

Skills Sharing to Foster Community and Social Change

The Art of Repair by Lisa Vinebaum



Sociologist Richard Sennett explores the concept of cooperation—defined as an exchange in which all participants benefit from the encounter—as a skill. He draws parallels between the process of learning a craft and learning how to cooperate with others, noting that cooperation skills are acquired, practiced, and perfected over time. Cooperation “requires of people the skill of understanding and responding to one another in order to act together”¹, and we learn how to cooperate through a lifelong process of copying, practicing, and refining these skills.

For Sennett, industrialization substantially weakened our cooperation skills: as the workplace became increasingly serialized and rigid, divisions of labor took hold, cooperation between workers became more and more difficult, dramatically eroding prior forms of workplace collaboration. Cooperation has eroded even further under late capitalism, which stresses short-term teamwork rather than true dialogue and problem-solving skills². This is especially true of the “disruptive” or “gig” economy, with its emphasis on so-called independent contractors who often work in complete isolation from one another.

Weakened cooperation poses serious problems in society more generally. Western values privilege self-sufficiency and individuality, eroding the skills required for dialogue and mutual understanding, which leads to intolerance and prejudice³. For evidence, look no further than

the racism and xenophobia unleashed during the current US 2016 presidential campaign, or the rise of far-right parties in Europe. Sennett urgently asserts the need for improved cooperation in our increasingly stratified society, and he explores the reinvigoration of cooperation skills as a type of much needed repair: we must learn to better cooperate with and respect each other if we are to repair our society more generally.

Can craft and fiber skills help repair our broken social bonds? Many artists believe so, using skills instruction and skills sharing to foster community. It is no surprise that today's artists are turning to fiber, with its social histories of cooperative circles and bees, to create social bonds—some more temporary, and others, more durational. Artists are using sewing, quilting, knitting, and spinning to foster dialogue, share experiences and knowledge, mobilize around common causes, and empower communities. From brief exchanges with strangers to ongoing forms of community organizing, artists are using hands-on skills sharing and instruction to interrupt our daily routines, create temporary moments of caring and intimacy, spur intercultural dialog, remember those lost to violence, make political demands, and enact social change.

Robin Love's Spindle 7 was a year-long series of spinning performances on the number 7 train between Queens and Manhattan in New York City in 2008. Love brought drop spindles and

ROBYN LOVE *Spindle 7* (video still) 2009, funded, in part, by the Decentralization Program, a re-grant program of the New York State Council on the Arts, administered by the Queens Council on the Arts. Photos: Marcia Connolly.



MICHAEL SWAINE

Mending for the People

2001—ongoing

The 15th of every month at 509
Ellis in the heart of the
Tenderloin in San Francisco.
Photos: Daniel Gorrell.



roving, and invited commuters to spin with her, also providing instruction. Queens is the most culturally diverse borough in the US, and Love surmised that many residents shared a common heritage of doing work with their hands. She was right. In addition to interrupting the solo routine of the daily commute, *Spindle 7* created a space for exchange in which many passengers revealed personal and family connections to spinning and fiber work, and demonstrating that, “we are all more connected to each other than our superficial differences suggest.”⁴

A very different project that seeks to break down urban isolation is **Michael Swaine's**

Mending for the People. For 14 years since 2001, he has offered a free mending service on the streets of San Francisco's Tenderloin district, home to some of the most disadvantaged and disenfranchised citizens of the city. Every month, Swaine sets up his bicycle-powered sewing machine (which lets him sew without electricity), mending clothing for local residents, many of whom are homeless and/or struggle with addiction and mental health issues. Swaine became part of the local community, with an established “clientele” that dropped by regularly to have things mended or just chat with the artist and other locals. As a result, people who most often experience





ABOVE: *Not Alone Baltimore: A Monument Quilt Display* 2016, fabric, survivor's stories, mixed media, 600' x 40'.

LEFT: *Gathering Voices: Addressing Sexual Assault in Indian Country* (installation of *The Monument Quilt* at the Oklahoma City Capitol Building) 2016, fabric, survivor's stories, mixed media, 80' x 180'. Organized in partnership with Native Alliance Against Violence.

isolation and exclusion gathered around the sewing machine to engage with one another, forging a more fleeting yet empowering type of community.

Cut off from their families and communities, prisoners face even greater isolation and disenfranchisement. In 1994, Congress cut Pell grants (which provide support to low-income college students) for prisoners, eliminating opportunities for them to pursue college degrees. State and federal prisons have cut nearly all training and education programs, despite studies showing that vocational and educational programs result in fewer disciplinary infractions, higher earned incomes, and lower recidivism rates after release. **Knitting Behind Bars**, initiated by **Lynn Zwerling** and **Sheila Rovellstad** in Maryland in 2009, provides weekly knitting classes for male inmates in the state prison near Baltimore in Jessup, Maryland. In 2016, the program



ABOVE: **FORCE: UPSETTING RAPE CULTURE** *The Monument Quilt* 2016 Volunteer session in Motor House studio. Courtesy of Maryland Institute College of Art, Baltimore, MD. Photos: Christopher Myers.

expanded to the women's prison. Participants learn to knit hats, providing 600 hats a year to their families, local charities, and the public school system. The classes teach knitting skills, but even more importantly help participants develop communications skills, empathy, and mutual respect—life skills that enable them to more successfully reintegrate into their communities in the future.

Yet other projects seek to heal the wounds caused by violence, bringing people together to share experiences and create physical and digital spaces for healing. Organized by the activist art collective **FORCE: Upsetting Rape Culture, The Monument Quilt** is a crowd-sourced collection of stitched and painted red quilt squares that provides a voice to survivors of sexual violence. The quilt inserts the stories of survivors into public spaces; to date, it has been displayed in 22 cities across the US. The project empowers survivors to tell their stories, and in so doing, to break the silence and victim blaming of rape culture. *The Monument Quilt* provides a place of healing where survivors can come together in mutual support; this space is at once emotional, physical, and digital.

The Lynch Quilts Project is an ongoing community driven project initiated by artist **Lashawnda Crowe Storm** that uses quilting to draw attention to the history of lynchings. To date there are eight collaboratively sewn and assembled quilts (and counting). The first quilt explores gendered aspects of lynchings, while others help disseminate statistical data on lynchings and racial violence. Some quilts explore healing and act as memorials to the victims of lynching, while more recent quilts explore mass incarceration, increased racist violence, and shared struggles against



ABOVE: **LAshawnda Crowe Storm Red Rum Summer 1919** © 2014, fabric, machine piecing and hand quilting, 144" x 144" x 2".

BELOW: **LAshawnda Crowe Storm Community Sewing**, 2011.



oppression across communities of color. The Lynch Quilts Project began with the participation of 10 volunteers in Chicago, and dozens of people have since helped to create the quilts; thousands more have experienced the quilts as viewers. The project involves the participation of more experienced quilters together with beginners and even children. Workshops are organized to teach sewing, piecing, and quilting skills, and quilt blocks are cut and sewn in community spaces. The quilting sessions also provide an

t. Louis Illinois July 1-3 1917 10 unidentified black trainmen
 W/A 1932 1 unidentified black man lynched Summs Illinois De
 bes Illinois April 26 19
 Villa Ridge Missouri
 urke lynched Columbia
 8 1920 Fayette Chana
 ll Missouri April 28
 Charleston Missouri
 Collins lynched We
 Missouri June 17 1914

RIGHT: LASHAWNDA CROWE STORM
Her Name was Laura Nelson:
 (installation view) © 2004, fabric,
 machine piecing and hand quilting,
 glass beads, table and chair set, and
 names of lynching victims,
 10.5' x 20' x 4.5'.
 Wall text detail ABOVE.



opportunity to discuss ongoing forms of racist violence in the US, notably racist policing and the unconscionable killings of unarmed black citizens by police.

Another memorial quilt project is **Gone But Not Forgotten** by artist **Rachel Wallis** in conjunction with the activist group **We Charge Genocide**. The quilt commemorates the over 130 mostly African American Chicagoans murdered by the Chicago police since 2007. Its panels—each of which is stitched with the name of one of the victims—are collectively sewn at quilting circles held in conjunction with community groups across Chicago. Handwork is accompanied by healing and discussion circles where participants talk about policing issues, police violence, and the city's long history of racist policing. Importantly, the project takes place across a range of Chicago neighborhoods and communities, supporting those directly affected by police violence while

also fostering education and exchange in one of the country's most racially segregated and unequal cities.

Projects like those discussed here foster new ways of being together through what critic **Mick Wilson** terms, "a sustained process of interaction that operates on multiple levels: speech, haptic experience, shared labor, the proximity of bodies in space."⁵ For sociologist **Steven Buechler**, one of the defining characteristics of these new modes of being together is "their capacity to establish and defend spaces in which critical discourse can flourish."⁶ Artists who emphasize skills sharing also invigorate social skills, what Richard Sennett describes as "listening well, behaving tactfully, finding points of agreement, and managing disagreement."⁷ These skills are contingent on what he terms "dialogics"—the technical word for attention and responsiveness to others. Cooperation depends on these dialogical skills.



RACHEL WALLIS *Gone But Not Forgotten* 2014—ongoing, donated fabric, embroidery thread, quilting thread, batting, embroidery, appliqué, machine and hand quilting, currently 60" x 40" with an additional 80" panel to be added. Photo: Marcia Connolly.

By creating spaces for dialogue and mutual understanding, these projects help to strengthen and repair cooperation skills, and so may be considered a type of social “reskilling,” or repair. They mobilize fiber skills to create social space—what postcolonial historian Bryony Oncuil terms *the engagement zone*: “a temporary, movable, flexible, living sphere of exchange.”⁸ Some projects provide frameworks for ongoing forms of collective engagement, and others for more fleeting yet poignant connections. Art alone cannot solve problems caused by capitalism, racism, colonial legacies, and socio-economic injustices. However, fiber can be used to create spaces for dialog and mutual understanding. Given the larger societal context in which these projects unfold (polarizing politics, the erosion of social programs, discrimination and inequality, screen culture and the decline of face-to-face interaction), fiber’s ability to bring people together should not be undervalued.

¹Sennett, Richard. *Together: The Rituals, Pleasures and Politics of Cooperation* (Yale University Press, 2012).

²Sennett, Ibid.

³Sennett, Ibid.

⁴Love, Robyn. *Spindle 7*, video, 2009, filmed by Marcia Connolly, edited by Susan Forste.

⁵Wilson, Mick. “Autonomy, Agonism, and Activist Art: An Interview with Grant Kester,” *Art Journal* 66/3, 2007, p. 110.

⁶Buechler, Steven. *Social Movements in Advanced Capitalism: The Political Economy and Cultural Construction of Social Activism*, 1st Edition, Oxford University Press, 1999, p. 208.

⁷Sennett, Ibid.

⁸Oncuil, Bryony. “Community Engagement, Curatorial Practice, and Museum Ethos in Alberta, Canada.” In *Museums and Communities: Curators, Collections and Collaboration*, eds., Viv Golding and Wayne Modest, Bloomsbury, 2013, pp.79-97.

Robin Love, *Spindle 7*: www.robynlove.com

Michael Swaine:

tinkering.exploratorium.edu/michael-swaine

Knitting Behind Bars: knittingbehindbars.blogspot.com

FORCE, *Monument Quilt*: themonumentquilt.org

The Lynch Quilts Project:

www.thelynchquiltsproject.com

Rachel Wallis, *Gone But Not Forgotten*:

www.rachelawallis.com

We Charge Genocide: wechargegenocide.org

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