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Arctic craftivism and revitalisation of crafting

"Craftivismo" ártico e revitalização do artesanato

"Craftivismo" ártico y revitalización de la artesanía

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Maria Huhmarniemi

University of Lapland

maria.huhmarniemi@ulapland.fi

ABSTRACT

Knitting is a form of craft that is practised in many cultures with local features. Colour combinations, specific qualities of yarn, and decorative patterns give local character to mittens, cardigans, and other knits. In many regions, patterns have a communicative function: they carry cultural symbols and representations of cultural identities. In this visual essay, I describe artistic productions that have included participatory methods and the use of patterns as visual communication. The study follows the approach of art-based action research in which Northern cultural revitalisation is promoted. The artworks can be viewed as craftivism as the practice of engaging creativity regarding political or social causes.

keywords: installation art, political art, craft, art-based action research, Arctic

RESUMO

O tricô é uma forma de artesanato praticada em muitas culturas com características locais. Combinações de cores, qualidades específicas de fios e padrões decorativos dão caráter local a luvas, casacos de lã e outras malhas. Em muitas regiões, os padrões têm um função comunicativa: eles carregam símbolos culturais e representações de identidades culturais. Neste ensaio visual, descrevo produções artísticas que têm métodos participativos integrando o uso de padrões como comunicação visual. O estudo segue a abordagem da pesquisa-ação baseada na arte em que a revitalização cultural do Norte é promovida. As obras de arte podem ser vistas como "craftivismo" a prática de envolver a criatividade em causas políticas ou sociais.

Palavras-chave: instalação, arte política, artesanato, investigação-ação com base nas artes, Ártico

RESUMEN

Tejer es una forma de artesanía que se practica en muchos culturas con rasgos locales. Combinaciones de colores, cualidades específicas del hilo y patrones decorativos dar carácter local a manoplas, cárdigans y otros tejidos. En muchas regiones, los patrones tienen un función comunicativa: llevan símbolos culturales y representaciones de identidades culturales. En esto ensayo visual, describo producciones artísticas que han incluyó métodos participativos y el uso de patrones como comunicación visual. El estudio sigue el enfoque de la investigación-acción basada en el arte en el que se promueve la revitalización cultural del norte. Las obras de arte pueden verse como 'craftivismo', la práctica de involucrar la creatividad en causas políticas o sociales.

Palabras clave: instalación, arte político, artesanía, investigación-acción basada en las artes, Ártico

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Introduction to revitalisation of cultural heritage and craft traditions

Revitalisations can be intergenerational and intercultural, with the aim of transmitting local knowledge, artistry, and cultural practices to new generations and new community members. Symbols and crafting methods, such as those in knits, carry cultural heritage. Crafts can be studied, and new meanings can be created for them. The method of crafting sustainability (Härkönen et al., 2018) is implemented in art projects where dialogue, revitalisation, and empowerment are created though crafting. I have carried out art-based action research in Northern Finland when studying how contemporary crafts can enhance dialogue and revitalisation of local traditions and heritage, and strengthen cultural pride. This study has resulted in installations in several group exhibitions.

Revitalisation is described as a practice that renews and remakes cultural traditions (Auclair & Fairclough, 2015). Revitalisation is often understood as the creation of cultural continuation from one generation to the next, as the reconstruction of forgotten skills, and as the promotion of cultural identities rooted in some specific regions. New meaning and functions can be given to elements of traditions (such as crafts) in contemporary art (Guttorm, 2015; Hansen, 2016; Härkönen et al., 2018; Igloliorte, 2019; Stöckell, 2018), art education (Gårdvik et al., 2014; Hiltunen, 2008, 2010; Hiltunen & Zemtsova, 2014), and creative tourism (Kugapi et all., 2020).

The concept of Arctic art and design (AAD) is used to embrace both tradition and innovation. AAD melds contemporary art, service, and product design with the core aim of investigating issues important in the Arctic region, such as Arctic sustainability, heritage, and livelihoods. As a concept, AAD is a parallel concept to Arctic art (Huhmarniemi & Jokela, 2020a, 2020b) and is defined in a similar way through concepts of changing traditions, sustainability, and political aspiration. Crafting is a so common approach in Arctic art due to the tradition of making and valuing arts and crafts as one and the same. The focus of my interest is on Arctic arts that study, represent, and reform local traditions, create new meanings with them, and implement local knowledge on new forms of expression and innovation. Arctic arts includes a dimension of cultural politics, since it is used to highlight specificities of the art and design in the Arctic and promote cultural sustainability, diversity, and the transformation of traditions as well as an awareness of cultural richness and diversity.

Craftivism, as a concept, joints the words craft and activism. Craftivism is commonly described as a form of activism, typically incorporating elements of anti-capitalism, environmentalism, solidarity, feminism and other similar socio- political aims. My knits are also a form of craftivism. Cultural politics are interwoven as statements in knits that I present in this visual essay. I call for cross-cultural learning and cultural aspirations in North.

This study is part of the wider research project Acting on the margin: Arts as social sculpture (2020–2023), funded by the European Union. The project is based on the view of arts as something that can move people, educate societies, and create new narratives. The arts can also shed new light on the past, hold up a mirror to contemporary life, and launch new perspectives for the future. AMASS, an arts-based action research project, provides opportunities for people to come together and accompany artists as agents in creative projects and interpretations. The perspective of the AMASS project is on the physical positioning of European countries 'on the margins' in the underserved northern, southern, western, and eastern regions.

Methodological approach

Methodologically, my artistic research through knitting follows the research approach of art-based action research (ABAR), which has been developed at the University of Lapland to combine artistic work with educational practices and community empowerment (Jokela, 2019; Jokela et al., 2015). ABAR aims to develop the professional methods and working approaches of the community artist and artist-teacher-researcher. The strategy shares some common features with artistic research in general, as well as action research and arts-based research. In ABAR, practical and theoretical forms of research are conducted simultaneously, and research topics have relevance for art as well as other academic fields, such as health, well-being, and sustainability. In my knits, my aim has been to promote crafting in contemporary art and study ways to enhance revitalisation and cultural pride in Finnish Lapland.

ABAR is a cyclic process that includes setting aims, conducting artistic and art-based interventions, and analysing and presenting results in research publications and art exhibitions. Typical to action research, ABAR is commonly collaborative in all parts of the process. Thus, aim setting is made together with community members and artist peers, interventions are participatory, and analyses and representations are often jointly conducted. The research presented in this visual essay has included many forms of collaboration, such as open calls for participation and collaborative design of group exhibitions in which the artistic

Figure 1. Maria Huhmarniemi, Elina Härkönen and Miia Mäkinen, from the photo series 'Shared Woollen Patterns vol 2', 2019, photo by: Maria Huhmarniemi.

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Figure 2. Maria Huhmarniemi, Imaginary Identities I: Enontekiö (Finland), Viljandi (Estonia), Alahärmä (Finland), 2019, photo by Outi Kugapi.

productions have been shown. One of the installations presented in this essay, *Shared Woollen Patterns*, is made by an artist collective called Patterns Collective.

Shared Woollen Patterns installations were presented in the *Fringe* exhibition in 2019. The title of the exhibition *Fringe* refers to the outer edge, or the margin. The curators of the exhibition stated that when something is regarded as peripheral, marginal, or extreme, it often must be respected and protected (Huhmarniemi et al., 2019). The curators selected artists and artworks that blend arts and crafts and implement dialogical themes and methods from various perspectives with handmade techniques. They stated aims to increase appreciation and understanding of the diverse use of handicrafts in reflecting the North and in fostering revitalisation (Huhmarniemi et al., 2019). The *Fringe* exhibition presented a number of works by artists from Finland, Iceland, Norway, Russia, and the United States.

Forest culture, later titled as *Kukki Forest*, was created for the exhibition *Forest Talks to Us* as part of the AMASS research. The exhibition was an intervention into environmental politics on the forest industry in Lapland as well as on cultural politics. The artworks in the *Forest Talks to Us* exhibition offered perspectives on the concepts of conversation and interaction. In the exhibition, visual and symbolic elements of knitted patterns were seen as one form of dialogue and communication.

Knits

When starting the series of knitted installations, I was inspired by patterns that can be localized to some specific regions but have also been adopted and transformed to other regions, not as cultural appropriation but as cultural exchange and learning. This knitted piece, *Imaginary Identities* I (2019), combines traditional patterns from the Enontekiö and Alahärmä regions in Finland and Viljandi in Estonia (Figure 2). This knitted piece reflects cultural, ethnic, and regional identity with patterns from two different parts of the world. Moreover, the mitten artwork highlights the cultural right to express identities between cultures (such as a Finnish-Estonian person or between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people).

Figure 3. Patterns Collective (Elina Härkönen, Miia Mäkinen, Maria Huhmarniemi and Jari Rinne) Shared Woollen Patterns, 2019. Photo: Janne Jakola.

The installation *Shared Woollen Patterns* (2019) by Patterns Collective (Maria Huhmarniemi, Elina Härkönen, Miia Mäkinen and Jari Rinne) examines a shared cultural heritage of the Arctic through traditional knitting patterns (Figure 3). The pieces of the three cloaks were collected in collaboration with knitters around the Arctic, who have shared their knowledge of their regional knitting traditions. The knitted pieces represent pieces of cultural identity and heritage. Presented together, the pieces show similarities and differences between different traditions. The installation includes a soundscape that includes actual knitting sounds and the creation of stories. The installation aimed to make the handcraft traditions visible and demonstrate their dimensions as a shared tradition of knitting that brings people together. Alluring audio cues aimed to create a feeling of a 'knitting state of mind', like slowing down, cosy feelings, and a safe space for sharing.

The second volume of *Shared Woollen Patterns* artwork consists of a series of photos in the three cloaks carried by Patters Collective members (Figures 1, 4-5). These photos underline cultural pride and the right to adopt elements of crafts and visual symbols into one's own cultural identity. The theme of the artwork is strongly connected to discussions of cultural politics in the Arctic, where cultural appropriation is judged. The artwork does not state that cultural appropriation should in any way be accepted, but pulls attention to possibilities of having a fair and open mix of cultural elements in one's own cultural identity and expressions of it.

Kukki Forest was an installation in the series *Sense of Forest Conflict* by Huhmarniemi (Figure 6-7). The *Kukki Forest* installation consisted of knitted elements that are associated visually with punching bags and trunks of pines in the exhibition that discussed forest disputes in Finland. The colours of the knitted elements referred to the grey, orange, and brown tones of the pines in forests in Finnish Lapland. Patterns in different styles, including decorative ornaments and animal figures, represented communication with trees as cultural heritage. The artwork is based on an experience of dialogue with trees as sensations and images

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Figure 4,5 Maria Huhmarniemi, Elina Härkönen and Miia Mäkinen, from the photo series 'Shared Woollen Patterns vol 2', 2019, photo by: Maria Huhmarniemi.

Figure 6-7. Maria Huhmarniemir, Kukki Forest, 2021, Installation: 8 knits, chains. The installation is presented in the Art Cave Saimaa Retretti. Photo: Saara Huhmarniemi.

in the mind's eye. Symbols of the heart were repeated in several of the knitted items, underlining care for trees and the experiences of togetherness with trees. Some patterns referred to traditional folk crafts in Nordic andBaltic countries and some to those in Scotland, associated with the essence of tree communication as a cross-cultural form of spiritual knowledge. The overall concept of trees as punching bags demonstrated the ability of trees to release human stress.

Reflection

Knits presented in this visual essay express how cultural meanings are not always told verbally but can also be conveyed through visual signs, symbols, the choice of material, and crafting methods. This visually crafted language has communicative effects both inside and outside local communities, and the language of crafts is important for sharing traditions, beliefs, and worldviews (e.g. Minnakhmetova et al., 2019; Schilar & Keskitalo, 2018). Traditional crafts can also carry spiritual and religious content (Helander-Renval, 2009; Joy, 2018), which have importance in contemporary society. Knits presented in this essay aimed to transmit heritage and revitalise crafting as communication. The knits can be described as Arctic craftivism.

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Figure 8. Maria Huhmarniemir, Kukki Forest, 2021, Installation: 8 knits, chains. The installation is presented in the Art Cave Saimaa Retretti. Photo: Tanja Koistinen

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amass acting on the margins arts as social sculpture

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