Chicks with Sticks

Stella Minahan

It was some time ago now. The young woman with dreadlocks was sitting opposite me on the tram. She was plugged into her iPod, dressed all in black, with heavy lace-up boots, chains, and lots of piercings around her face. Just another Goth? Well maybe, except this Goth was knitting a garment for a baby. The incongruity was a surprise. Since the import of cheap knitwear began, most women had given up knitting as being too expensive and too time consuming. It was much easier to go to Target and buy a jumper for $29.95 than to spend $100 on wool and forty plus hours knitting, only to find it looked awful or didn’t fit properly. Due to lower prices and mass production, wool shops and haberdasheries had disappeared from the city and suburbs. The traditional Knitting Guilds with their ageing membership struggled on preserving the skills—thank goodness. But I wondered where had this young woman learnt to knit and why was she knitting? Was it part of the Goth identity? Was a knitting revival occurring? Was knitting a fun way to pass the time on the tram? Over the next few years I observed the revival in knitting amongst young women: particularly knitting in public places such as cafes and on transport. Talking with the knitters, sometimes as a participant observer, provided some insights.

I learnt that the skills of knitting continue to be transmitted across generations of women. Most of the knitters said they had been taught to knit by their grandmothers, occasionally by mothers or aunties or by their girlfriends. Many of the young knitters were nostalgic about these early learning experiences, with most of them learning to knit at home before their fifth birthday. Many women stopped knitting during their adolescence only to return to it more recently. Jenny is a member of a knitting group that meets regularly in the suburbs of Melbourne.

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1 I should reveal that I am addicted to textiles generally and knitting specifically. I can’t remember who taught me to knit and over the years I have taught others; my only failure was one of my graduate students who is left-handed. My brain could not do the necessary transformations to teach her to knit.
2 There is a whole generation of older women (including the author), who are very technologically savvy, who knit. Their story is for another time.
3 Some women were knitting baby clothes; scarves and socks were the most common object. Hand knitted items, of all shapes, colours and sizes, as well as the occasional model Ferrari.
4 Twenty five interviews were conducted around Victoria in the winter of 2005.
I think one of the last things that I knitted was when I was about, um, 14 years old or something. It was back in the 80s, there was this hideous jumper thing that I did, um, yeah, and after that, I hadn’t, I didn’t really knit for quite a long time. It wasn’t until about 2000–2001 that I took it up again.5 (Jenny, 30 something).

Stitch’nBitch

The revival of knitting occurs within a movement sometimes called Stitch’nBitch. Prevalent around the globe, particularly among women, this movement is based in local places, such as hotels and cafes, it also using the Internet. The women meet to knit, stitch and talk. The groups use new technologies as an enabler and resource exchange. The movement is evident in Europe, particularly Zurich, many parts of the USA, including Chicago, New York and Los Angeles,6 as well as in Australia.7 At the same time, the movement can be seen, in part, as a response to major political, social and technological changes including globalization, terrorism, damage to the environment and the dislocation of the Information Society.

I use technology because I have to and it makes certain aspects of my life easier, but if I had the choice I probably wouldn’t use it because I think it’s a bit unnecessary in a lot of respects and it’s taken away from these traditional ways of doing things. (Kat, 27)

The current Stitch’nBitch activities may be heralding a new Arts and Crafts Movement. Many craft movements have been driven, in part, by a political protest such as the Industrial Revolution. Stitch’nBitch may be an example of a new way of connecting with community that is based on material production, and using traditional craft skills and yarns as well as the optical fibre and twisted pair cable used for telecommunications.

Stitch’nBitch groups are formed by and for women who get together to knit as a highly social form of creative leisure production8. The groups meet to discuss their knitting projects, to exchange skills and to socialize9. This appears to be part of a resurgence of interest in

handcrafts among young women\textsuperscript{10}, both domestically and socially, with knitting being a particular focus outside of the house. The identifiable characteristics of Stitch’n Bitch groups appear to be that they are social, outside the home, based on craft production and predominantly female.

\textit{Places for Women}

People have always looked to gather together in places for social interaction. For many of us, getting together for a coffee or a drink is a regular event. Many Australian men get together at the footy or the cricket, in hotels and clubs. These different places for social interaction are often outside of the home. These venues are what Ray Oldenburg calls ‘third places’.\textsuperscript{11} The home is regarded as the ‘first place’; ‘work’ is the second place, with the social venue the ‘third place’. Oldenburg says that these third places are ‘the heart of a community’s social vitality’, a place for connecting, making new acquaintances, reviving old friendships or just being.

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\textbf{A recent knitting group (2006), meeting in a café—a traditional activity, now shared in modern surroundings.}


Women may have a much wider range of social connections at work, and opportunities for social experiences and outings during the lunch breaks. After work socialising is rare as generally the mother has to race home to get dinner. This ‘second place’, the work place, is often significant for women as it takes them away from domestic chores, introduces them to new people and gives them the opportunity to develop skills, make new friends, and gain financial independence. For many women, there are rewards in paid employment apart from the wage, and social interaction is one of those rewards.

This Third Place is about community-based leisure and social interaction and is a venue for Stitch’nBitch groups. Previously community centres, YWCAs, churches and clubs provided venues for third place activities for women. Now, some groups will meet in private homes or in commercial pubs and cafes.

**Cyberfeminism**

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".12

It is notable that the online forums use the language of the feminine. The Internet group convenor is known as the ‘list mum’ or ‘nest mum’ and the rules include a requirement to ‘feed the blogs’; and the rules are enforced by the ‘door bitch’. While maternal terms are evident, the members are well aware of the technological tools available and often blend computers with their

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knitting. 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.

There is also a sense of protest and resistance evident amongst the cyberfeminist chicks with sticks. 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.’14 This caring and nurturing image of protecting an entire city 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.

**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 several centuries. One of the early movements was seen in 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. Indeed one of the common designs was to carve a chair back in the shape of Napoleon’s military hat to imply that he was going to be sat on at all times. Other earlier movements include the British and the American Arts and Crafts Movements as responses to the Industrial Revolution.

*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

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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.

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In Short

Crafts have for centuries been associated with protest movements and calls for alternative sources of energy and manufacture. *Stitch 'n Bitch* 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. It appears as though the skills of the handmade are being conserved and transmitted through a new generation of women.

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Selected Bibliography


Knitting in Public <http://www.gusset.net/kip/> [accessed 21 December 2004].


Stitch’n’Bitch <http://www.stitchnbitch.org/> [accessed 18 January 2006].