

# ARTPULSE

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gold rim glasses red velvet deep  
little girl's eyes  
Hummingbird no elephant skin  
radio sensitive fat  
speaks in bunches  
long  
Gen-old granddaddy  
deep loud squawks  
wrinkles

**"SCREEN DEMOCRACY" OR FASCISM OF THE IMAGE?**

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**DOR GUEZ**

**JILL MAGID**



# REDEFINING CRAFTS

## A Conversation with L.J. Roberts

L.J. Roberts is a Brooklyn-based artist and writer whose work challenges the boundaries of gender identity, craft and fine art. The recipient of numerous awards, including most recently a MacDowell Colony Fellowship (2010), A Fountainhead Fellowship/Emerging Artist Residency in Craft and Material Studies at Virginia Commonwealth University (2010-2011) and the Bag Factory residency in Johannesburg, South Africa (2012), Roberts work was shown most recently in “Craft Futures: 40 under 40” at the Renwick Gallery, Smithsonian American Art Museum (2012). In this email interview, L.J. discusses queer identity and craft, his knitting and embroidery process, and what it means to be create AIDS activist work today.

BY JENNIE KLEIN

*Jennie Klein - Could you talk about the relationship between queer identity, queer theory and craft and suggest why embracing craft can be seen as a queer strategy of deliberate dis-identification and misrecognition? I was interested in your arguments in “Put Your Thing Down Flip It and Reverse It: Re-imagining Craft Identities Using Tactics of Queer Theory” in Maria Elena Buszek’s Extra/Ordinary: Craft and Contemporary Art (Duke University Press, 2011).*

**L.J. Roberts** - I wrote “Put Your Thing Down Flip It and Reverse It: Re-imagining Craft Identities Using Tactics of Queer Theory” in 2007. It was my master’s thesis while I was an MFA/MA student at California College of the Arts. At the time the word ‘craft’ was being erased from the names of major institutions across the United States, including CCA and the Museum of Arts and Design, which was formerly the American Craft Museum. ‘Craft’ was a dirty word and represented ‘undesirable’ traits—the feminine, the amateur, the anti-intellectual, the ethnic, the non-white and the lower or working class.

In my essay I followed Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, who located ‘queer’ as a dirty word as well. Queer encompassed a range of overlapping identities and was associated with non-normativity. The word ‘queer’ was used on the streets during the AIDS crisis in the 1980s and 1990s and then made its way into theory. It occurred to me that craft could also be used in this way—to be a signifier of the non-normative and at the same time a way to avoid stereotyping that calcifies identities. In my essay I looked at artists that were overperforming craft in ways that magnified its negative stereotypes in a way that was queer.

To look back on my essay in 2012 and recognize that it became a theoretical cornerstone of what is now called the ‘queer craft’ movement. The essay even inspired a Craft Pride Parade that’s happened the past few years in Vancouver that looks like a ton of fun—con-jures some mixed feelings for me. On one hand, I’m glad people are making queerness visible through material practices, but I don’t want it to be a formula. I think it’s important to remember that feminism is the root and foundation of the work, and that artists like Harmony Hammond were paving the way for people like me to make work back in the 1970s. In a lot of ‘queer craft’ work I see a disturbing

trend of fetishizing cisgendered men—straight and queer—who engage in textile practices and the privileging of a variety of masculinities, whether it be an acceptable and easy to swallow queerness or a reification of the macho, as in, «Oh, this person is still a man even though they practice feminine crafts—and isn’t that sweet.» This really bothers me, especially as a trans-masculine person who engages in textiles. It’s irksome that the fetishization of queer masculinities through textiles creates a sly misogyny. So I think there is yet work to do in the realm of queer craft. I would love to see the work be celebrated for being feminine in its own right.

*J.K. -Your work is primarily comprised of knitting and embroidery. On the one hand, these forms of making things can certainly be associated with the debased, middle-brow craft culture associated with Jo-Ann Fabrics and Michaels. On the other hand, guerilla knitting seems to be trendy. A quick Google search for knitted installations reveals all sorts of objects—living/dead, indoor/outdoor—that have been covered in knitting. Could you talk about how your work is distinguished from this urban knitting phenomenon?*

**L.J.R** - Well, I was 7 years old when my maternal grandmother taught me to knit, and that was in 1987. She learned needlework from her grandmother, who probably learned it from her grandmother. My grandmother is an unbelievably talented needle worker and artist, and she was incredibly patient with me when she was teaching me to knit. However, as a kid I was terribly uncoordinated, and I dropped the practice pretty quickly after learning.

When I was 20 years old I had a terrible accident and basically severed my foot. I was in bed for months. At the time I was just starting my junior year of college. I had been taking sculpture classes, and I worked with a large variety of mediums—plaster, latex, video, wood, etc.—yet there was also a textile element that usually found its way into my work. When I injured myself I couldn’t do anything physical, so I picked up knitting again because at least it got my hands working. During this time I was also living in a radical environmental collective at the University of Vermont called Slade Hall. When my housemates did banner drops and direct actions I tagged along with them and took the photographs that were used for the press releases



L.J. Roberts, *The Queer Houses of Brooklyn and the Three Towns of Boswyck, Breukelen and Midwout in the 41st Year of the Stonewall Era*. (Based on the drawing by Daniel Rosza Lang/Levitsky and with illustrations by Buzz Slutzky), 2011, crank-knit yarn, fabric, thread, sequins, poly-fil, 1" pins, 9' x 9' x 14'. Courtesy of The Renwick Gallery of The Smithsonian Museum of American Art.

and communiques. I was also struggling with my queerness, sexuality and gender. I grew up in a conservative area and went to a boarding school that forced hetero-normativity on students. I went to Vermont for college because I thought it seemed like a safe place where I could undo and unlearn a lot of internalized homophobia and slowly come out. But, as I soon learned, when I feel deep shame about something I kind of have to deal with it head on. So my first guerilla action was to knit a huge pink triangle with the words «Mom Knows Now» and drop it from the steeple of the church on the main university green. So that was a big part of my coming out process.

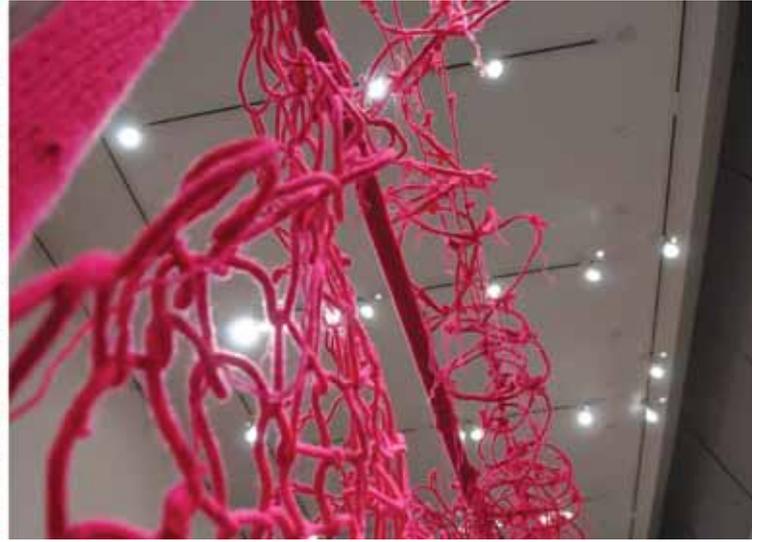
Somewhere along the line I must have seen some of the ACT UP actions, such as the banner drops in Grand Central Station or at the Stock Exchange and seen the work of Gran Fury, because even though I was only at the beginning of getting politicized, the symbols and actions that were part of their activism were in my vocabulary, even as a young person that was just getting sex education as the AIDS crisis was hitting a fever pitch.

Really, I've only done three guerilla actions, and they have all been deeply political expressions of rage and passion.

This was also the case with the second guerilla action, which was in response to California College of the Arts dropping the word «craft» from their name. The name change of the school, which happened in 2005, occurred as I started the MFA textiles program. The name change infuriated a lot of the students, faculty and alumni of

CCA(C). The school was founded on the principles of the Arts and Crafts movement, and the craft departments there are just phenomenal. It struck me as classist, elitist, misogynist, racist—just completely insulting to many populations that have «craft» practices. So, I knitted «& CRAFTS» in bright orange, mounted it on Plexiglas and stuck it on the façade of the San Francisco campus where the original «& CRAFTS» had been taken down. I woke up super early on the morning of open studios. I took the tallest ladder I could find and used E6000 glue, which is an incredibly strong adhesive, and stuck them on. They stayed on the building for a week, much longer than I had anticipated, and the response from the CCA community was positive—even bordering on giddy.

So really, I don't identify as a yarn bomber—it's certainly not a regular practice for me. I only use guerilla actions for my work when I feel the urgency to make a statement that comes from my core. It's funny that you separate yarn-bombing and the trendiness of it from stores like Jo-Ann's and Michaels because I get a lot of my yarn from there. I grew up in the Midwest, and that's where we went to keep ourselves busy. And while I don't identify as a yarn bomber and agree that it's trendy, I think it's great that people, especially women and gender-variant people, are getting out there and making their own kind of graffiti, which for so long has been such a male-dominated practice. If people gain agency from guerilla crafting, I say more power to them.



L.J. Roberts, *We Couldn't Get In. We Couldn't Get Out*, 2006-2007, crank-knit yarn, hand-woven wire, steel poles, assorted hardware, 10' x 30.' Courtesy of the artist. Photo: Team Photogenic.

**J.K.** - *Can you talk a bit about your knitting process? Why a Barbie knitting machine?*

**L.J.R.** - I began using toy knitting machines as a graduate student at CCA. At the time I was hand-knitting, and I was told I wasn't making enough work because the process was too slow. My advisor, Carole Beadle, told me about this little toy that she saw on the Internet called the Cool Corder that made knitted cords or ropes. At first I was very resistant to making my work on any kind of machine, even a toy. But I looked up the machine and it was hot pink and sparkly and I thought it was the gayest, most flaming thing ever. So I bought one and got addicted and was using it everywhere I went (similar to how I am embroidering now). Towards the end of my time at CCA I was at a party and one of my advisors, the performance artist and scholar Tina Takemoto, saw me using the machine and told me that her dad had her old Barbie knitting machine in his garage and used it to make covers for his fishing rods. She loaned it to me and I was just hooked again. For a long time I had been trying to use really 'low' methods of craft—and now I was knitting Richard Serra-sized sculptures with toys I bought off the Internet and eBay. I love the toy knitting machines and how they work, and I don't see my use of them as ironic, but rather the machines seem to be an extension of my personality and compulsivity. As a person that is genderqueer, they seem to be a perfect blend of queer femininity and masculinity in a weird little device. So now I collect vintage and new toy knitting machines.

**J.K.** - *I was interested in your "barbed wire" fences, which you were inspired to make after seeing the fences in your neighborhood. Could you talk about pieces such as We Couldn't Get In. We Couldn't Get Out (2006)?*

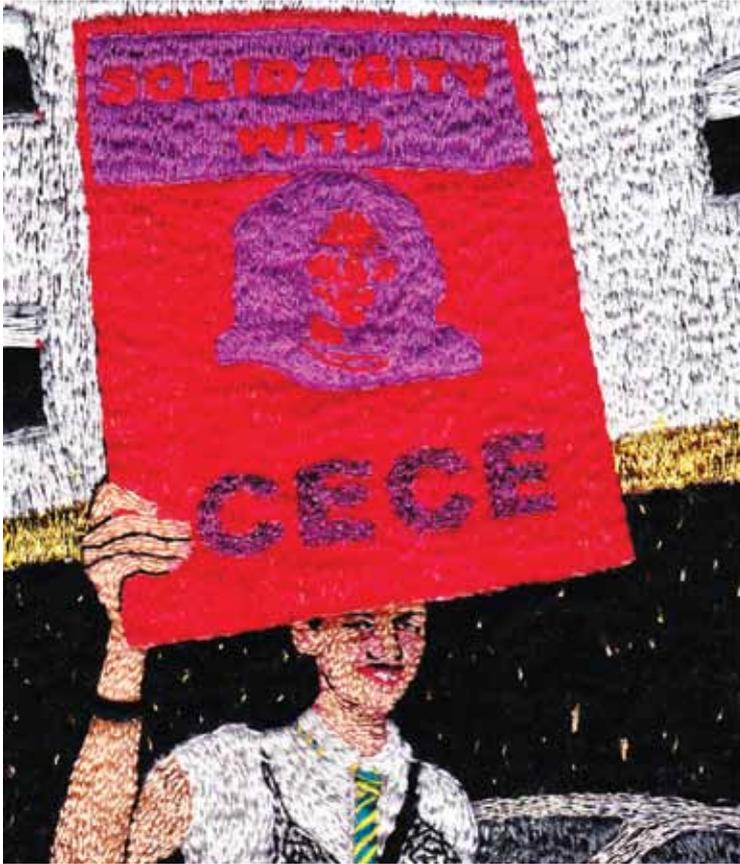
**L.J.R.** - *We Couldn't Get In. We Couldn't Get Out* was the first piece in the series of fences that I made on toy knitting machines for my MFA at CCA. The entire piece is hand-woven—there's not a fence inside the knitting. When I made the fence series I was living in San Francisco and there was a lot of barbed-wire and cyclone fence in the city, and seeing them every day was part of the inspiration. The weave of the fence is very similar to a knitted stitch, so I was viewing a fence as a textile. In the mid-2000s, immigration debates were raging (as they still are), and personally I was thinking about identities and barriers. I was researching how fences and walls were universal objects for obtaining and maintaining control and power. Fences are both object and metaphor, and sometimes the

line between the two is blurry. I was personally grappling with the experience of my last two years of high school that were spent at a 'therapeutic' boarding school for troubled teens. Though there was not a barbed wire and cyclone fence at my high school, as a 25 year old I was working through the intense confinement and measures of control that were enforced on me in my late teens. Intertwined with the physical isolation of my 'therapeutic' boarding school experience were hetero-normative coercion and demands that were forced upon my burgeoning sexuality and gender. The fences series is a broad exploration of politics and power but also a personal reclamation.

**J.K.** - *Many of your pieces deal with the idea of identity, particularly non-normative identities. Could you discuss a series such as The Radical and the Resilient in terms of the decisions that you made and the medium that you used (embroidery)?*

**L.J.R.** - The tentatively titled, *The Radical and the Resilient*, is an ongoing project where I am embroidering portraits of my friends and people that I am in community with. The portraits are very small and are based off photographs that I have taken with a camera phone or snapshot camera on the street or in friends' homes. I don't really pose people because I am a shy photographer, and most of the photographs are taken on the fly. All of the portraits have queer signifiers in them—sometimes subtle or sometimes very overt. I started making the portraits when I didn't have a studio. The embroideries are small enough that I can literally work on them wherever I go. Much of the stitching is done when I am riding the subway or listening to a lecture or at a social gathering. I never anticipated I would make portraiture or small work, but I think of all the work I have created I feel most attached to these pieces. I only use a single strand of thread when I embroider, so the pieces take a long time to make. I bring them wherever I go and, of course, they're pictures of my friends, so in a weird way it's like having someone with me all the time. Using embroidery to make these portraits is similar to a Polaroid exposure where the pictures appear slowly over time. My images take about two months to make if I am working fairly diligently on them. I feel very lucky to be in community with so many people who inspire, support and challenge me. Everyone that I have stitched so far has a creative practice and is engaged with social justice and queer and trans issues.

**J.K.** - *I was very moved by the piece that you did on AIDS and HIV, which has also fallen into a post-crisis period. Why do*



*Portrait of Deb 1988-1997*, 2013, (work-in-progress), single-strand embroidery on cotton. Courtesy of the artist.

*Free CeCe*, 2012, *From The Radical and the Resilient* (2011-ongoing), single-strand cotton-on-cotton, 4" x 6". Courtesy of the artist.

you find this topic of continued importance to a young and not so young gender-queer community? Can you speak about *The Queer Houses of Brooklyn*? Do you consider any other pieces to address this issue, either directly or indirectly? In what way has AIDS art activism changed since the mid-1980s?

L.J.R. - It's funny, in answering your questions I had this memory back from when I was a teenager and was just coming out to myself. I left home when I was 13 and went to an all-girls boarding school on the East Coast (I was later kicked out of the school). On the weekends we could sign up for various field trips. One of the excursions offered was a trip to Washington, D.C., to see the AIDS quilt laid out in its entirety for the last time. I think I was 14 or 15 years old, so it would have been in 1994 or 1995. I was also just getting sex-ed in school, and of course none of it made sense to me because I was such a queer and the entire curriculum was hetero-normative. I was the only kid on the trip to go see the AIDS quilt. I remember getting there and just feeling like I had the wind knocked out of me, partially because it was so huge, and I realized the amount of people that had passed away was incomprehensible, but also that there was overt queerness expressed—and perhaps that was the first time I had encountered the militancy expressed on some of the panels and the pink triangles and the rainbows and labryses. I bought a T-shirt, and this was my first piece of queer ephemera—so immediately my own burgeoning queerness was associated with the AIDS crisis. Of course, I now look back at that encounter with the quilt and consider the art and activism I do and just shake my head at how powerful that experience was.

*The Queer Houses of Brooklyn in the Three Towns of Breukelen, Boswyck, and Midwout During the 41st Year of the Stonewall Era* was based on a drawing by my friend and collaborator Daniel Rosza Lang/Levitsky. She drew the map for the occasion of the first Queer House Field Day, an event organized by the QuoRum Collective where collective queer houses in Brooklyn 'competed'

against each other in queer sports in the summer of 2010 in Prospect Park (for instance the condom toss and walk-offs). Daniel's map was at once an archival document and a drawing that tangibly marked a loose community of artists and activists that were not only co-existing, but collaborating, and loving, and creating, and fucking, and being family to one another. I think for many of us there is the realization that we are able to create chosen family and support structures because of some of the care systems that came into play at the height of the AIDS crisis. And, of course, there are folks that are positive and living with the virus—so it's in our lives—I don't think we are post-crisis by any means.

I am currently involved with Visual AIDS, which is an organization that archives the work of artists that died of AIDS or are HIV positive and produces exhibitions that relate to AIDS and HIV. Visual AIDS also works with younger artists like me who are making work about the crisis and queer life. They are very invested in bringing people together to talk about the many facets of the crisis. I feel like I've gotten this whole education about queer history in New York from their events that have influenced not only how I think about being queer, but how I think about global politics. I can't remark on how AIDS activism has changed since the 1980s as I was born in 1980, but I can say that every week in New York there is some film or discussion or protest or show or performance that is AIDS related. It seems like there are many ways of being an activist right now or ways to get involved.

Right now I'm working on *Portrait of Deb* (1988-1997?), which is an embroidered collage of an archive of radical queer and HIV/AIDS ephemera that was passed down to me by a friend who was very active in ACT UP and Women's Health Action and Mobilization (WHAM!) during the late 1980s to mid-1990s. There are about 200 buttons and stickers that belonged to her that I am stitching. I love that it shows the crossovers between feminist, lesbian and AIDS activism. ■