material-relational processes of art and the body, and she has a special interest in fabrics and curating. She is a founding member of the European New Materialist Network COST IS1307, and co-chairs its creative arts working group. Her essays have appeared in *Carnal Knowledge: Towards a “New Materialism” through the Arts* (2013) and in the new materialist special issues of *A+M Journal of Art and Media Studies* (2014) and *Cultural Studies Review* (2015). Katve-Kaisa is currently completing her book “The Way of Following: Art, Materiality, Collaboration” for the Immediations series at Open Humanities Press.