

Creativity

How Knitting Became Entwined with Protest Art

• Lisa Zhang Aug 13, 2019 1:05pm

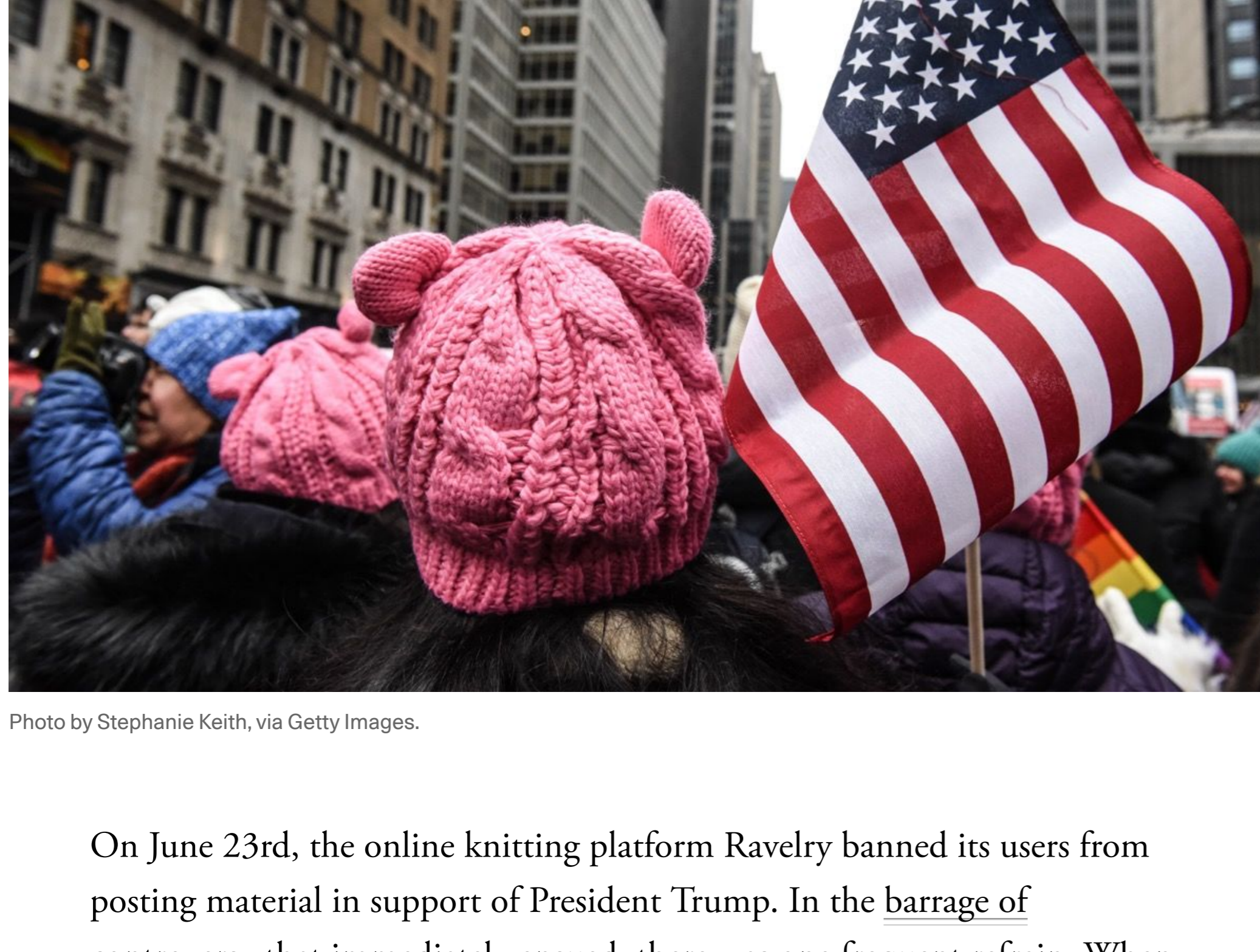


Photo by Stephanie Keith, via Getty Images.

On June 23rd, the online knitting platform Ravelry banned its users from posting material in support of President Trump. In the barrage of controversy that immediately ensued, there was one frequent refrain: When did knitting become political?

Knitting, as well as textile arts and handicrafts more broadly, have long played a political role in the United States. Betsy Ross sewed the first American flag in a political, even revolutionary, act; communities of colonial women came together in friendly competition to see who could make the most homespun yarn in a gesture to spurn British taxes; and women formed clubs to knit socks for soldiers during the Civil War. In step, knitting has long been entwined with political art, too.



Liz Collins, *Knitting Nation: Phase 1 - The Muster*, 2005. Courtesy of the artist.

Given that yarn and other knit materials are traditionally associated with femininity and domesticity, female artists who have used such media have fought to be considered artists at all. “Claes Oldenburg’s soft typewriters are sewn pieces,” Faith Ringgold famously said, “and I never heard anyone call them craft. It’s who’s doing it that makes it craft.” It’s worth noting that Claes Oldenburg’s first wife, the artist and poet Patty Mucha, actually sewed his soft sculptures.

In turn, knitting and other textile mediums became central to feminist art. Faith Wilding’s 1972 *Crocheted Environment*, perhaps better known as “Womanhouse,” organized by Judy Chicago and Miriam Schapiro. The work is a harmony of opposites: simultaneously comforting, like a cocoon, and off-putting, like a web. In a similar way, Wilding frames her work as a feminist spin on a feminine and domestic past: “Our female ancestors first built themselves and their families round-shaped shelters,” Wilding wrote. “I think of my environment as linked in form and feeling with those primitive womb-shelters, but with the added freedom of not being functional.”



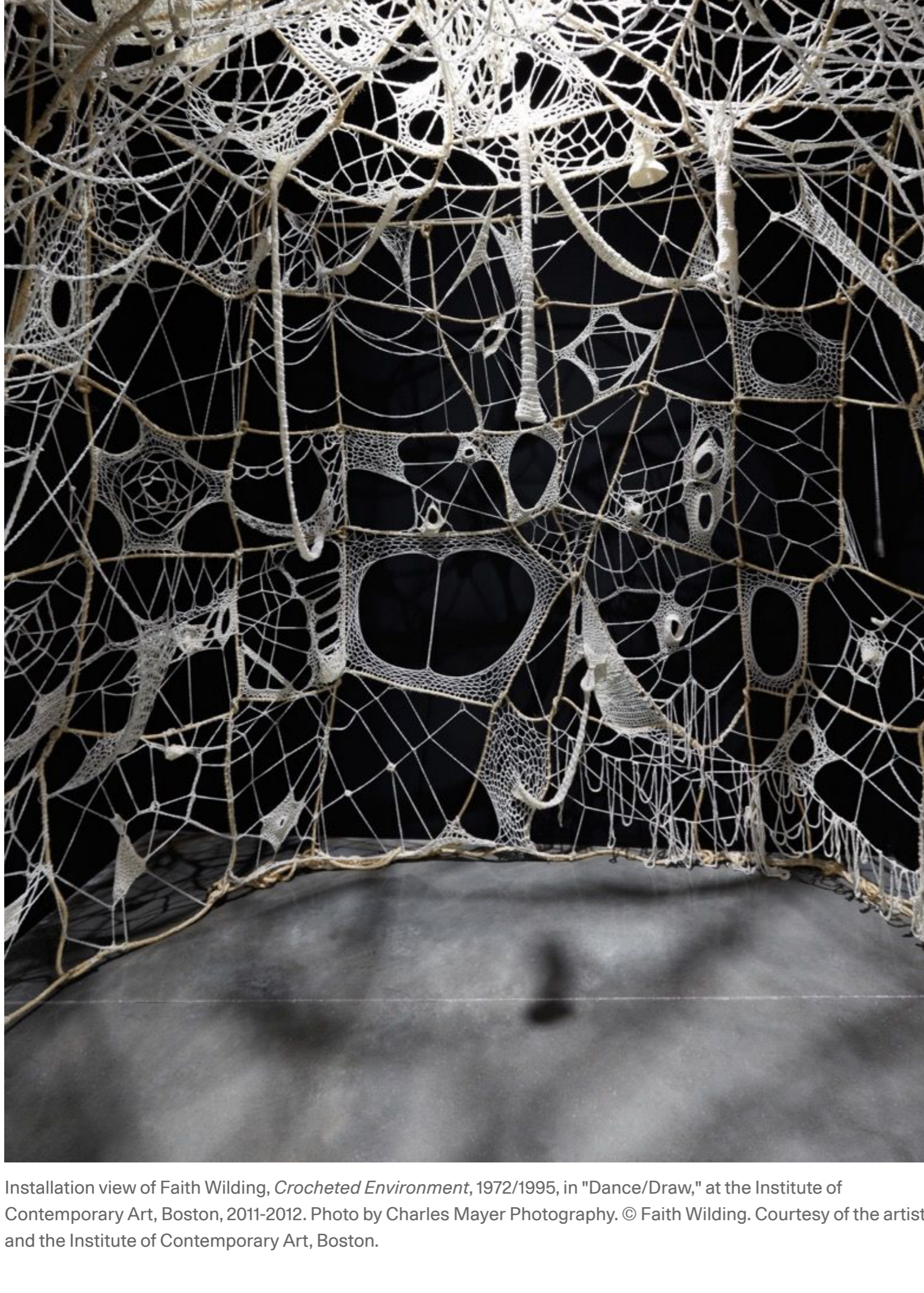
Faith Ringgold
Echoes of Harlem, 1980
The Studio Museum in Harlem



Faith Ringgold
American Collection #4: Jo Baker's Bananas, 1997
National Museum of Women in the Arts

That freedom of “not being functional” refers to the untying of knitting from its origins in domestic labor. Because knitting had, for some, become a choice and not an obligation, it became a means of solace, creativity, and a way to find communities, as was the case with the knitting circles of yore.

This position has been echoed in the wake of Ravelry’s decision. “My crochet is not political and I do not want it to be,” read one blogger’s complaint. “It is my way to destress, my safe place.” For others, though, in either a continuation or a perversion of knitting’s political roots in the U.S., knitting has been a platform for protest.



Installation view of Faith Wilding, *Crocheted Environment*, 1972/1995, in “Dance/Draw,” at the Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston, 2011-2012. Photo by Charles Mayer Photography. © Faith Wilding. Courtesy of the artist and the Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston.

Julia Bryan-Wilson, a foremost scholar of handicraft, writes in her book *Fray*, “[Textiles] occupy a central place in traditionalist histories while they also erupt as potential sites of resistance.” They are claimed by some to be a continuation of domestic subjugation, by others as a space of non-political pleasure, by still others as a medium for protest.

“Textiles are contingent,” Bryan-Wilson told me recently. “You cannot claim for them that they are inherently anything.”

In the hands of contemporary artists, knitting has also been used to protest war. In this sense, the World War II-era propaganda poster slogan “Remember Pearl Harbor; Purl Harder” can seem to take on new meaning.



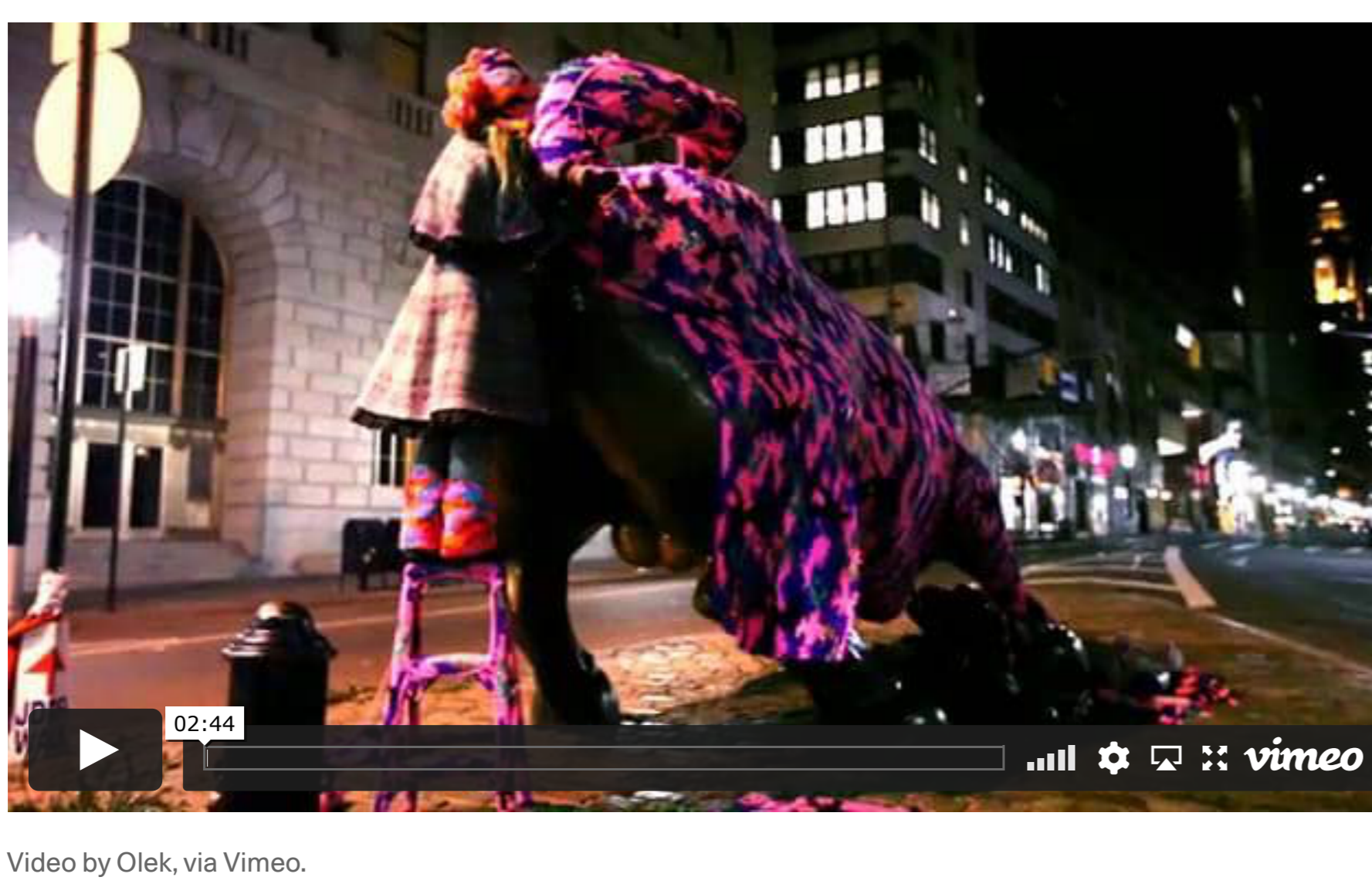
Caroline Wells Chandler
My Neck, My Back, 2019
C24 Gallery



Caroline Wells Chandler
Girl Meets Girl, 2018
CHOI&LAGER

Liz Collins’s multi-phase project *Knitting Nation* (2005–16) was initially prompted by opposition to the Iraq War, revolving around issues of labor, manufacturing, and patriotism. *Phase 1: Knitting During Wartime*, staged in response to the prompt “What are you fighting for?” and inspired by Civil War reenactments, saw Collins’s “army” of knitters collectively construct a massive knit American flag that was then dirtied, stepped on, and defaced.

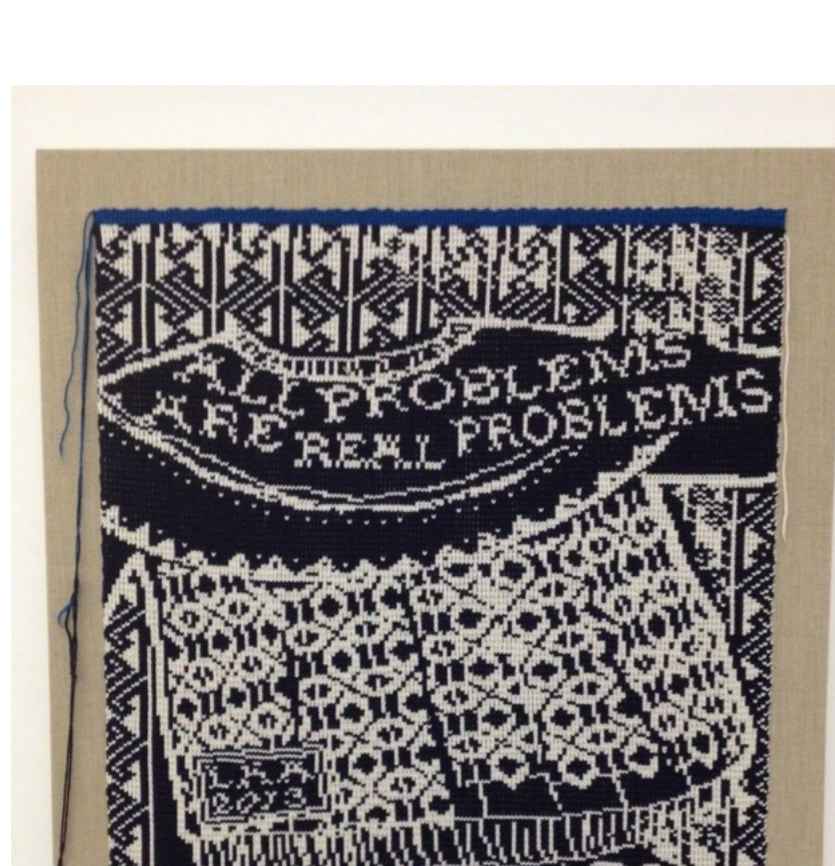
Barb Hunt’s *Antipersonnel* (1998–present) renders deadly weaponry like stake mines, pressure-activated mines, and fragmentation weapons in yarn. These creations are pink-hued and limp, as opposed to metallic and hard. “There is a close association of knitting with care,” Hunt writes on her website, pointing to hand-knitted bandages that were made for soldiers. “I use these associations to contradict the abuse of power and the use of violence by transforming a destructive object into one that can do no harm.”



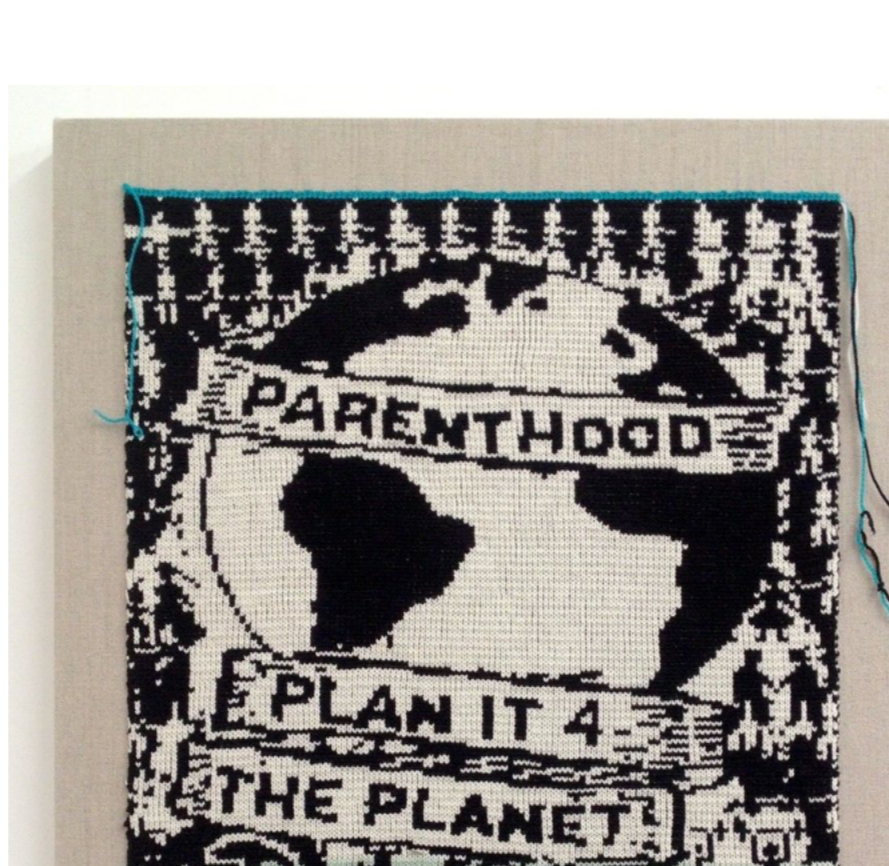
Video by Olek, via Vimeo.

With the rise of sites like Ravelry, knitting has swept onto digital platforms, galvanizing movements of collective action. *Stitch for Senate* (2008), a project organized by the artist Cat Mazza, saw hobbyists knit helmet liners for each member of the U.S. Senate to persuade them to bring back the troops. More famously, after the election of President Trump, the *Pussyhat Project*, which bills itself as “Design Interventions for social change,” provided free patterns for crafters all over the U.S. to knit their own pink pussyhats. As a result, the Women’s March in January 2017 became a defiant tide of pink.

Other artists have harnessed handicraft in politically salient ways. Caroline Wells Chandler’s fiber works feature a full cast of crocheted characters, often happily bearing rainbow genitals or scars from double mastectomy FTM top surgery scars. “I am primarily interested in contributing to the history of figuration,” Wells said in an interview with *Juxtapoz*, “by populating it with gender queer bodies that affirmatively celebrate in-between-ness.”



Lisa Anne Auerbach
All Problems Are Real Problems, 2013
Gavilak
Contact for price



Lisa Anne Auerbach
Plan It for the Planet, 2014
Gavilak
Contact for price

Artists are, however, sometimes conflicted about the efficacy of political artmaking. The artist Olek, known for her guerilla-art practice of yarn-bombing public spaces or objects, such as *Charging Bull* (1989) at the New York Stock Exchange, told me: “If political art changed anything, it would be illegal.”

Internet platforms like Ravelry created an online community around a love of knitting, only to find that its members were not all there for the same reason. Knitters today differ vastly in their motives for knitting and in their understanding of the nature of knitting itself. And just as the pussyhat pattern spread like wildfire across social media, so, too, has the debate over Ravelry’s decision, across Twitter, blogs, message boards, and online retailers. Though it’s been updated to a new platform, the age-old politicization of knitting persists. •

Lisa Zhang