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Lisa
Anne
Auerbach



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TAKE THIS KNITTING MACHINE AND SHOVE IT: Photograph taken for Nottingham Contemporary Mural, 2009.
 Model: Lisa Anne Auerbach, and Photographs by Lisa Anne Auerbach, except where noted.

Lisa Anne Auerbach wears her politics on her sleeve—literally. Known for her colorful sweaters emblazoned with opinionated slogans inspired by advertising and propaganda, Auerbach is not a textile artist, but an artist who works in textiles, specifically knitted textiles. Rather than wearable art, her pieces are art that is worn, repeatedly, and usually by the artist herself.

Long before yarn bombing and knit-ins became a thing, Auerbach was knitting politically charged clothing, blankets and banners. Her “Body Count Mittens” of 2005 enumerated American military deaths in Iraq—a chilling spin on knitting for the troops. (She posted the pattern on her website in hopes that others would make them, widening the debate). Other works

critique commodity culture (“Buy this sweater off my back \$25,000”) or mock the media’s tendency to reduce complex issues to buzzwords and sound bites (“If nothing changes, it changes nothing”).

Many female artists have reclaimed traditional crafts and so-called “women’s work”—quilts, weaving, crocheting—for subversive political ends. But Auerbach goes a step further, subverting the whole notion of political art itself; her work has been described as post-feminist. By playing on the old feminist adage that the personal is political, Auerbach pokes fun at the typical activist artist, who focuses on hot-button issues. “Everyone’s problems are important to them,” she says. “People’s concerns are real whether they affect the entire planet or their cat. My personal issues are as important



LISA ANNE AUERBACH

MAKING THEM SWEAT

"A SERIOUS MESSAGE CAN
HAVE MORE TRACTION IF THERE'S
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to me as global warming." For a 2010 project, she asked friends to send her lists of their enemies; the resulting "Blanket of Death" name-checks everyone from George H.W. Bush to ex-boyfriends.

Chunky sweaters and fuzzy blankets are not obvious canvases for an artist based in Los Angeles, where the temperature rarely drops below the mid-60s. But Auerbach is originally from Chicago, with its bitterly cold winters and large Scandinavian population. She is also an avid skier, who has written quirky articles for magazines like *Skiing* and *Outside*. When she was growing up, her mother (an *Ornament* reader) made quilts and jewelry as well as doing "a bit of knitting." One of her quilts, documenting her daughter's young life, was included in a book about Illinois quilting.

Kimberly Chrisman-Campbell

"Another one was about how the deer in our neighborhood were being pushed out by the encroaching housing developments and how the native plants were disappearing," Auerbach remembers. "I think that was her one and only political quilt. It's gorgeous." Her mother took Auerbach to the textile galleries at the Art Institute of Chicago and instilled an appreciation for handcrafts, but she admits: "I wasn't so interested in making things with her when I was a kid. I think she once tried to teach me to knit but I didn't learn. I didn't have the patience."

Sweaters require patience. Not only do they take a long time to make, but they last forever; in that respect, they are more like tattoos than T-shirts, the traditional sartorial conduit for political commentary. In today's



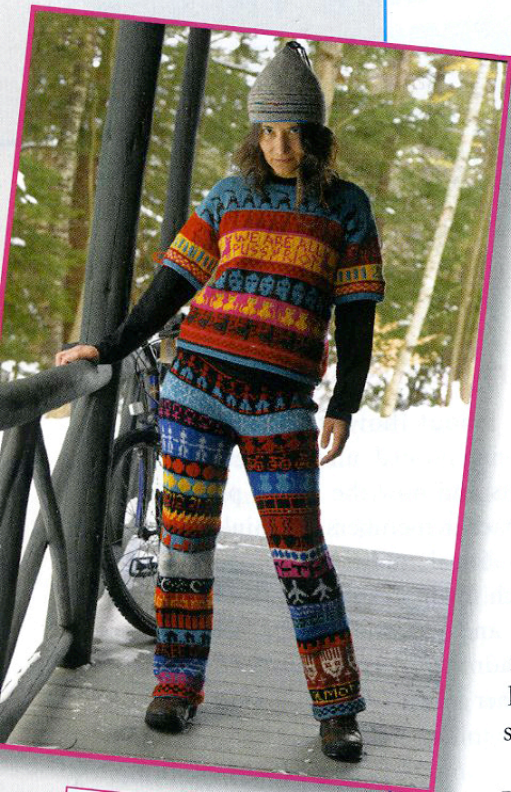
twenty-four-hour news cycle, Auerbach's sweaters often outlive the newsmakers they commemorate. But she has found that while politicians may come and go, the bombastic political rhetoric never changes. One of her sweaters borrows a sound bite from the eighteenth-century philosopher Diderot: "Strangle the last king with the entrails of the last priest."

In many ways, sweaters are uniquely suited to political commentary. With a back and a front, a sweater can present both sides of an issue. When Auerbach, a cyclist, took a job that required her to commute by car, she created a sweater decorated with cars and bicycles, reading "I used to be part of the solution" on the front and "Now I'm part of the problem" on the back. Unlike a T-shirt, a sweater's message is part of the garment, not just printed on it. The text is the textile; the medium is the message.

Auerbach is not sentimental about knitting. For her, it is neither a hobby nor a craft, but a means to an end. Although she is a talented (and self-taught) handknitter, she often uses a computer-controlled knitting machine instead. "I want to make things that are topical, and it takes me a really long time to handknit a sweater," she explains. Auerbach got her first knitting machine during the run-up to the 2004 election, when a friend asked her to make a sweater in support of John Kerry; his office dress code did not allow T-shirts. Her studio—a shared live-work space in downtown L.A.'s industrial Arts District—now contains two computerized knitting machines, as well as tile cutters, unicycles, a large-format printer, a spinning wheel, and several cameras.

Photography was Auerbach's first love, and her major in college (at the Rochester Institute of Technology in New York) and graduate school (at the Art Center College of Design in California). But after she completed her MFA in 1994, she found herself temporarily without access to a darkroom and began to consider other, less equipment-intensive media. A photograph of Cheap Trick guitarist Rick Nielsen wearing one of his many custom-designed sweaters—this one with the band's name rendered in upside-down letters—inspired her to try her hand at knitting a similar piece, with her own name in place of the band's. "I learned how to knit because I wanted that sweater to exist," she explains. She turned out to be a natural. Auerbach dives into a stack of gray archival boxes occupying one corner of her studio and produces her first-ever handknitted sweater. It is remarkably even, with an ambitious zippered front and a cheerful color scheme. By the time Auerbach figured out how to knit one with her name on it, she was hooked. Instead of a one-off, that sweater turned out to be the first in a still-growing oeuvre.

Auerbach just completed a sabbatical from her day job as Assistant Professor of Art at Pomona College in Claremont, California. It has been an



SHARROW SWEATER of machine-knit wool, 2009. See cover for backside. Photograph by Brian Pescador.
 HØNSESTRIK OUTFIT (WE ARE ALL PUSSY RIOT SWEATER AND JOURNAL PANTS): Sweater 2012, Pants 2013.
 Photograph 2013.

eventful year, taking her to Denmark, Sweden (twice), Norway, the United Kingdom, Detroit, Miami, Phoenix, and her hometown of Chicago. She spent two months at the MacDowell Colony, an artists' enclave in New Hampshire, and took her photography students on a pilgrimage to "Spiral Jetty," Robert Smithson's vast earthwork sculpture in the Utah desert.

All those Scandinavian stamps in her passport are souvenirs of her most recent solo exhibition, "Chicken Strikken," which closed earlier this year at the Malmö Konsthall in Sweden. The title is a pun on Hønsesrik, a style of knitting invented in Denmark in the early 1970s by Kirsten Hofstätter (1941-2007). Literally translated as "chicken knits," Hønsesrik was more than a style. It was a movement: a feminist, anti-authoritarian, socially conscious attempt to break with the traditions and norms of knitting while reclaiming its populist, creative character. At a time when machine-made sweaters were replacing handcrafts, Hønsesrik attempted to demystify knitting, rejecting the patterns imposed by yarn manufacturers and making knitting accessible to anyone, anywhere. Like jazz, Hønsesrik was improvisational and collaborative. It was characterized by brightly colored bands of pattern and text, incorporating playful, cartoon-like figures as well as political symbols. Hofstätter's three books on Hønsesrik were translated into Swedish, spreading the movement across Scandinavia. (Interestingly, a hard-to-find English omnibus edition eliminated all political references.)

Hønsesrik—and handcrafts in general—fell out of fashion in the 1980s, replaced by designer labels and video games. Even in its heyday, Hønsesrik was virtually unheard of outside Scandinavia. Auerbach encountered it for the first time while lecturing in Oslo in 2011; Norwegian textile artist Inger Johanne Rasmussen mentioned that Auerbach's work reminded her of Hofstätter's. Auerbach, who has always used traditional Scandinavian designs in her knitting, felt an immediate kinship with Hønsesrik, which she knows only from photographs; very few original Hønsesrik pieces from the 1970s survive. When Auerbach was invited to mount an exhibition in Malmö, she jumped at the chance to try her hand at Hønsesrik. She hopes her efforts will spark a revival.

"Chicken Strikken" broke the rules in more ways than one. Instead of being displayed on mannequins or gallery walls, the twenty-five Hønsesrik-inspired sweaters Auerbach created for the exhibition were worn by the museum staff—guards, curators, administrators—during the run of the show. As the staff went about their daily routines, visitors saw the sweaters on the human body, in motion. The models helped come up with the sweaters' slogans, which included "Big Brother is Watching," "Wool is Gold," and "Occupy Yourself First."

Auerbach designed the sweaters, plotting out the intricate motifs by hand on graph paper; however, she is quick to point



THIS LANE MODEL WOOL SWEATER.
Model: Morgan. Photograph 2012.



out that a true Hønsesrik sweater would not be made from a pattern. To traditional Hønsesrik motifs (like fists, feminist symbols and animals) she added her own, contemporary iconography, including surveillance cameras, cocktail glasses, protestors, and the tattoos of Malmö-born soccer star Zlatan Ibrahimovic. But she soon realized that she would not be able to handknit all twenty-five sweaters in the limited time she had. So she tapped into Denmark's knitting grapevine and recruited a team of eight women, including some who had been part of the original Hønsesrik movement. "The knitters were really excited about the project, and the people who wore the sweaters were touched and grateful to be part of the exhibition," Auerbach says. "They enjoyed the interaction with the visitors."

Museums usually have strict rules about touching—much less wearing—pieces of art. But Auerbach's sweaters are made to be worn. For a 2008 show at the Aspen Art Museum, she encouraged museum visitors to borrow her sweaters and wear them around town. "I just feel like the most appropriate place for a sweater is on a body," she explains. "I'm interested, too, in the confrontational quality of it. When you read it, it has a real import that it might not have if it's an object [in a museum]. The message is connected with person."

The messages on the "Chicken Strikken" sweaters were "not super confrontational," Auerbach admits. "No one was offended." But the things she knits for herself are designed to make people sweat. For years, her daily uniform was one of her own sweater and miniskirt sets, an outfit resembling a cheerleader's uniform. One even has a megaphone and the slogans "Keep Abortion Legal" and "Cheer for Choice" in a collegiate font. Another typical example reads: "Keep your church out of my state."


Much of Auerbach's work involves provocative text, whether in the form of photographs, blogs or 'zines. But the cozy, crafty nature of sweaters literally softens the message and "makes the sayings or the ideas palatable to an audience that might otherwise be turned off," Auerbach notes. "I think it works a little bit in the way that humor works. Humor can be a weapon, but it also makes things more palatable." Though her themes—abortion, terrorism, global warming, religion—may be serious, Auerbach uses humor liberally in her art. "A serious message can have more traction if there's a funny aspect to it," she says. A Sarah Palin-inspired knitted ensemble (illustrated with guns, high heels and a moose) is so hilariously profane that its title cannot be printed in a family magazine. Another sweater, from 2007, demands: "Did you hear what Bush said when asked about Roe vs. Wade?"



WHERE THERE'S DRINK THERE'S ALWAYS DANGER of machine knit wool, 2009.
KEEP ABORTION LEGAL SWEATER. Photograph 2006.

The punchline is delivered on the back: “I don’t care how they get out of New Orleans.”

Auerbach is clearly smitten with Hønsesstrikk, and though the show has come to an end, she is not giving up the technique any time soon. She made herself a Hønsesstrikk sweater to wear to the exhibition opening; amidst cheeky pictures of cats, it reads “We are all Pussy Riot” on the front and “We are all Pussy Galore” on the back. During her sabbatical year, Auerbach passed the time on the road by knitting herself a pair of pants in the Hønsesstrikk style. They functioned as a three-dimensional diary, each band of color commemorating a thought or experience in text or images. The first band reads “Malmö,” followed by the date of her flight and a band of airplanes she knitted while waiting in the airport. Subsequent entries record events both life-changing and mundane. “I went to the farmer’s market and got blueberries, so I have blueberries,” Auerbach says, pointing out a band of blue circles. “Then a strip of film, because I was looking for a negative I couldn’t find.” One row depicts coffee cups, because “there’s always coffee!” She has already started a second pair, having worn and washed the original so much that it is now too big for her petite frame.

As she was rediscovering handknitting on her travels, Auerbach began to formulate her next project. “I was looking at these knitting charts and I started thinking about pattern,” she remembers. She began to consider how she might translate all those patterns, charts and grids into different media. She began with gouaches, she says, “because I’d been doing these machine-knit pieces and photographs and dealing with computers and software and it was driving me insane.” The neat, pointillist images have a three-dimensional quality; they seem to ripple like fabric, unraveling at the edges. From gouaches, Auerbach moved to mosaics—a painstaking, labor-intensive technique she had never attempted before. She recently rendered the pattern of a traditional Estonian sock she found in a book as a two-by-three-foot mosaic. Like much of her work, it plays with concepts of genre and scale, manipulating the pattern until it becomes an object of beauty in its own right. Unusually for Auerbach, however, the piece is wordless; she lets the beauty speak for itself. 



BALACLAVA. Studio self portrait.
Photograph 2011.

SUGGESTED READING

- Auerbach, Lisa Anne. *Chicken Strikken*. Malmö Konsthall, 2013.
—. *Charted Patterns for Sweaters That Talk Back*. Printed Matter, Incorporated, 2008.
Hofstätter, Kirsten. *Everybody's Knitting*. Penguin Books, 1978.