

1.

Lesbian Activism and Crafted Fashion

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The clothing culture of lesbian activism is intrinsically tied to craft. When fashion meets activism, its most common goal is to make an impact or leave a message – and what better way to make a garment stand out than by emblazoning a statement across it? Now, in the twenty-first century, online brands and on-demand printing mean that it is easier than ever to buy and wear a t-shirt printed with words like ‘dyke’, or less specific messages like ‘girls girls girls’. This was not always the case. For lesbian activists from the 1970s through to the early 2000s, to wear their identity, politics, group affiliation, or event participation on their bodies, they would have to take the matter quite literally into their own hands.

Crafted or customized fashion in the landscape of lesbian activism takes many forms, but the most typical include t-shirts, badges, and knitwear. While occasionally garments like t-shirts or badges would be semi-mass-produced, perhaps by a lesbian organization, event, or publication, these ready-made examples were more likely to show affiliation with a group rather than a general lesbian identity or ideology (Burkhardt 2017: n.pag.). As such, it is understandable that some individuals or small groups chose to handcraft or customize their clothing with their own messages and designs.

Forms of craft, things that are handmade (often for practical use), have always been devalued when it comes to the skill and intent put into them. The hierarchy of art over craft is rooted in class and gender, where anything made by a working-class person or a woman is intrinsically lesser. The political and artistic significance of crafted items, but especially those forms done largely by women,

such as embroidery, have often been unacknowledged. Because craft is reflective of the marginalized position of women more generally, it has been taken up as a tool for many feminists who seek to subvert its connotations and use it as a ‘weapon of resistance’ (Parker [1984] 2010: xix). Protest banners, quilts, slogan-based embroidery, and hand-printed t-shirts are all examples of this.

In these contexts, craft represents a case of something being rejected by the mainstream but taken in by the subversive. A creative form that is perceived as lesser becomes worthy in oppressed communities because the two can combine to create something new and separate from a system that classed them as secondary. Lesbian craft continues this idea, embracing craft culture on the social sidelines; to use craft in lesbian activism is to imagine the possibilities of life outside of all forms of hierarchy. It is a tool for lesbian creation and reinvention. It exists in the physical labour of printing ink onto fabric or weaving yarn into shape, but it also exists in the possibilities that this process offers. The informal, unstandardized nature of craft practices is an acknowledgement of the freedoms and differences that flourish in lesbian existence. Craft and lesbianism both break boundaries, and combining the two amplifies the break. If the slogan or image on a t-shirt has been carefully stitched, painted, or printed by hand before those same lesbian hands pull it onto their body, it becomes all the more potent.

This chapter is an exploration of garments that have been hand-crafted and customized by lesbian activists in Britain. My argument is supported by a visual and material analysis of t-shirts housed in the collection of Glasgow Women’s Library (GWL), which largely date from the 1980s to 1990s. For the most part, these t-shirts belong to the Lesbian Archive and Information Centre (LAIC) collection, which began in London in 1984 and moved to Scotland in 1995. Although GWL has its own collection of LGBTQ material that was collected in Scotland from the 1990s until the present, there are very few examples of lesbian-crafted fashion among them that relate to lesbian life in Scotland. Thus, though lovingly housed and cared for in Scotland, some of the t-shirts discussed in this essay are not Scottish in origin, with just one exception of a t-shirt made by a Glaswegian artist and volunteer at GWL, although they all clearly have national significance. An additional source for this essay has been records of lesbian knitwear from Greenham Common Women’s Peace Camp, as well

as the garments' reinvention by artist Ellen Lesperance in her exhibition *Will There Be Womanly Times?*, which took place at Hollybush Gardens in London between 1 July and 11 September 2021. This chapter is separated into three sections: the first focuses on craft within lesbian activist fashion as a necessary practice. I consider the cost-effectiveness of craft for activists trying to create a lesbian culture and lesbian visibility, as well as craft being an accessible form of self-expression. The second section rests upon the idea of craft *as* activism, rather than as an expression of activist ideas – how can the process of knitting be an act of lesbian resistance? Lastly, I explore the concept of a 'billboard body', or the visibility politics of lesbian craft. This section is an analysis of words and symbols that make up a lesbian visual language. This is a language wielded by anyone who puts ink onto fabric and adorns their lesbian body with it.

Craft as necessity

Craft practices, when it comes to clothing, cannot be discussed without acknowledging the role of capitalism in the mass production of clothing, often referred to as 'fast fashion'. Throughout the world, clothing is overwhelmingly mass-produced, and to craft or even update or repair one's own clothing is to abstain from a capitalist system of high-speed production, exploited workforces, and millions of tonnes of textile waste (Somers 2019: 1). While in the 1980s and 1990s the mass-production of clothing was not quite so prolific as it is today, it still played a role in the choice to craft and customize. This is particularly true when it comes to t-shirts, which – although part of craft culture – have borders that overlap with the colossal fast fashion industry.

The plain t-shirt is an ideal representative of consumer culture and therefore easily accessible to consumers; to use it to question dominant ideologies is to reappropriate cultural restrictions to criticize the very same culture (Neal 2014: 186). Media scholar Joel Penney, in his article 'Eminently visible: The role of t-shirts in gay and lesbian public advocacy and community building' writes that '[g]raphic t-shirts can cost only a few dollars [or pounds] to create, and can be exhibited to literally thousands of people in public space as wearers transform themselves into exhibition screens' (Penney 2013: 290). The low cost of customized t-shirts is one of their most compelling charms.

A group campaigning against dominant ideologies is rarely granted funding by the authorities that they are challenging. To make oneself visible or translate the language of lesbian iconography from meeting notes and pamphlets to bodies and the streets they walk through, hands must get dirty. For example, consider the t-shirt pictured in [Figure 1.1](#), from GWL's collection. The t-shirt is bright blue, in a size medium, and made from cotton. Although the plain t-shirt itself is likely to be mass-produced, the front of it has been customized, showing an overlapping Jewish Star of David and double venus (otherwise known as the double woman symbol, representing lesbianism). Underneath the symbols are the words 'Birmingham Conference 1985'. The Star of David has been printed onto the t-shirt in bright green ink and the double venus printed over it in a deep red, most likely by screen printing. The text, with ink applied in a thinner layer, may have been added separately, perhaps by using hand-made stencilled letters and a paintbrush.



Figure 1.1: Blue cotton t-shirt printed with the Star of David and the double venus, above the words 'Birmingham Conference 1985', 1985. Glasgow Women's Library t-shirt collection, LAIC Box 3. Glasgow, Scotland. Photo credit: Eleanor Medhurst.

‘Birmingham Conference 1985’, according to a poster for the event, refers to a Jewish Lesbian Conference held in Birmingham (United Kingdom) on 16–17 February 1985. The poster, aside from advertising the date and location of the conference, also includes an illustration, not unlike the imagery on the blue t-shirt: two venus symbols next to each other, the circles of both enclosing a Star of David. This customized t-shirt may have been one-of-a-kind, or it might have been reproduced on a small scale by Jewish lesbians attending the conference. It is highly unlikely that it was any kind of official uniform or merchandise. For one, the combination of the symbols is different on the poster than on the t-shirt. Second, the t-shirt is not finished to a professional standard – the green ink is visible underneath the red, the symbols are off-centre, the red ink is smudged, and the letters of the wording are irregular. While skill is highly valued within most craft communities, skill and finish were secondary for the purposes of this t-shirt. It was made, presumably, to present the affiliation of the wearer (who may also have been the maker) with the conference and its principles, but an additional purpose could have been to extend the conference further than the walls of the location it was held in. The symbolism of Jewish lesbianism printed on this t-shirt might have walked through the streets of Birmingham after the conference ended. It might have also continued in a more abstract form, in leftover ink splatters staining the floor of the room in which it was printed. This t-shirt was clearly born out of necessity and urgency.

The making, as well as the wearing of this t-shirt, is part of its life and part of the maker/wearer’s activism. It is a physical manifestation of the time, effort, and care it took to make, as well as the time, effort, and care that it takes to fight for lesbian rights. Craft skill is not what is important here because the finished product makes its mark no matter how neat the inked lines may be. Craft is an accessible form of revolution and its cost-effectiveness does not make it any less potent.

The connection to a cause

A t-shirt that has been quickly but purposefully hand-printed creates an additional connection for the maker/wearer with their cause than could be achieved by wearing a ready-made garment. But what if the craft process is longer and more labour-intensive? In some cases, the process of making, crafting, or customizing

is an added benefit, secondary to the final product. In others, it is an intentional part of the crafter's activism and community-building. A garment like this has a vastly different life story than one that has been bought new and worn unchanged. In anthropologist Igor Kopytoff's essay 'The cultural biography of things: Commoditization as process', objects are posited as having 'biographies' (Kopytoff 1986). In the context of this essay, the life story – the biography – of the crafted lesbian activist garment is infused with each place that it was made in, each hand that touched it, the hopes, dreams, ideology, and identity of the people to whom those hands belonged. These hands are part of the story, as lesbian hands so often are. In the words of lesbian writer Wednesday: 'Hands hold our power, our independence, our talent, our strength, and most importantly, each other' (Wednesday 2008: 402).

A prime example of crafted garments that provide important biographies of the past are the knitted jumpers from Greenham Common Women's Peace Camp. Greenham Common Women's Peace Camp was a collection of protest camps that were active from 1981 to 2000, formed around Greenham Common Royal Air Force Base in Berkshire in the United Kingdom. The camp was protesting worldwide nuclear war, and more specifically the cruise missiles that were being stored at the base. The women's peace movement was campaigning for women *and* for peace, with nuclear power being seen as 'the highest, maddest expression of patriarchal reasoning' (Finch 1986: 95). Creativity and forms of craft were essential in this campaign, as shown in [Figure 1.2](#), which shows protestors weaving materials like wool and ribbon through the camp's fencing. As artist Ellen Lesperance explains in *Velvet Fist*, her book documenting the knitwear of Greenham, 'the gesture of creativity itself was a gesture of non-violence' (Lesperance 2020: 4). Knitting is a more time-consuming process than screen-printing a t-shirt, as well as being more portable. It is also less permanent; so many of the world's knitted garments have been unwound and the yarn worked anew, despite the original item being a product of extensive time and labour.

The feminist and peace movements may have been the main causes represented at the camps, but many activists at Greenham were also lesbians – something that is rarely acknowledged. For lesbianism to be invisible in so much of the scholarship surrounding Greenham Common is a misrepresentation of the



Figure 1.2: Photograph by Jocelyne Wood, 12 December 1982, taken at Greenham Common, from the Feminist Archive South, held at the University of Bristol Special Collections, DM2123/1/ Archive Boxes 129. Photo credit: University of Bristol and the Wood family.

camp, and although lesbian identity was not crucial to campaigning for peace, it was an important part of many activists' personal and political lives. This is clear when we consider some of the items and garments created by those at Greenham. Their knitwear represented their lives, their political and community affiliations, and the time that they spent at the camp, working for a better world. The jumpers were knitted with skill and intent; their yarn formed the shapes of lesbian and feminist symbols like the labrys (a double-headed axe linked with the Amazons), the moon (associated with femininity, the opposite of the masculine sun), and the venus and double venus. The garments were transient, their lives as finished objects not always being long ones. Jumpers would sometimes be remade, other times destroyed by police or the rubbish

disposal trucks that were set loose on the Greenham campsites (Finch 1986: 99). The jumpers' biographies are not lesser for their short lifespans since the act of creating them was a central part of their story. They mostly survive in photographs and hand-made video footage – or in artistic recreations. Artist Ellen Lesperance, in her exhibition *Will There Be Womanly Times?* (2021), brought these jumpers to life once more. Her work melds craft and art practices, honouring the labour, intentions, and original artistic sensibilities that went into the Greenham jumpers in her reinterpretation of them. The exhibition consisted of artworks that are at once paintings and knitting patterns, made on a knitter's grid and both practical and beautiful. The designs are based on knitwear shown in footage and photographs, Lesperance piecing together a jumper's portrait through snapshots. Two of the paintings were used as patterns for Lesperance's own knitting practice, and the resulting garments were also displayed.

About one knitted piece, *The Only Revolution This World Has Ever Seen Is the Little Man Against the Bigger Man, but They're All Mens to Me* (2021), Lesperance says that:

I decided to knit one of the jumpers in the exhibition, the black hooded cardigan, because I had such a sense that I knew enough about the source jumper to bring it back into the world. I tracked the Greenham woman who wore that garment through crowds and expanses of video to capture numerous details of the jumper, including its *WITCH* text, its left lapel moon, the two joined women symbols on the back, even the incredible rainbow *LIFE* patch on its sleeve.

(Lesperance 2021: 6)

The back of this piece, with the 'two joined women symbols' (which I refer to as a double venus), can be seen in [Figure 1.3](#). As Lesperance explained, she was able to bring it back to life because of the fleeting moments when its image was captured and preserved, as well as the labour that she expended in finding these very moments. The jumper was a lesbian activist garment, a feminist garment, a crafted garment, and a garment for peace. Its different meanings only continue to exist for us now because of the angles at which it was captured; if we did not have a view of the back, we would not know about the double venus. Its



Figure 1.3: Ellen Lesperance, *The Only Revolution This World Has Ever Seen Is the Little Man Against the Bigger Man, but They're All Mens to Me*, 2021. Back. Wool sweater hand-knit by the artist. Photo credit: Eva Herzog.

lesbian affiliation would have been erased, despite being purposefully knitted by – presumably – the lesbian hands of the wearer. This craft activism lives on in Lesperance’s reproduction, being exposed to the world once more, captured on smartphone cameras, and shared on social media. Lesperance says: ‘My quest has been to uncover this history of material culture from Greenham Common: their argumentative jumpers, and to bring them back

together and into the cultural consciousness for more attention' (Lesperance 2021: 9). There was always a lesbian presence at the Greenham Common camps and this jumper, with its double venus carefully designed, knitted, and proudly worn, tells us that it should not be ignored.

In a 1986 article, 'Socialist-feminists and Greenham', written by Sue Finch (with a collection of other women from Hackney Greenham groups, Mary, Cynthia, Linda, Colleen, Barbara, and Jan) the activist ethos of Greenham is illustrated:

In opposing the nuclear threat many women have discovered a new pride in our strength. We have sensed the importance and creativity of a new way of organizing, and have seen the sterility of traditional male-dominated violent confrontation. We were peaceful; we found our voices; we took care of each other.

(Finch 1986: 99)

Part of the 'new way of organizing' was through craft. Craft, in this context, connected these activists to their cause, through the time and energy put into the practice as well as then wearing or sharing the results. The Greenham knitted jumpers were activist objects and activist clothing, but they were also activism in community and activism as action.

Billboard bodies

I now want to pick up a thread that has appeared throughout this essay. This is the idea of visibility within lesbian-crafted fashion, a lesbian visual language of words and symbols that a crafter purposefully chooses to adorn their bodies with. In the 2019 zine *Fashion Craft Revolution*, published by Fashion Revolution, the organization's co-founder Carry Somers introduces craft as a socio-political tool, a 'physical manifestation of beliefs and values, a symbolic visual language' (Somers 2019: 1). By hand-making or customizing a unique garment, a crafter is able to present their 'beliefs and values' in the most accurate way that they can. Stephanie Talbot, author of the book *Slogan T-shirts: Cult and Culture*, writes that 'The t-shirt can be likened to an exhibition space' (Talbot 2013: 13). With these ideas in mind, a uniquely crafted activist garment like a jumper or t-shirt remodels the marginalized self into something that deserves to be exhibited.

When an activist garment has been crafted or customized, the iconography displayed on it and the visual language used cannot be disregarded. Whoever drew, printed, stitched, or wove those words and symbols made the decision to do so. In this way, crafted lesbian garments are a construction of lesbian identity and lesbian space, bringing both the private, bodily world of lesbianism and the lesbian community to the material terrain. In other words, the act of hand-craft or hand-customization is a link between private identities and public activism. Depending on the words or symbols used, the reaction can differ. The word ‘dyke’, for example, is a distinct iconographic choice compared to a symbol like the rainbow. A t-shirt reading ‘dyke’ asserts that yes, lesbians are dykes and they are angry, but through no fault of their own. Printed to be displayed proudly across the chest, the word ‘dyke’ is a powerful message, at once an identity and an accusation. It is a word that, for its power, crops up repeatedly on archival lesbian t-shirts, with a screen-printed example in GWL’s collection shouting out the word in patchy black ink on an orange backdrop. This t-shirt has no source, but it does not necessarily have to; ‘dyke’ is a widespread concept, after all. It could have just easily been printed in a rural country home as marched through the streets of a city centre.

In Robin Maltz’s *Toward a Dyke Discourse*, she suggests that the word ‘dyke’ is crucial to the theorization of lesbian existence because of its violent legacy (Maltz 1999). In the article she refers to her ‘shame at using the word “dyke” as being the very reason to use it’ (Maltz 1999: 91). Reappropriating language that has been used specifically for the purpose of shaming lesbians, both outside and in their community, is to deny space for that feeling of shame. The more a person claims and uses ‘dyke’ and feels comfortable with it, the harder it is for them to be shamed by it. To purposefully print it onto a t-shirt and then wear that t-shirt is an act of reclamation. It is, however, also a challenge. To wear such a visible sign of difference is to put one’s body on the line, as while a dyke may have shunned their own sense of shame, that does not mean that people have stopped trying to shame them. For freedom, though, this is a risk that many are willing to take. This is the difference between a t-shirt where the iconography is lesbian but perhaps less obvious, such as a labrys or double venus symbol, and one that reads ‘dyke’. The latter is always a political action, and while the former may

have the same intent, it does not run the same risk because there is a less universal understanding of its meaning.

Activism, though, is not defined by the riskiest strategy. Words like 'dyke', as well as less obvious lesbian symbols (such as the moon), both play a vital role in the visual language of lesbianism. After all, if there were not a range of symbols and words to be chosen from, it would not be a language at all. Sometimes a selection of words and symbols, chosen by a crafter to adorn a t-shirt, jumper, badge, or even banner, work together to create a new and specific meaning. See, for example, the Birmingham Conference t-shirt discussed previously (Figure 1.1). In this case, two symbols – the double venus and the Star of David – were combined to create the specific message of Jewish lesbianism. The original maker of the hooded jumper from Greenham Common, re-created by Ellen Lesperance, did not limit their use of symbolism to the double venus on the back. They also used the word 'WITCH' (a possible identification with historic women labelled as witches, as well as the women's liberation groups assembled under the name Women's International Terrorist Conspiracy from Hell), the crescent moon, and the rainbow. These examples date from the 1980s, but lesbian symbolism persists in crafted activist garments that are more recent.

Figure 1.4 is a photograph of a t-shirt printed in Scotland in 2017 by Glasgow-based artist and GWL volunteer, Bel Pye. The screen-printed design on the t-shirt is a grey and pink circle with a black triangle and a black labrys overlaid onto it, as well as the words 'Queers Against the Bathroom Bill'. Pye's inspiration for the design was a combination of lesbian imagery found on a badge and a postcard from the GWL lesbian archive. Pye said that they 'tried to recreate these images on fabric and have changed the text on the badge image to make it about a current discriminatory law' (Pye 2017: n.pag.). The 'Bathroom Bill' refers to legislation that prohibits access to public restrooms based on perceived gender, which for the most part has been fuelled by anti-transgender sentiment. Though relating to legislation from the United States, it has been discussed and campaigned against in other countries including the United Kingdom. This context is important. As with the 'Birmingham Conference' t-shirt, a combination of specific imagery constructs a unique meaning. The t-shirt, designed and printed by hand to reflect lesbian material and activist histories in



Figure 1.4: Bel Pye, *Queers Against the Bathroom Bill*, 2017. Screenprint on a grey Primark t-shirt. Glasgow Women's Library t-shirt collection. Glasgow, Scotland. Photo credit: Eleanor Medhurst.

a twenty-first-century world, is locating lesbian and transgender activism in the same place. This place is the t-shirt; the worn garment; the billboard body.

We are existing in a landscape where, although the 'L' (Lesbian) and the 'T' (Transgender) are both parts of the same community and the same 'LGBTQ+' acronym, some people would have it otherwise. Consider the recent forming of the 'LGB Alliance', a British lesbian, gay, and bisexual activist group that purposefully excludes the transgender community. When voices like this are loud, it is easy for lesbian and transgender identities to seem disparate. A visual, unavoidable collaboration like that in [Figure 1.4](#) challenges this idea. Lesbian activist pasts are not incompatible with transgender-liberatory futures, just as how the words and symbols on the 'Queers Against the Bathroom Bill' t-shirt exist in harmony. Craft, here, is a material reflection of conversations and collaborations that are being had in the written and theoretical world. For example, in the same year that this t-shirt was printed,

Sara Ahmed's *Living a Feminist Life* was published, in which she wrote: 'I would suggest that it is transfeminism today that most recalls the militant spirit of lesbian feminism in part because of the insistence that crafting a life is political work' (Ahmed 2017: 227). Note the use of the phrase 'crafting a life' – craft is about care, purpose, and intent. Whether the thing being crafted is an identity, relationship, or an activist garment, the act of crafting is just as important as what has been made.

Conclusion

The purpose of a crafted activist garment is to *act* for something, and its intent must be understandable. Part of craft as activism is the process of making, such as with the Greenham knits, but the finished garments also had a purpose: to be seen and to attract more activists to Greenham Common and the cause (Lesperance 2021: 18). Within lesbian activist fashion, craft is a tool to assert identity, ideology, and aspirations. Often these things are specific and personal, which is why choosing the words and symbols to be printed onto or woven into a garment is a vital step to the 'finished' result. The lesbian visual language was, and is, necessary to the existence of crafted lesbian activist fashion. However, the opposite is also true. Because symbols were printed on crafted t-shirts like those housed by GWL, their messages and meanings continue to 'live on' as important biographies of lesbian lives.

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