

STITCH'nBITCH

Cyberfeminism, a Third Place and the New Materiality

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Abstract

We discuss the emergence of a new craft movement known as *Stitch'nBitch*. Prevalent around the globe, particularly among women, this movement is based locally in places such as hotels and cafes, and virtually using the internet. The women meet to knit, stitch and talk. The groups use new technologies as an enabler and resource exchange. At the same time, their presence can be seen, in part, as a negative response to major political, social and technological changes including globalization, terrorism, damage to the environment and the dislocation of the Information Society. We introduce five themes to assist in the development of a research agenda into this new form of material culture, discussing (1) remedial, (2) progressive, (3) resistance, (4) nostalgic and (5) ironic possibilities. Each is considered in terms of their respective foci on community, cyberfeminism, craft, conservation and comment.

Key Words ◆ craft ◆ gender ◆ information society ◆ leisure ◆ nostalgia

CASTING ON

Stitch'nBitch is a collective term given to groups of young women who get together to knit, stitch and chat. In this article, we suggest that such groups may be a response to major political, social and technological changes of the new millennium. In particular, we consider the way that the Information Society has resulted in profound changes in the way

people live, communicate and connect with one another and has also provided a trigger for new, more community-focused activities using craft production.

Indeed, the current *Stitch'nBitch* activities may be heralding a new Arts and Crafts Movement. We propose that *Stitch'nBitch* may be an example of a new way of connecting that is based on material production using traditional craft skills and yarns as well as the optical fibre and twisted pair cable used for telecommunications. A variety of research methods were used in the preparation of this article. In response to calls for historical analyses we looked back on Arts and Crafts movements of previous centuries (Kieser, 1994). Our investigation included a review of art theory, organizational change theory and feminist literature; the World Wide Web (particularly knitting blogs) and the popular/street press. The global movement is considered as well as individual responses detailed in the literature, knitting blogs and a reflective piece by one of the authors who learned to knit in the 1950s, when knitting was a domestic, not public pursuit, a necessity rather than a leisure option. We assert that an understanding of *Stitch'nBitch* is informed by discussion of the Information Society, leisure and social connectedness, gender and technology through notions of the digital divide and cyberfeminism. Reflecting on hierarchies of art and craft and their relevance to the *Stitch'nBitch* movement, we argue that *Stitch'nBitch* may signify an ironic mimicry or melancholia for a past that never was rather than a romantic nostalgia or desire for return. We suggest a research agenda into *Stitch'nBitch* as both a local and global phenomenon in which the production and consumption of gender, technology and society collide, one that exemplifies a new materiality.

STITCH'NBITCH GROUPS

Stitch'nBitch is the term used to describe the global movement where women meet virtually, through the internet, and physically, often in local cafes and hotels, to socialize and share their craft. The movement is evident in Europe, particularly Zurich, many parts of the USA, including Chicago, New York and Los Angeles (Craft Yarn Council of America, 2004), and in Australia in Melbourne and Sydney (*Stitch'nBitch Melbourne*, 2004; Yahoo Groups, 2004). It is named after a book, titled *Stitch'nBitch*, written by Debbie Stoller (2003), editor of the New York-based feminist magazine BUST.

Stitch'nBitch groups are formed by and for women who get together to knit as a highly social form of creative leisure production (Lemke, 2004). The groups meet to discuss their knitting projects, exchange skills and to socialize (McAdams, 2001; Yahoo Groups, 2004). This appears to be part of a resurgence of interest in handcrafts among young women

(Sholnik, 2004; Wheeler, 2004), both domestically and socially, with knitting being a particular focus outside of the house. These groups can be found on university campuses; in clubs, pubs, cafes and private homes throughout Europe, the USA and Oceania. Some gatherings are for stitching such as cross-stitch, embroideries, tapestry and small weavings. Other groups include a social welfare contribution as part of their organization; for example, 'Afghans for Afghan' is a project being undertaken by one university-based *Stitch'nBitch* group. (Afghan is the term given to a multi-coloured knitted or crocheted patchwork blanket.) Another group is dedicated to raising funds for Médecins Sans Frontières, the international medical aid organization (McPhee, 2006a). An important characteristic of the groups is their use of information technologies such as chat rooms, email and blogs to share and develop their craft in particular and life experiences in general. In summary, the identifiable characteristics of *Stitch'nBitch* groups appear to be that they are social, third place, based on craft production and predominantly female.

Accordingly, the name being used for participants in *Stitch'nBitch* groups is *Chicks with Sticks*. Indeed, the number of young women knitting has grown rapidly in the last few years. For example, the proportion of women under the age of 45 who know how to knit doubled between 1996 and 2002 from 9 per cent to 18 per cent (Craft Yarn Council of America, 2004; Sholnik, 2004). The movement is also evidenced by the dramatic increase in the sale of knitting wool (Craft Yarn Council of America, 2004). New retail outlets are being established in relatively affluent areas suggesting that the activity is being pursued for reasons other than the economic.

THE INFORMATION SOCIETY

It is notable that this growth is occurring at a significant period of human development where the opportunities revealed by progress in information technology are being diffused across many parts of the globe. One approach to the combination of knitting and technology has been taken by Jaya Srikrishnan, a knitting designer and a Palm Pilot fan. She uses the Palm Pilot for a variety of tasks associated with her craft, including sizing, databases of projects and patterns, and designing using the grid on spreadsheets and downloads of patterns into word processing (Srikrishnan, 2004). Another example concerns two young women who responded, independently, to calls from *Vogue Knitting* wishing to contact Australian knitters. One of the women is an IT professional, a programmer, the other an instructor in knitting. Their meeting with the *Vogue* editor led to the women collaborating on the development of an online hand knitting and yarn cyber shop called OzYarn (Alexander, 2001; OzYarn, 2004).

In addition to such examples of virtual culture (Rheingold, 1994), the *Stitch'nBitch* groups listed in Yahoo.com (Yahoo Groups, 2004) show how women appear to be harvesting the opportunities for the development of social capital or 'resources that may be called upon by sole virtue of being one of a network of durable social relations' (Bourdieu, in Wacquant, 1987: 69), and choice through engagement in craft as well as their engagement in technology. Rheingold (1994) was one of the first to present some of the implications of the new communities and cultures, believing that they provided for the development of social capital and associated choices and activities that could be leveraged for benefit of individuals and groups.

COMMUNITARIAN LEISURE – KNITTING TOGETHER NOT BOWLING ALONE

Rheingold's virtual communities are important to the discussion of *Stitch'nBitch* as the movement uses aspects of the technology in its endeavours and can be seen as an embodiment of the cliché of both acting locally and being connected globally via the internet. However, while *Stitch'nBitch* groups use information technology as an enabler and resource exchange for the dissemination of information, they appear, at the same time, to be in part a remedial response to the Information Society in the sense that people are now connected 24/7/365 to the rest of the planet but often not connected at all to their community and place.

This lack of connection has been particularly evident in contemporary leisure activities. Until recent times, leisure has been seen as an individual activity of consumption (Arai and Pedlar, 2003), for example with women selecting to join a gymnasium for recreation and personal fitness, and the home has become a privatized setting for consumption activities, including leisure activities (Ritzer, 1999). At one extreme, Robert Putnam's (2000) *Bowling Alone* describes what can occur when people retreat from a community into their own lounge rooms and watch the television set. He argues that a richly networked society, high on social capital, is required before there can be any valuable degree of social inclusion. Arai and Pedlar (2003) argue that there is a need to focus more on community and the common good in leisure studies to assist in an understanding of shared meanings in community and the inclusion of oppressed and marginalized citizens.

In this context, the *Stitch'nBitch* movement may be reflective of a move towards a community focus that will build, not reduce, social capital. It is proposed that the emergence of *Stitch'nBitch* reflects a wish for more self-expression of creativity and social connection at a community level through leisure. As Flew has suggested, '[i]nteractivity, virtuality, and globalization, as developments associated with digitization,

convergence and networking have promoted new forms of social interaction, new possibilities for the construction of identity, and new forms of community' (Flew, 2002: 209). These 'new possibilities' are demonstrated through the use of blogs, a type of electronic diary with images and links to other online sites. Knitters share their current projects, exchange thoughts and concerns in blogs that, according to the 'web ring' rules, must be updated at least once a week. The blogs allow readers to lodge responses by posting comments that are visible to all readers. We surveyed one knitting blog site that, as of January 2006, had 800 active blogs and was growing rapidly (Knitting Blogs Web Ring, 2006).

FROM THE GENDER DIVIDE TO CYBERFEMINIST CHICKS WITH STICKS

The existence of *Stitch'nBitch* groups as women's groups may give further cause for optimism against a backdrop of what feminist theorists present as a gender divide in participation in technology. For example, Wajcman (2004) reminds us that women are significantly under-represented in the fields of science, engineering and technology and that this reflects a growing and strengthening of the bond between masculinity and technology. The number of women actively participating in the information technology industries has been declining for many years (Wajcman, 2004), and the continued dominance of men in science and technology is of concern at a time when the influence of technology is expanding to all parts of the globe. Yet Wajcman (2004) celebrates the new era with an optimistic view rather than a pessimistic and deterministic presentation of the phenomenon of young women in the 2000s. She portrays the new generation of women as:

Wired women in cyber-cafes, experimenting with new media, clutching mobile phones, are immersed in science fiction and their imaginary worlds. It presents a seductive image for a culture with an insatiable appetite for novelty. The possibilities of reinventing the self and the body, like cyborgs in cyberspace and the prosthetic potential of biotechnologies have reinvigorated our thinking. (Wajcman, 2004: 107)

Despite the decline of female participation in information technology, there has been a continued discussion in the feminist literature about cyberfeminism, which is a construct developed to allow a voice to women who wish to participate in technology on their own terms. Luckman suggests that cyberfeminism is important to the generation of women who are participating in *Stitch'nBitch*: 'Cyber feminist discourse gives voice to a particular "women-with-attitude" spirit within computer culture. This modern, hip, sassy, post-feminist approach to life in a wired world holds substantial currency for many young women' (Luckman, 1999: 36), and

is embodied in the character Purl, whose cartoon image can be purchased emblazoned on (machine-produced) items such as t-shirts, bags and mouse pads (see *Stitch'nBitch*, 2006).

Of particular relevance, there have been deliberate efforts to get young women to participate in the Information Society through the reclaiming of feminine craft. Wajcman notes that some feminists have been working systematically over extended periods of time to encourage women to enter fields of science and technology: 'Workshops to encourage women to take up computing became widespread, and the analogy between the binary logic of writing software and knitting patterns was drawn to feminize this skill' (Wajcman, 2004: 109). Ironically whilst the women who *Stitch'nBitch* may be rejecting technology, the same skills are required to read a knit pattern as to read a computer program – 'slip stitch, knit stitch, pass slip stitch over'. The feminist author Plant notes 'female programmers and multi-media artists were to discover connections between knitting, patchwork, and software engineering and find weaving secreted in the pixelled windows which open on to cyberspace' (Plant, 1995: 58). A woman must have the skills to engage with technology in the same way required to become a reader of patterns. A knitting program is very similar to the BASIC programming languages still in use today. The skill base required is important for women and needs to be appreciated and applauded.

Such reclaiming is also extended to old women's craft as presented by Starita (2004) when describing the owner of her local wool shop as:

a middle-aged Goth with black eyeliner and tattoos. She kept knitting, a more sullen than cunning Madame Dufarge [sic] . . . That was Brooklyn, where knitting and crocheting are no longer the domain of grandmothers. Now it's a woman's art being reclaimed by feminists who play bass and keep Betty Page magnets on their refrigerators. (Starita, 2004: 66)

In summary, we may begin to understand the role of *Stitch'nBitch* by considering it under a *remedial theme* as part of a movement away from the individualism of the Information Society to a more collective recreation that meets a need for social connection. Like much leisure, craft in recent decades has also been a solitary and passive activity. We suggest that the return of women to basic crafts is not simply a rejection of technology, for in many cases *Stitch'nBitch* is technology-dependent. Under an alternative, *progressive theme*, *Stitch'nBitch* may be a unique cyber-feminist phenomenon, one of women expressing their own thoughts and reflecting their own circumstances and environment; women gathering together in a 'third place', separate from home and work, for social activity and the expression of individual creativity (Florida, 2004). That this place may often be the local pub, traditionally a bastion of masculinity, is also noteworthy, for *Stitch'nBitch* may also be understood through

a third, *resistance theme* as a new protest movement using craft as a subversive vehicle for comment on gender as well as on the increasing commodification of society and technology. The resistance theme may be associated with the emergence of a new Arts and Crafts movement. Globalization, global fashion and mass production of apparel may be causes for protest for some groups, whose local production of single pieces of unbranded knitwear may be a small effort to refute the ubiquity of the Nike sweatshirt. Many knitters responded to the terrorist bombing of July 2005 in London with postings on the web rings. As posted by one contributor: 'I want to knit a big comfort shawl for London' (McPhee, 2006b). Environmental concerns are reflected in the use of organic fibres such as silk, hemp and wool, often in minimally processed forms. In establishing the themes for the research agenda it becomes clear that we need to be alert to the diversity of motivations present when engaging in what is a basic production process.

PATTERN MAKING: FURTHER POSSIBILITIES

In this section, we suggest that it is not coincidental that *Stitch'nBitch* is focused on craft activities that are regarded as lowly – textile crafts (see Wolfram Cox and Minahan, 2002). Craft is often seen as solely physical labour, messy and dirty, without an intellectual or aesthetic component (Metcalf, 1994: 16) and a perceived minimal contribution to cultural development. We discuss the marginal aesthetic position of craft in relation to fine art and show how its history contributes to the *resistance theme* and also raises two further possibilities that may guide a research agenda into *Stitch'nBitch*: a *nostalgic theme* whereby *Stitch'nBitch* offers a romantic return to the past rather than, for example, a remedy to the present, and an *ironic theme* where the desire for a return to a past is parodied and presented as melancholic; a simulacrum of a past that never existed (cf. Baudrillard, 1993; Golden and Hill, 1991) rather than one to be re-created (see Table 1).

CRAFT AT THE MARGIN

For many years and in many cultures, craft has been seen as plebeian and associated with the labour of an underclass (Yanagi, 1989). Craft is medium-specific (for example, woodworking, metal smithing, weaving), and is defined by use (for example, jewellery, furniture, clothing). Craft is defined by its past. Each discipline defined by and reviving techniques from its history (Metcalf, 1993: 40, 44; see also Johnson, 1997; Markowitz, 1994). Craft's hand-made nature, utilitarian function, and (traditional) lack of semantic character reflect the devaluing of physical labour (Metcalf, 1993). The manipulation of material can become subservient

TABLE 1 A research agenda for *Stitch'nBitch*: Suggested themes

Theme	Focus	Description
Remedial	Community	Remedying the individualism of the present Information Society through collective recreation
Progressive	Cyberfeminism	Women's independent expression and creativity
Resistance	Craft	Textile crafts as aesthetically marginal and negatively gendered
Nostalgic	Conservation	Possibility of a romantic return to simpler times
Ironic	Comment	Satirical simulacrum of a melancholic return to a past that never was, thereby commenting on the present more than on the past

to aesthetic purpose (Kuspit, 1996: 16–7; see also Osborne, 1970: 12), and because of 'our tendency to value what is distinctive about paintings over what is distinctive about pots' (Markowitz, 1994: 67), *fine art* is distinguished from *applied*, more utilitarian art (see Osborne, 1970: 12), and art further marginalizes and excludes *craft* as a 'lowly pursuit' (Ioannou, 1997/1998; Metcalf, 1994).

Markowitz has commented that what Alison Jaggar (1983) has termed *normative dualism*, or the privileging of things mental over things physical, has shaped not only morality, politics and gender but art, and that 'it is no accident that the work of marginalized groups often counts as craft' (Markowitz, 1994: 68). Browne (1994) also points out that the art/craft hierarchy serves not only to marginalize craft but also to marginalize groups such as Latino and Native American artists working in the United States (cf. Marincola, 1995).

ARTS AND CRAFTS MOVEMENTS AS PROTEST

Craft's activism comes from a combination of 'lowly' media with cultural commentary. If *Stitch'nBitch* is to be understood through this lens, it is important to note that arts and crafts movements, as a form of protest, have occurred over more than two centuries. One of the early movements was seen as a style known as Biedermeier. It was popular in the late 18th century in northern and central Europe, particularly Austria. It was seen as a reaction to the fulsome ornamentation of the Rococo period and politically as anti-French. Many of the states that developed Biedermeier furniture had been conquered by Napoleon and were reluctant to imitate anything from the era. Other early movements include the British and the American Arts and Crafts Movements as responses to the Industrial Revolution.

The British and the American Arts and Crafts movements. The painter, poet and philosopher John Ruskin and the designer William Morris helped renew the status of craft during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. For example, Metcalf (1993) refers to the influence of Morris, who was himself influenced by the nostalgia of Ruskin, who contrasted the 'spiritual deadness' of machine-made goods with the craftsmanship of the Middle Ages, where goods may have been imperfect but where their makers were not reduced to 'slavery' (Poulson, 1989: 35; see also Metcalf, 1993: 46; cf. Osborne, 1970). Morris produced handmade textiles, books, wallpaper and furniture, and hoped for the unification of art and craft (Metcalf, 1993; Osborne, 1970). Kuspit (1996: 19) comments that, for Ruskin and Morris, craft became a way of restoring the 'lost utopia of unalienated work'. Their work assisted social developments, such as the British Arts and Crafts Movement, whose followers opposed mass manufacture and misuse of the machine (Browne, 1994; Collins, 1987; Lucie-Smith, 1981). This was the height of the American Arts and Crafts movement (Browne, 1994), whose legacies remain in craft's appreciation of workmanship (Kirkham, 1998; Markowitz, 1994; Parry, 1989). Rather than being uncritical, craft can instead be regarded as subversive to mass production because it is handmade.

The hippie era: 1960–1970s. The resurgence of interest in crafts in the 1960s and 1970s was clearly aligned with the anti-Vietnam War protesters with 'Flower Power' being an icon of peace and connection to nature and natural resources. The era was fraught with fears that natural resources such as oil would be depleted and that a nuclear holocaust was inevitable so alternative energy sources must be found. Women in the western world took up their needles and threads during this era. Spinning wheels were in full flight producing yarns for hand knits and looms threaded to produce textiles for wear and domestic use.

In more specific movements, many indigenous communities have used the development of modern commercial art forms as a means of building their identity in the nation state. The Inuit have used their arts to build new institutions that express their distinctiveness in contemporary cultures in Canada (Graburn, 2004). In the Japanese Alps, week-long residential weaving workshops are held where Japanese women reassert their identity and culture via their crafts in the 'midst of west-ernization' (Creighton, 2001: 5).

Women's work. Further, craft is gendered and it is not coincidental that we have focused on knitters and sewers rather than the more masculine *bricoleurs* (cf. Gabriel, 2002). Since craft is seen as 'women's work', the notion of the *crafty woman* is often presented as a double pejorative (Landay, 1998). More literally, craft's activism is perhaps most evident in the use of 'feminine' crafts, such as embroidery, as the medium for

exhibitions such as *The Subversive Stitch* in 1991, *The Social Fabric* in 1993, and *Guys who Sew* in 1994, among many others (Marincola, 1995). Further disrupting the utilitarian nature of craft, feminist embroiderers have produced works 'with decidedly artlike semantic content' (Markowitz, 1994; see also Holloway, 1994; Ullrich, 1998).

In summary, crafts have for several centuries been associated with protest movements and calls for alternative sources of energy and manufacture. *Stitch'nBitch* may well be a form of resistance to the traditional placing of women in terms of physical location (the home compared with the third place e.g. the pub), of isolation (the private home compared with the public place), and in response to the low status of traditional women's textile crafts such as knitting.

THINGS AREN'T AS THEY USED TO BE: NOSTALGIA, KNITTING AND THE HUMBLE BROWN POT

In contrast, it may also be possible that the young women participating in *Stitch'nBitch* groups may be nostalgic for a more materially substantive past, and this explanation, which we term the *nostalgic theme*, can also be understood in terms of craft's history and symbolism. In general, craft has been understood as a *nostalgic* response to art and has been regarded as an attempt to 'restor[e] the humble brown pot to a place of honor' (cf. Metcalf, 1994: 15). Metcalf (1993) suggests that craft is intimate, useful, and meaningful, and that it should be viewed as a site for reinforcing personal identity and meaning. Rather than being viewed from a distance in an art-like gallery or museum, craft can be seen (and used) in the home (Metcalf, 1993). Kuspit explains the restorative function of craft by suggesting that '[t]he craft object is thus not only a means of revitalizing the idea of work but an unexpected means of restoring the individual's sense of wholeness, thus serving his or her emotional health' (Kuspit, 1996: 19).

Thus, under this theme, *Stitch'nBitch* may be understood as a nostalgic, conservative response to a world no longer present; young women knitting their way back to the world of their grandmothers. Wajcman says that there is evidence of a 'nostalgia for an idealized past when people belonged to a harmonious community and spent time chatting with friends and neighbors' (Wajcman, 2004: 59). This differs from the notion of restoring community in the present-day sense of the *remedial theme*, although both have in common the idea that the present Information Age is in imbalance, hence the need to claim or reclaim time, space, materiality and community and, by association, irrationality (cf. Hancock and Tyler, 2001: 213). In Japan, even the highly commodified Hello Kitty phenomenon is seen as an appeal to nostalgia to 'encourage a reconnection with the past' (McVeigh, 2000: 225). For example, some

young women appear to be claiming place and affiliation at a local level when they meet in *Jazz and Knitting* or *Stitch'nBitch* nights in pubs and clubs around the Australian cities and in regional areas (Stitch'nBitch Melbourne, 2004; Knitting in Public, 2004).

THE DIVIDING STITCH

Whose nostalgia? However, there are complications. For example, Starita (2004) attended a conference about *Biancheria*, an Italian word representing white linens and virginity. *Biancheria* are the cloths made by young women for their *corredo*, or trousseaux of items such as slips, sheets and pillowcases. Starita recounts how the underlying, nostalgic assumption of the conference was that the attendees wished to somehow recreate their idealized image of the making of the painstakingly created works:

But not until the question and answer session did a woman from the audience break the spell of the lace tablecloths and camisoles: many immigrant mothers, she said, actively discouraged their daughters from sewing and lace making and crocheting. They viewed it quite simply as work, work that generated neither money nor leverage. (Starita, 2004: 66)

It appears that while crafts such as stitching and embroidery may be a positive and social occupation for many, there are still far too many women around the world who are required to work at these tasks for poor pay rates and in difficult conditions. The 'digital divide' is very real for these women, and they are firmly placed on its 'have not' side. They live in a world of very basic and inadequate technology and where there is no nostalgia for craft – it is a reality that brings income to the household. And even in more affluent circumstances, knitting may not signify nostalgia. To demonstrate this we ask that you consider Stella's own story, where Stella reflects on life in the suburbs where she learnt to knit in the 1950s. This was a time in western democracy when young girls were taught domestic crafts as skills essential to all women. It is provisionally titled 'You Will Never Get a Good Trousseau':

One of the authors has been a keen knitter all her life. Knitting for her is an act of recreation whilst watching TV. She believes that to sit and watch a TV program, without simultaneously doing something else, is a wicked waste of time. She continues the superwoman traits of her childbearing years – stir the dinner, hear the reading and nurse the baby . . . Or is that hear the baby, stir the reading and nurse the dinner?

She pursues the multi tasking female agenda for continued superiority over the male. As an academic much of her life is spent in front of a computer screen and like many others she uses it for networking and social connections. Her exploration of *Stitch'nBitch* contains a reflective component for her.

She cannot remember who taught her to knit or how old she was when she learned. Her school required that all girls at senior primary level (about

12 years of age) learn domestic skills of sewing and embroidery. Her teacher, Mrs. McNamara, demanded that all the girls in her class master cross-stitch on gingham. Whilst Mrs. McNamara was presiding over needlework, the boys were learning how to use woodwork tools and were creating boxes to store shoe nugget. Stella is not sure who got the better deal, but the insistence on perfect, minuscule stitching was beyond the capacity of her fine motor skills and her patience for such tasks. She found knitting much more satisfying as it gave faster results and was quite a forgiving task. Mrs. McNamara sensed Stella's lack of interest (and covert hostility at being required to sit still and do this work). She reviewed Stella's messy attempts at cross stitch and, shaking her head, announced for all to hear that Stella would never have a decent trousseau to present to her husband. Her prophecy was fulfilled.

The author's knitting continued over the years; cardigans, sweaters, skirts and suits emerged from the needles. At times she knitted almost obsessively; she felt as though the needles were an extension of her body, the rhythm of the pattern passing almost undetected through her brain to her hands, slip one, knit one, purl one, pass slip stitch over; knit one, purl one, pass slip stitch over. Or, as represented in knitting patterns – S11, K1, P1, PSSO in robotic, or at least cyborg fashion. Knitting was also required to keep warm. Knitting yarn was relatively inexpensive in Australia in the 1960s/1970s and provided lots of opportunities to knit and crochet the long vests and fringed ponchos of the hippie era.

Whose remedy? Whose cyberfeminism? Thus, for some, nostalgia may be neither claimed nor desired. And in a qualification of his hopes for new, progressive forms of community, identity and interaction as remedies for the Information Age, Flew (2002: 76) notes that 'the "digital divide" raises questions of inclusion and social exclusion from such forms of interaction and participation, as well as questions of identity and the self in virtual environments'. Further, he believes that these developments may be important but that the full value to democratic societies may not be reached unless there is overt action to enable and empower participation. Just as the nostalgic theme carries assumptions of past affluence, Luckman (1999: 38), quoting Josie Arnold, defines cyberfeminist practice as 'the domain of people who have three great cultural wealths: education, time and money'. This emphasis on affluence is reinforced by popular press coverage of Hollywood's celebrity knitters. For example, Sheridan (2000), reporting in the *Sunday Express* in Los Angeles, lists a number of movie stars who knit apparently to minimize the boredom of the film set. Noted knitters include: Darryl Hannah, Demi Moore, Cameron Diaz, Pamela Anderson, Goldie Hawn and Whoopi Goldberg (Sheridan, 2000). Similarly, reporter Alison Rehn (2002) in the *Sydney Daily Telegraph* mentions that 'thanks to stars like Julia Roberts, Sandra Bullock, Sarah Michelle Gellar, Winona Ryder and Sarah Jessica Parker, knitting is trendier than ever before' (Pearson, 2003). Further, Luckman is critical of the concentration

of focus on young women cyberfeminists. She reports that recent surveys have shown that the group taking up technology in greater numbers is the over-55s. This age group is believed to be feeling 'retirement boredom'. Luckman believes that more women of this age bracket and the rest of baby boomers need to engage with technology to broaden the debate. This group of baby boomers, women and men, will begin to retire soon and will be one of the wealthiest and best-educated groups to reach retirement age. She states that:

Cyberfeminism needs to embrace and include these women – these Cyborgs – if they are to achieve an oppositional and more comprehensively liberatory agenda. At present, with its emphasis on sassy youthfulness, it is not surprising that the movement is dominated at a grass roots level by women under thirty, plus a few older women located firmly within professional and business occupations. (Luckman, 1999: 39)

An ironic response. While we are personally sympathetic to such calls for greater inclusion, we are also conscious of not dismissing the youth and wealth that appears to typify the Cybergrrrls (Everett, 2004) of *Stitch'nBitch* groups. In the sassiness of this youth, we wonder whether the earnestness of the previous *remedial, progressive, resistance* and *nostalgic* themes are even relevant. For these women have grown up in the Information Age and have nothing to compare it with; they may be neither trying to remedy its effects nor create a new way, sew up a new society. They may have little to resist, for they are able to move freely between home, work and third place, bringing knitting from the hearth to the pub and contacting each other via the internet in between their meetings. We suggest that theirs may be a playful, ironic comment and an unbundling/ re-forming or even implosion (Baudrillard, 1993) of traditional associations and differentiations between time, place and gender rather than an earnest expression of a strongly-held desire for innovation, restoration or resistance. Rather than nostalgia for what was lost, *Stitch'n Bitchers* may be expressing melancholy for what never existed, but with recognition that they would never have wanted the lives associated with trousseaux in the first place. Accordingly, we suggest a final, *ironic theme* where the desire for a return to a past is parodied and presented as melancholic; a simulacrum of a past that never was rather than one to be re-created.

These themes, remedial, progressive, resistance, nostalgia and irony may be expressed in the objects knitted. We investigated several knitting blogs and talked to the owners of two yarn retailers. The storeowners reported, with some pleasure, that in the last few years, many young girls had moved from basic knitting such as simple scarves to more challenging projects. By challenging they were referring to technical rather than aesthetic challenges. Blogs routinely contain pictures and information on

current knitting projects (Wei, 2004). These online diaries revealed a much richer and creative environment for knitters. Projects ranged from the very popular multi-coloured socks, hats, scarves and mittens to original and provocative pieces such as knitted wombs (Carroll, 2006), assorted penises, turkey shaped tote bags, death masks, cup cakes, bridal party gowns and wedding cakes, CD wallets and mobile phone/iPod covers, reproduction sweaters and Victorian tea cosies. Further work is required to ascertain whether there is an association between the identified themes and the objects knitted.

A RESEARCH AGENDA

In this article, we have presented a range of ways in which the global *Stitch'nBitch* phenomenon/movement may be understood. We have raised a series of themes, each of which draws on notions of *Stitch'nBitch* as a form of social capital, a new arts and crafts movement, a form of social protest and rejection of technology with particular foci on communication, cyberfeminism, craft, conservation and comment. Included among these, we suggest that *Stitch'nBitch* among young women is an example of a new way of connecting, based on traditional craft skills and an entrenched gender divide, using venues traditionally associated with gatherings of men – the pubs. It may be heralding a new art and craft revival such as occurred in the 19th century and more recently in the 1960s hippie era. This movement may be a new form of craft; a form that is cognizant of the new circumstances of the Information Society and the alienation that can be experienced, and that may provide a new movement that uses material culture to enhance social connectedness and wellbeing of women.

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