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Crafty Entanglements: Knitting and Hard Distinctions in Aesthetics and Political Theory

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Abstract

Many theoretical writings on aesthetics and politics rely on hard distinctions between what is and is not art, and what is and is not political. In this article, I draw on the work of theorists, knitters, and fiber artists to argue that hand knitting provides a lens through which to unsettle some of these distinctions. I illustrate some of the ways in which aesthetic theory relies on hard distinctions between art and not-art and politics and not-politics, with particular focus on the work of Kant, Hegel, Heidegger, and Rancière. I explain how knitting is often seen as falling clearly outside the definitions of art and politics, and explore the surprising ways in which knitting shows the instability of these categories and expectations. I show that common social traditions and practices that often go unanalyzed can provide insight into the limitations and complexities of prevalent theoretical assumptions.

Key Words

aesthetic theory, art, feminism, Kant, knitting, Hegel, Heidegger, political theory, politics, Rancière

1. Kant, Hegel, and Heidegger on art and not-art

There is no shortage of discussion about what constitutes art. Distinctions between what is and is not art, or beauty, have a long history in continental aesthetic theory, stretching back to Immanuel Kant, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, and Martin Heidegger. For Kant, beauty is evaluated through taste, which depends on disinterest. Interest, for Kant, is "[t]he delight which we connect with imagining the real existence of any object," and is thus connected to desire.^[1] Kant claims that "the agreeable," which is pleasing to the senses^[2] and "the good," which relies on having "a concept of" the thing,^[3] are both tied up with interest. Kant believes that to be able to judge the beautiful "[o]ne must not be in the least prepossessed in favor of the real existence of the thing, but must preserve complete indifference in this respect."^[4] "The beautiful," Kant maintains, "is that which, apart from concepts, is represented as the object of a UNIVERSAL delight."^[5] For Kant, then, the assessment of beauty must be disconnected from one's own interest in the thing itself. This seems to be an attempt to disconnect notions of beauty, including in art, from the more practical material relations of life.

Hegel's work seems to also rely heavily on such distinctions; for him they play the role of a starting premise. In his case, however, the split is not between beauty and interest, but rather between fine art, which is his subject, and that which is not fine art. Hegel restricts his focus in the *Introductory Lectures on Aesthetics* to "Fine Art."^[6] He excludes nature from his inquiry, as, from his perspective, "[m]ind, and mind only, is capable of truth."^[7] "Fine art is not real art," Hegel says, "till it is ... free, and only achieves its highest task when it has taken its place in the same sphere with religion and

philosophy, and has become simply a mode of revealing to consciousness and bringing to utterance Divine Nature, the deepest interests of humanity, and the most comprehensive truths of the mind."[\[8\]](#) He states:

Art liberates the real import of appearances from the semblance and deception of this bad and fleeting world, and imparts to phenomenal semblances a higher reality, born of mind. The appearances of art, therefore, far from being mere semblances, have the higher reality and the more genuine existence in comparison with the realities of common life.[\[9\]](#)

So, for Hegel, there is a stark line between fine art and both nature and common life. Despite being concerned with a different distinction, Hegel's insistence on a particular type of art has a similar effect to that of Kant, insofar as it emphasizes art as something higher than that which is not art.

While Kant and Hegel keep their distinctions between beauty and interest or art and not-art fairly abstract, Heidegger's separations are perhaps best shown through his extensive use of an example: the famous painting of peasant shoes by Vincent van Gogh. In *The Origin of the Work of Art*,[\[10\]](#) Heidegger explains that "as long as we only imagine a pair of shoes in general, or merely look at the shoes as they stand there in the picture, empty and unused, we will never learn what the equipmental being of equipment in truth is."[\[11\]](#) However, he goes on to revise this, saying of the painting, "From out of the dark opening of the well-worn insides of the shoes the toil of the worker's tread stares forth."[\[12\]](#) Heidegger believes "the equipmental being of the equipment" is "its reliability,"[\[13\]](#) and that

The equipmental being of equipment was discovered.... Not through the description and the explanation of a pair of shoes actually present. Not through a report on the process of shoemaking. And not through the observation of the actual use of shoes as it occurs here and there. Rather, the equipmental being of equipment was only discovered by bringing ourselves before the van Gogh painting. It is this that spoke. In proximity to the work we were suddenly somewhere other than we are usually accustomed to be. The artwork let us know what the shoes, in truth, are.[\[14\]](#)

Truth is closely connected with Heidegger's definition of art. He says that "[t]he essential nature of art would then be this: the setting-itself-to-work of the truth of beings."[\[15\]](#) Heidegger is explicit that art is not about beauty, as is often said.[\[16\]](#) The work of art, for Heidegger, is the "disclosure of the being as what and how it is."[\[17\]](#) This is "a happening of the truth at work."[\[18\]](#) Importantly, for my purposes, Heidegger explicitly states that "perhaps it is only in the picture that we notice all this about the shoes," as "[t]he peasant woman ... merely wears them."[\[19\]](#)

Thus Heidegger explicitly separates the work of art as a revealer of the "truth of beings" from the beings

themselves,[20] and so seems to separate the particular from the realm of truth. Our concern, for Heidegger, is not the particular shoes or the particular woman who wears them but rather the truth of being of the shoes as equipment. This is closely connected to the removal of interest from definitions of the beautiful for Kant, and the removal of lower forms from high art for Hegel. In all three theories, art is seen to provide access to truth or objectivity in a way that other forms of knowledge creation do not.

2. Rancière on politics and dissensus

As much as distinctions between what is and is not art have been a foundational theme for significant aesthetic thinkers, distinctions between what is and is not politics are just as significant within political thought, and within general Western social discourse separating the public from the private or domestic. Among theorists whose writing focuses significantly on both aesthetics and politics, Jacques Rancière exemplifies this split. He defines politics in a very particular way.

"Politics," for Rancière, "stands (sic) in distinct opposition to the police."^[21] For him, "the police is (sic) not a social function but a symbolic constitution of the social," and "consists ... in recalling the obviousness of what there is, or rather of what there is not, and its (sic) slogan is: 'Move along! There's nothing to see here!'"^[22] Politics, in contrast to the police, "consists in transforming this space of 'moving-along,' of circulation, into a space for the appearance of a subject: the people, the workers, the citizens."^[23] Politics, then, "is an intervention in the visible and the sayable."^[24]

Central to Rancière's split between politics and the police is his distinction between two other concepts, namely dissensus and consensus. For Rancière, "[t]he essence of politics is *dissensus*," which "is not a confrontation between interests or opinions" but rather "the demonstration ... of a gap in the sensible itself."^[25] Consensus, then, "lies in the annulment of dissensus as separation of the sensible from itself," and "in the reduction of politics to the police."^[26] "Consensus is," therefore, "the 'end of politics': in other words, not the accomplishment of the ends of politics but simply a return to the normal state of things – the non-existence of politics."^[27]

It is clear, then, that conceptual thinking about politics, for Rancière, is heavily bound up in his distinctions between politics and the police, and between dissensus and consensus.

3. The entangled knitter

In light of the above, knitting would seem to fall into categories of both not-art and not-politics. Before I go on to define knitting, however, I must provide a brief disclaimer. I can go no farther without a word on my own entanglements. I am a knitter. Knitting is an integral part of how I see myself in relation to my material and cultural surroundings. I am also connected in my life to politics in a broad sense, though it is debatable whether or not my own endeavors fit into politics as Rancière defines it. I could choose to go on, in the style popular in much of academia, and pretend that I am not entangled. This would be, at best, disingenuous, and at worst, a rejection in practice of the arguments I make here in theory.

This article is, among other things, a defense of entanglement, and a rejection of the inclination in much of

aesthetic and political theory to write as though there can be a clear line between these categories. I therefore use some of my own examples and experiences, while relying on the work and experiences of many others, in the web of knitting, art, and politics that follows.

Knitting can be defined, as Joanne Turney suggests, as “formation of a fabric consisting of vertical columns through the looping of a continuous yarn.”^[28] Hand knitting, in contrast with that often done today by machine, involves “two or more needles” that are used to make the loops.^[29] Knitting, as Turney notes, is often socially associated with women, due to its status as “largely a domestic pursuit” that is “associated with the home.”^[30] She also argues that knitting has significant ties to Romanticism, saying that knitting has “come to characterize a Romantic nostalgia ... and in some cases a rejection of the contemporary and a desire to ‘revive’ that which is near death.”^[31]

4. Knitting as not-art and not-politics?

Given these views of knitting, which have recently been culturally prevalent in contemporary Western conceptions of knitting, it is not hard, in the context of the authors discussed above, to see knitting as not-art. It does not perform well within the binary hierarchies set forth by Kant, Hegel, and Heidegger. Knitting is interested, in Kant’s sense in which we are concerned about the real existence of the thing, and for Kant this is mutually exclusive with taste. Knitting is mostly seen to produce functional items that are worn for practical purposes. It can be hard to imagine knitting that does not have as its aim an item in which one would be interested, in Kant’s sense.

For these reasons, it is also difficult to see knitting as Fine Art, in Hegel’s usage. The production of practical articles, even if visually pleasing, is seen to be part of the “realities of common life” rather than the “higher reality” with which Hegel identifies fine art.^[32] Turney herself indicates that knitting was often seen in the twentieth century to be part of a way of being “thrifty” and “saving money” in the home,^[33] which is hardly a pursuit on a par with philosophy or religion in Hegel’s framework.

Perhaps most compelling for the separation between knitting and art, however, is Heidegger’s analysis of the peasant shoes. Knit garments, like peasant shoes, are functional necessities at various points in history, and often are to this day. Both are functionally focused, which Heidegger assumes means that they do not reveal their true being by themselves, but rather can only have their being revealed as truth through art.

Beyond the distinctions of these three thinkers, general sensibilities about art also seem to be missing in knitting. Knitting can be seen as lacking creativity and uniqueness. Stephanie Pearl-McPhee, a knitting humor writer, writes about a trip to the woods in which she was struggling with thinking about knitting as a creative activity.^[34] “When you are creative,” she says, “you’re relying on your own brain to come up with answers, solutions, and concepts.... [N]ot all knitting is creative, using the traditional definition.”^[35] “We creatively problem solve in knitting all the time,” she says, “but the act

itself, actual knitting, that's not tremendously creative," but rather, "[t]hat's execution."[\[36\]](#) In this sense, the act of knitting can be seen as mostly following directions written to achieve a product envisioned and designed by another.

Creativity may not play much of a part.

Knitting can also easily be seen as lacking the uniqueness ordinarily associated with art. Who made art is typically seen as important, while following a pattern to produce a particular object can be seen as repeating the work of others. This perception is reinforced by the extensive presence of industrially produced knit objects. Pearl-McPhee notes that the "commercial knitting industry" produces "just about everything stretchy," and people wear knit fabrics of various sorts each day.[\[37\]](#) The preponderance of industrially knit items and the extensive use of patterns support the notion that knitting is not unique enough to be art. Thus, thinkers like Kant, Hegel, and Heidegger as well as the general public are generally unlikely to see knitting as art.

Similarly, Rancière and the general public are unlikely to see knitting as politics. Knitting can be seen to fit well into Rancière's understanding of consensus. Knitting is often seen as a trope. As Turney says, "on the surface, knitting is ostensibly an ordinary activity associated with the domestic sphere."[\[38\]](#) In fact, knitting has such strong stereotypes associated with it that Turney notes it is used by Agatha Christie's character Miss Marple so that she can "disappear into the background" while investigating.[\[39\]](#) "Knitting is understood," Turney goes on to say, "as an innocuous activity, associated with dithering – if not curious – old ladies."[\[40\]](#) In this way, knitting fits neatly into the sensible and the sayable within Rancière's frame, and does not create an opening. In Turney's words, "The iconography and meanings attributed to knitting infer that it expresses a non-changing activity and aesthetic, a general and popularly held view of craft per se: stability and continuity."[\[41\]](#)

These expectations are so strong that knitting can be overlooked even by feminists. Ann Wilson describes her experiences at the University of Guelph.[\[42\]](#) She noticed that some people applying for jobs in the Fine Art and Music department "had, either as a primary or secondary interest, art practices that involved craft," and particularly knitting.[\[43\]](#) She told a graduate student about her observation, with "bemused incredulity with just a hint of condescension."[\[44\]](#) In response, she was told by the graduate student, "All the women in the Ph.D. program knit."[\[45\]](#) The perception of knitting as a domestic, feminine pursuit often gives the impression that knitting cannot possibly be a form of politics, in the broader sense beyond Rancière's definition, even among those who, as feminists, are theoretically inclined to examine these gendered distinctions.

5. The instability of art

Despite these tropes and because of them, knitting can and does unsettle definitions of both art and politics. Knitting can be seen to unsettle definitions of art in two different forms: knitting as a knit product that is produced, and knitting as a process that is undertaken.

Knitting as product shows that the distinction between art and functionality is not stable. Some knitting is seen as not functional and classified as art, but this is not definitive, and knitting shows that the functional cannot and should not be excluded from art. Despite the stereotypes, there is knitting today that is not designed to be functional. This is part of Heidegger's complaint: the functional blends into daily life, and this blocks our ability to see the truth of its being. Today, hand-knit objects have become somewhat more distanced from the functional. As Turney notes, "hand knitting is now a hobby rather than a necessity and as such is an indulgence, distanced from the world of domestic chores."[\[46\]](#)

This distance from the functional can be seen in examples from various knitters, some of which are explicitly classified as art. Anna Hrachovec produces incredible, and often tiny, knit projects that do not have a functional purpose. One can view photos on her website[\[47\]](#) of art installation projects that encompass all kinds of knit creatures, including gnomes, snowmen, and mountains and rainbows with eyes. In another vein, KNIT CamBRIDGE was a project of Sue Sturdy, the 2010 Artist in Residence for the City of Cambridge in Ontario, Canada, and was a successful effort to cover the city's iconic Main Street Bridge with knitting.[\[48\]](#) Many knitters from many places, including myself, contributed knitting to the project (Figure 1). Thus, though much knitting is functional, not all knitting is functional, particularly today, and knitting is at times classified as art.



Figure 1: The 2010 KNIT CamBRIDGE installation in Cambridge, Ontario, Canada. Photo by the author.

Even in these projects, however, knitting is not separated from function. KNIT CamBRIDGE was intentionally connected to the history of industrial textile production in Cambridge.[\[49\]](#) Anna Hrachovec has two websites for her work: one for her fiber art exhibitions, and one for her knit patterns and knitting books.[\[50\]](#) Both of Hrachovec's websites contain many of the same little characters and themes, though popular expectation means that having two websites (to distinguish the practical from the artistic) is likely professionally advantageous. The lines between art and craft are clearly blurred by the overlap.

Knitting as a product shows that the functional cannot be

separated from art, and does not need to be. This is part of Heidegger's mistake. He advocates for the work of art because he believes that it, and not everyday items, allows us to get to the truth of being. In reality, though, art, as distinct from the practical, is not required for us to ask interesting and important questions about peasant shoes. Ann Wilson's conversation with a graduate student was enough for her to reflect on the practice of knitting in a sufficiently serious fashion for her to write a chapter about it. Heidegger might respond, quite rightly, that this was a conversation that was not provoked by actual knitting. Nonetheless, knit items themselves can be approached with a curiosity that can lead to such discussions and examinations. For example, on a website called Ravelry,[\[51\]](#) which I and others often describe as "like Facebook for knitters," one can find a number of knitting patterns for baby cocoons. These are stretchy little knit sacks, and the photos often show them enveloping real babies. These baby cocoons, one learns, are often used as props for baby photo shoots. I can imagine that one could learn quite a lot from taking a moment to ask oneself some questions about these cocoons, and perhaps by asking them of the cocoon's owner, the person who knit it, or the person who designed the pattern.

If we consider these cocoons to be roughly analogous, for my purposes, to Heidegger's peasant shoes, it is perhaps easier to see the limitations of his analysis. Heidegger's mistake is in part that he sees the painting of the peasant shoes as an exposure of truth rather than as a particular type of mediated conversation *about* the shoes. A differently mediated but no less useful conversation could be had by asking the peasant woman about the items that she knows so well, just as one can learn from speaking to a parent who puts a child in a cocoon. Even more could be learned and said by discussing the items with a cobbler, knitting designer or knitter, or by speaking with someone who paints peasant shoes or takes photos of babies in cocoons. It is debatable whether Heidegger's ideas regarding the truth of being can be revealed in this way, but important questions about truth, life, and social meaning certainly can, and should be explored in this way.

The question of the baby cocoons, however, shows more than the limitations of Heidegger's framework. It shows the futility of trying to definitively separate art from non-art. Are such cocoons art? One might say no, since they can be reproduced using a simple pattern, and thus have more in common with industrial clothing production. However, can they be considered art when they are used in commercial baby photography? What if the photography is not commercial, but rather destined for an art gallery? Should the photos be classified as art, but not the cocoons themselves? What if the cocoons are created and tweaked for this purpose? These questions and the many more that could be asked suggest that, even in more social and less theoretical notions of art, the lines are not clear. Art and not-art cannot be definitively separated, and since we can ask good questions about functional items that are right in front of us, they do not need to be.

Knitting as a product, then, suggests that the definition of art

is much less stable than some of the thinkers cited above might suggest. The same is true for knitting as a process. The actual process of knitting can show the instability of the category of art, particularly in relation to the issues of creativity and performance.

First, on the issue of creativity, Pearl-McPhee eventually chose to reframe her discussion and her interpretation. She realized that “[k]nitting wasn’t always about creativity, and neither was writing; it was about creation, bringing something into being.”^[52] While it can certainly be argued that many aspects of knitting as a process are, in fact, creative, seeing knitting through the lens of creation can bring new affinities with art in general, as art can be seen to depend on creation as much as on creativity. Where exactly could one say that creation stops and creativity starts? This slippage between creativity and creation shows the futility of trying to separate art from not-art on the basis of creativity.

Second, and perhaps more substantially, knitting as a process can be seen to unsettle definitions of art through its role as a performance, which can straddle the practical and the artistic.

This is closely related to Jacques Lacan’s work on the gaze.

Part of the gaze is Lacan’s suggestion that who we are is heavily interrelated with how we are “beings who are looked at.”^[53] The gaze precedes the eye for Lacan.^[54] “The gaze I encounter,” he says, “is, not a seen gaze, but a gaze imagined by me in the field of the other.”^[55] He speaks of Sartre, who was overwhelmed by the gaze and shamed by it while “looking through a keyhole.”^[56] “What determines me,” Lacan says, “at the most profound level, in the visible, is the gaze that is outside.”^[57]

In explaining the gaze, Lacan uses Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s analysis of Choang-tsu, who is said to have dreamed he was a butterfly, but when he woke, he wondered whether he was really a butterfly dreaming that he was Choang-tsu.^[58] Lacan says “in the dream, he is a butterfly for nobody. It is when he is awake that he is Choang-tsu for others, and is caught in their butterfly net.”^[59] Unlike animals, though, and crucially for the issue of performance as art, Lacan believes a human “knows how to play with the mask as that beyond which there is the gaze.”^[60] Humans are not “entirely caught up in this imaginary capture.”^[61]

The gaze as part of performance plays an important role in knitting as a process. We are seen to knit, or rather, we see ourselves as people who are seen to knit. Is knitting a “trap for the gaze,” as Lacan calls it?^[62] For Lacan, this means that the person in question “wishes to be looked at.”^[63] This is certainly sometimes the case with knitting. While I often knit in public settings, I on some level do this to keep my hands busy. That is not to say, however, that I do not get enjoyment from other people taking interest in my activity in various ways, and that I am not fully aware that I am being watched while I knit; further, I do not object to being watched while I knit. More formally, some knitters use being seen to knit for more specific purposes, such as a recent “knit-in” in support of striking Toronto Public Library workers that brought out more than 100 people.^[64]

Turney notes that “knitting is so firmly established within

popular culture through its iconology and iconography, it is an ideal genre to exploit, manipulate and challenge.”^[65] Knitting is largely a trope, and alternate stories can be told about the awareness of being watched. Unless one knits alone, one is knitting in the gaze. That is, one knits with awareness that others see one knitting, and this can be used intentionally for exploitation and challenge. I would also argue that one knitting alone is subject to the same gaze, since we are “beings who are looked at, in the spectacle of the world.”^[66] It may well be that many of us knit, in part, because we come to see ourselves as people who are seen to knit, and that shapes how we understand ourselves to be perceived in the world.

So while knitting involves performance, does this mean that knitting can be seen as performance art? Paul Virilio can help with this question. He believes that all current art is a performance. He says, “In my opinion, all art today is a spectacle.”^[67] Contemporary art, for Virilio, is

of the moment. But it can only disappear in the shrinking of instantaneity, because the instant is constantly being reduced. We know it all too well: from microseconds now we’ve reached nanoseconds. So, in some way, the instant is what does not last, what disappears.^[68]

For Virilio, then, performance is connected with his concept of speed, which he states “pits contemporary civilization against those that have preceded it.”^[69] “Speed suppresses not only Relatedness ... but also Reason.”^[70] The result of speed, then, is that “we must now eliminate what still subsists of material opposition to advancement, to the dromospheric race of automotive devices.”^[71]

Where does knitting fit into this narrative of performance and speed? The act of knitting can be seen as a performance that is in the moment and that disappears in an instant. It can be used for intentionally momentary artistic endeavors. It can, however, also be seen as a challenge to speed. In her analysis of non-knitter responses to the fact that knitting a pair of socks takes her fourteen to twenty hours, Pearl-McPhee invokes the value of time and investment of effort that keeps us from serving boxed macaroni to guests or berating Michelangelo for spending so long on the Sistine Chapel.^[72] Watching someone knit can be a visible reminder that there are things more valuable than efficiency, and this can appear even in places that are significantly focused on quick outcomes, such as on public transit. Knitting as a public performance or as a personal performance may be a cue to challenge the devolution to speed that so worries Virilio, even while such performance participates in speed as something instantaneous.

Knitting as a performance can also be tied to disrupting the stereotypes and tropes associated with it, in an era that is often viewed as postmodern. Turney notes that, within contexts of postmodernism as “a movement in the visual and material arts, ... the cultural knowledge the viewer brings to the work in terms of its interpretation is as important, if not more so, than the person who created it.”^[73] Despite knitting’s links with Romanticism, Turney argues that “the

handmade object ... can – and frequently does – demonstrate aspects of postmodernism, which challenges the perception of the craft object as a stable entity.”[74] She argues that “[t]raditional disciplinary boundaries that delineate art, craft, design, and fashion are now less stable, with disciplines crossing, fusing, and borrowing from one another.”[75]

Through disruption of these boundaries, these active attempts can certainly be seen to have the philosophical weight that Hegel looks for in his definition of art, but this weight also depends on the tropes of the domestic themselves. In toying with these barriers, knitting as a process can unsettle distinctions between what is and what is not art.

6. The instability of politics

So knitting both as a product and as a process can be seen to show the instability of the category of art. It can, however, also show the instability of the category of politics. Knitting unsettles hard distinctions about politics because it can be used to undermine the binaries that have supported those distinctions, because it can be used in overtly political ways despite and because of its domestic connotations, and because it can be seen as both consensus and dissensus.

First, knitting can be used to undermine the binaries that have supported hard distinctions between the political and the apolitical. It has been a symbol used to reinforce images of the domestic. Knitting in the West has existed in a cultural context that values some things as masculine and public, and devalues things that are seen as their opposites. In ideas now common in the North American feminist tradition, the discrediting of knitting as part of the private is connected to a devaluing of interpersonal care and the domestic, which is tied to the devaluing of women who are socially expected to perform domestic tasks and to sacrifice themselves in the process. This devaluing and gendered self-sacrifice can be and is challenged by knitters in their daily lives. Wilson notes that “[k]nitting, for these women [in the graduate program], represents a reclamation of a craft in which women have excelled, allowing the graduate students who participate in the culture of ‘stitch ‘n bitch’ to take the time to attend to themselves and regroup in an activity that relaxes them.”[76]

She also notes that she wonders “if knitting among third-wave feminists in the academy carries a bit of refusal to capitulate to [her] generation’s over-investment in work,” which had been a necessary generational reaction to the exclusion of women from the academy.[77] As such, knitting can be part of a resistance at a personal level to various expectations shaped in sexist power relations. Those relations have shaped the terms of the political and apolitical, just as they have shaped the domestic placement of knitting within gendered terms.

Second, knitting can show the instability of the category of politics by taking this resistance and inserting the domestic into matters that are generally seen as part of the conventional realm of politics. This can only be done in spite of, and because of, knitting’s strong domestic connotations. For example, there is a campaign in the United States for people to knit uteruses and send them to congressmen with the theme: “Dear Men in Congress: If we knit you a uterus,

will you stay out of ours?"[78] This has been in response to significant efforts in the United States to dramatically reduce access to reproductive choice, which NARAL Pro-Choice America calls "The War on Women." [79] I myself decided to create a uterus (Figure 2) for a Member of Parliament who was trying to bring debate of access to abortion back into our House of Commons through a motion to re-examine the definition of "human being" in the Criminal Code of Canada,[80] and I created a video about it.[81] Other overtly political knitting projects have involved sending knit helmet liners to members of the United States Senate, or covering a military tank with pink knitting.[82] These activities are often seen as political in the public realm because they expressly address the supposedly proper realm of politics, namely state legislation and power. They do so, however, by inserting something that is generally excluded from the supposedly public political realm. This insertion gently mocks that delineation and works to undermine those who would have us believe that politics can and should be firmly separated from the domestic.



Figure 2: Uterus knit by the author and sent to a Member of Parliament in Canada. Pattern by M. K. Carroll.[83] Photo by the author.

Third, knitting shows the instability of the concept of politics by being both consensus and dissensus in Rancière's framework. If politics for him is "an intervention in the visible and the sayable,"[84] then knitting should not be it. As noted above, we see knit garments all the time, and the production of clothing can be seen as a mundane hobby or something that simply appears to blend into the background. This does not sound like dissensus. However, knitting is less common now than it was, and is increasingly done by young women and men. The confusion and mixed reactions to knitting in public that Pearl-McPhee notes[85] are not uncommon in my own experiences. Much of the time, knitting no longer fades into the background.

Knitting that is not intended for explicitly functional purposes, in particular, often contains dissensus, given our current symbolic order. Whether covering a bridge with knitting[86] or creating a miniature world in which snowmen and gnomes are fighting each other,[87] knitting can create gaps in the sayable or the symbolic order. When I was working on a panel for KNIT CamBRIDGE, I had difficulty explaining to people what the project was, in large part because of the gap

between supposedly domestic, soft, and non-functional knitting and the overt functionality and hardness of the surface it was to cover. Many of the people with whom I spoke could not picture such a bridge and could not figure out how to speak of it.

This, however, is somewhat subjective, which leads to a significant problem that knitting uncovers in Rancière's opposition of dissensus and consensus. Dissensus and consensus, it seems, can be seen quite differently by different people. I was once knitting a vest at a municipal council meeting on a local issue that had become contentious, and I was paying close attention to the proceedings. I was surprised when three different participants told me, separately, that I reminded them of Madame Defarge from *A Tale of Two Cities*. Defarge was, as Turney explains, a character who was part of the Reign of Terror after the French Revolution, and who "quietly and vengefully knits the names of the Revolution's intended victims into a list."^[88] Turney sees Defarge as "both part of, and seemingly oblivious to, the hatred both within and around her."^[89] In my case, the image of the intense, judgemental participant/spectator was not one that I was trying to convey, but the image of me knitting had particular meaning for a number of the other actors in the space that each of us contributed to shaping. My participation in the sayable and unsayable, then, was significantly different for me than for others around me. I was participating in and disrupting a symbolic order of which I was not even aware, and creating new combinations of the sayable in the process. I was creating different moments of dissensus, which resolved into different new moments of consensus. My aim was to finish the vest before my little nephew's birthday. For consensus and dissensus, it is hard to deny that perspective matters a great deal.

Given Rancière's reliance on consensus and dissensus for his notion of politics, where does that leave politics and knitting for Rancière? He would likely consider the knit uterus project to be a matter of "[p]olitical demonstration," which

makes visible that which has no reason to be seen; it places one world in another – for instance, the world where the factory is a public space in that where it is considered private, the world where workers speak, and speak about the community, in that where their voices are mere cries expressing pain.^[90]

For him, however, political demonstration does not fall under the definition of politics because it "presupposes partners that are already preconstituted as such and discursive forms that entail a speech community, the constraint of which is always explicable."^[91] If "[p]olitics can therefore be defined ... as the activity that breaks with the order of the police by inventing new subjects,"^[92] then is knitting politics? The answer is both yes and no. Rancière sees politics as constitutive of subjects, and knitters are constituted through the act of knitting, albeit more or less conservatively or disruptively depending on the particulars. If we take Lacan's use of the gaze seriously and consider all hand knitting as a performance, we cannot help but see knitting as constitutive of

subjects, in particular times and places.

The problem, of course, is that subjects are always constituted in these sorts of moments. This makes Rancière's distinction not much of a distinction at all. A close examination of knitting leads us to wonder whether the split between politics and not-politics can ever be taken as a premise upon which theory could build.

7. Conclusion: distinctions as lenses

Theories of art and politics, in both formal theory and popular discourse, often rely on what are seen to be hard distinctions that isolate art and politics from what they are not. Knitting, as both a product and a process, can show the instability of the categories of art and politics in a variety of ways.

Perhaps what knitting shows, then, is that splits between politics/not-politics, consensus/dissensus, and art/not-art should not be used as starting points to theory. Perhaps they rather should be used as possible lenses through which to view and understand particular moments. In this framework, knitting a uterus, or a sweater, can be seen to be simultaneously both political and apolitical in ways that are always shifting. Then the boundaries between art and not-art and politics and not-politics can be recognized as unstable, while still allowing us to see the importance of those meanings in contemporary life, art, and politics.^[93]

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- [93] I would like to express my sincere thanks to my reviewer



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