

Beth McLaughlin
Fuller Craft Museum, Brockton, Massachusetts, U.S.A.

Pussyhat Production and Consumption: The Role of Needlework in Building Resilient and Empowered Communities

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Submitted by Beth C. McLaughlin

On January 21, 2017, over 3.3 million people marched in 650 U.S. cities and 260 global sister marches in response to the 2016 United States Presidential Election. The ubiquitous pink Pussyhat was a powerful presence at the events, worn in immeasurable numbers to symbolize unity, empowerment, and political resistance. This paper examines this material culture phenomenon and positions needlecraft as a viable technic in building healthy, energized, and elastic communities.

As plans for the January 2017 Women's March on Washington crystallized, the Pussyhat Project was conceived to embolden citizens and stimulate solidarity in defense of equality and reproductive freedoms. With low barriers to entry, the Pussyhat offered an accessible, affordable, and eye-catching "call to action" that was heeded across the globe. Millions took part in knitting, crocheting, and sewing the cat-eared hats to ultimately generate the largest example of social action through craft, or craftivism, in modern U.S. history.

A variety of dynamics put forth in the paper asserts the Pussyhat movement as a highly effective counter-response to the separatist ideologies of newly elected U.S. leadership. The movement is assessed through the optic of craftivist traditions – in both contemporary and historical contexts – to argue the value of politically aligned handwork in promoting the wellbeing of our communities through supported vulnerability and mutual empathic involvement. Furthermore, the project establishes a framework for sustained activism through healthy makers, empowered citizens, and engaged societies.

More than ever before, individuals are seeking out ways to rebound from societal deformation caused by political upheaval. An examination of the Pussyhat initiative in the context of politically charged fiber art traditions strongly supports the efficacy of needlecraft in creating accessible modalities for relational resilience, mental wellbeing, and sustained political action.