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SPIN ARTISTS, AND HOW THE INTERNET FUELS THE ART YARN MOVEMENT

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This presentation's title is inherently problematic, in part because of the inclusion of the word "Internet." It's just too big. Every time I considered this topic, it got more unwieldy. For that reason, this paper focuses on several individual yarn artists, and we will view the Internet and its influence through them, with the knowledge that it's all much, much *more* than I can possibly address here. I've chosen these particular artists because they make extraordinary yarn, and move the medium forward, as well as maintaining an active presence online.



Figure 1. Karen Barnaby; Pisaster, detail, 2009. © Karen Barnaby

The other problematic term is the "art yarn movement." This is the shortest way to say what I'm talking about, and I believe it can be understood by a wide audience to refer to the practice of spinning unconventional, innovative yarn, a practice that has been gaining in popularity steadily for several years. However, many people avoid the term "art yarn" altogether, since yarn is yarn and art is art, and sometimes yarn is art, but not every "art yarn" is art.... (Fig. 1)

While avoiding the whole "what is art?" debate, I do need to explain the current colloquial meaning of the phrase "art yarn." There are a number of spinning techniques that evolved from "mistakes": when yarn is not smooth, even, and perfectly balanced, specific factors contribute, and experimenting with those factors of error leads to interesting, deliberately re-engineered yarn. When spinners learn and use these techniques, the yarn is called "art yarn," as opposed to laceweight yarn or worsted weight yarn, or just "yarn." But that's not the topic of this paper. This paper looks at yarn-as-art, or artists who are using spinning as their medium, creating yarn that somehow goes beyond itself, and how these artists find and engage with one another online. In a sense, I'm attempting to "curate a show" that will illustrate the wealth of innovation, expression, and potential in handspun yarn (as seen on the internet.)

To understand the prevalence of art yarn spinning online, and the relationship between the Internet and spinning, it's necessary to retrace some steps. Unbeknownst to those who don't knit, the so-called blogosphere has been crowded with knitting blogs for years. More knitblog readers means more new knitting blogs, and more related-topic blogs and readers, including handspunners. In the last few years, this loose network of online fiber people has acquired a concrete and binding web

through Ravelry.com. Ravelry combines yarn-centric social networking with well-designed and user-friendly organizational systems for logging one's own projects and searching information. The Ravelry community has steadily grown to over a million members, and countless special-interest groups have sprung up among "Ravelers."



Figure 2. Cindy Cole, *HR PuffnStuf*, 2009. © Cindy Cole

This is the realm in which we find our art yarn spinners, through, of course, the Novelty and Art Yarn Spinners group. In the group forum discussions, members can share their work, ask questions, suggest themes, respond to each other's efforts, and generally get to know one another. The variety of over 1500 members makes for a rich, interactive arena for creative innovation. (Fig.2)

Several of the spinners featured in this paper have a presence elsewhere online, apart from Ravelry, and in fact the online community of art spinners pre-dates Ravelry by several years. Whereas Ravelry was launched in Jan. 2007, websites such as Lexi Boeger's blog Pluckyfluff, the Fiber Friday group on Live Journal, and the Yarn Museum (Linda Scharf's brainchild) were active in 2005 & 6 or even earlier. The purpose of each of these online ventures is simple: to promote the making and sharing of interesting yarn, and to encourage thoughtful dialogue about spinning.

Chris Anderson, curator of TED talks, calls the Internet phenomenon of improvement through group sharing "crowd accelerated innovation." The bigger the group exposed to examples of work, the more potential innovators, while the rest of the crowd provides "the ecosystem from which innovation emerges." The increase in "light," or attention given to outstanding work, causes an increase in "desire," or the motivation to innovate, thus growing the whole scene, whatever the medium may be.¹ This idea is echoed by Jacey Boggs, aka Insubordiknit, a yarn artist and spinning teacher who created the instructional DVD *Sit & Spin*. Jacey was asked why she would give away all the secrets of her trade in her DVD. She replies, "When we share all of our secrets, that's when we start inventing new ones and the new generation of innovation starts....The more people know, the more we share and learn from each other, the more we push each other to create new and truly original things."²

¹ Chris Anderson: *How YouTube is driving Innovation*. Dir. TED talks. Perf. Chris Anderson. TED talks, 14 Sept. 2010. *YouTube*. Web. <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X6Zo53M0lcY>>.

² Boggs, Jacey. "'Sit and Spin' DVD!." Online posting. *Novelty and Art Yarn Spinners*. *Ravelry*. N.P., 29 Jan. 2009. Web. 1 Jan. <<http://www.ravelry.com/discuss/novelty-and-art-yarn-spinners/503014/1-25#5>>.

The Yarn Museum has provided a platform for this kind of motivation through its themed gallery shows, and various groups on Ravelry also challenge spinners to create in response to a theme. Fiber Friday revives the now-defunct Live Journal idea of a new topic each Friday, ranging from the specific to the abstract. You will notice that the photographing of yarn is one more layer of artistry: the presentation of a yarn online is an essential step in this creative exchange. A partner group is Picto Create, which introduces a new image every Monday, eliciting dynamic and impressive interpretations.

The encouragement of innovation is consistent with online yarn veteran Lexi Boeger's approach as well. Her first spinning book, *Handspun Revolution* (2005), was a "set of suggestions, a launching point," with large photos of yarns and brief technical explanations. The text urges spinners to be open to anything: "It is when the yarn diverges from your intentions that discovery and innovation happen."³

Lexi (aka Pluckyfluff) is a visual artist who uses yarn "as a medium to convey an idea," and is constantly testing the boundaries of possibility in spinning. But she is not a lone artist. Lexi values and fosters community, and everything she does or makes or writes encourages others to join the "revolution." Much of her 2008 book *Intertwined* is an exhortation: "Learning to extract what is rich, interesting and meaningful from your world and from yourself, and channeling that into your spinning, will make your yarns creative and engaging."⁴ Her blog from the same time period includes intense reflection on creativity:

"Being creative means bringing what is inside of you, out.

The purpose of being creative isn't about the product at all. Focusing on the product only makes people shy away from their creativity because they're worried that what they make won't measure up. Which is terrible news for our culture, because being creative is the process of being yourself and presenting your truthful perspective to the world. If everyone got comfortable with being creative, then they would become comfortable presenting their true perspective to others, and get used to facing the honest perspectives of others. We could all be a little more honest."⁵

Another giant of the Internet spinning community is Linda Scharf or stoneleafmoon. Linda has been a prolific participant in all the online groups, past and present, and she maintains her own blog, website, and the Yarn Museum, in addition to teaching and conducting independent textile research and collection. As a teacher and online spinning mentor, Linda urges spinners to break away from the restrictive, rule-following mentality, directing them instead toward play. Her blog post from October, 2009 elaborates on play (Fig. 3):

"The very word "spinning" embodies fun, doesn't it? Add whorl/whirl, and the idea is magnified further. So playing and games, it would seem, are central to spinning. In making yarns off the beaten path, play is a good place to start.

...some suggestions:

1. Release preconceptions about what "yarn" is.
2. Let go of ideas about "use", if only temporarily.
3. Adopt an exploratory mode/attitude. What if I made a yarn that is a self - portrait, a yarn that could take over the world, a yarn that was a poem?

Following your sense of curiosity and creative hunches, you will keep your spinning heart (and

³ Boeger, Lexi. *Pluckyfluff: Handspun Revolution*. California: Pluckyfluff Publishing. 2005. P. 3

⁴ Boeger. *Intertwined*. Beverly, MA: Quarry Books, 2008. p.13

⁵ Boeger. "Spring Flood! This is a RANT." Blog. *PluckyfluffLive Journal*. *Live Journal*. N.P., 13 Feb 2008. Web. <<http://pluckyfluff1.livejournal.com/34549.html>>

spinning as an art) alive and you will grace the world with expressions of your time on earth.”⁶



Figure 3, left. Linda Scharf; 2009. ©Linda Scharf

Figure 4, right. Cindy Cole, *Golden Grumbles* (a yarn story), 2009. ©Cindy Cole

Cindy Cole, or Studiolo, is a spinner, writer, crochet artist, clock and toymaker, and the mother of many creative groups on Ravelry and elsewhere. She began the Novelty and Art Yarn Spinners, Fiber Friday and Picto Create groups, in addition to **nine** other Ravelry groups and the Spin in Public website, all devoted to stirring up interchange among artists. Cindy throws boundless energy into her work and makes her enthusiasm contagious through a flurry of online activity. Cindy takes inspiration from the entire scope of art and pop culture. The variety and breadth of Cindy’s interests opens up a wide playing field for her fellow spinners, feeding back into fiber work and stimulating new ways of thinking.

“The most inspiring part of spinning for me is that I can let it be an avenue for experience. What I mean...is that I can watch a movie, see a painting, smell something sweet, hear wonderful music - and be able to translate by spinning yarn what that experience meant to me. I tend to use a lot of external factors in creating my yarns. I am really inspired by all sensory things in life, namely nature, media, the ocean, and found objects and I like taking these things and using them as themes for my yarns. In the end I am left with something that is not only beautiful but has a one-of-a-kind look and meaning to me. It is a placemaker for that moment in my life.”⁷ (Fig. 4)

Although a fiber artist with formal art training for years prior to spinning, Laura Mayotte had only ever spun pure wool, uniform conventional yarn until she encountered Lexi’s *Intertwined* book and the spinning groups on Ravelry:

“Ravelry was the beginning of another journey and new direction. Soon after joining Ravelry, I found the Fiber Friday spinning group. Experimentation without fear, self-discovery, no boundaries, personal challenge, metaphors, motivation, relationships, friends, community, encouragement, and fulfillment all reside here. This is what I have wanted from spinning all my life.”⁸

⁶ Scharf, Linda. “Play.” Blog. *Stoneleafmoon*. *Blogspot.com*. Blogger. 28 Oct. 2009. Web. <http://stoneleafmoon.blogspot.com/2009_10_01_archive.html>

⁷ Private written interview, 2009.

⁸ Private written interview, 2010.

Laura produces complex works in response to the themes, often spending days preparing her materials and composing her ideas. She also writes an artist's statement for each piece, and uses the photo website Flickr.com as her gallery or blog. In response to the Queens of England theme, Laura spun a yarn Lady Jane Grey, who was made queen at the age of 16, but promptly beheaded for her refusal to convert from Catholicism. (Fig. 5) Laura explains, "I made a lot of yardage because I imagined her knowing and waiting for the axe must have felt like an eternity. I was left haunted by the images of her wearing the blindfold, her long hair swept out of the way....I'm not sure why this topic has held my attention, but sometimes taking a look at sad dark history can make us more appreciative of the light and freedom we enjoy now."⁹



Figure 5, left. Laura Mayotte, *Lady Jane Grey*, 2009. © Laura Mayotte
Figure 6, right. Karen Barnaby, *Grape Hyacinth*, 2008. © Karen Barnaby

Karen Barnaby did not consider herself a visual artist before she began spinning (which is surprising, when you see her responses to the group challenges,) but she says that "something just clicked really deeply" when she started to work with fiber. As an executive chef, her creative medium was cooking, and she draws an analogy with spinning:

"I've been in the food business for a little over 30 years and a lot of the time I'll approach the crafting of a yarn in the same way that I'll cook a dish. Usually I start with main ingredients, then layers of flavor in the forms of herbs, spices and liquids. Translated into fiber, I can use a thought, picture or concept as a main ingredient and then start adding dimensions of flavor, using whatever I think will taste good.

When I'm on a good spin, I'll realize that I've been repeating the same phrase or thinking the same thought over and over again as I'm spinning."¹⁰ (Fig. 6)

Karen's spinning connects her with her family history: both grandmothers talked to her about spinning, in Quebec and Nova Scotia. She is on a "quest to have the same depth of understanding of

⁹ Mayotte, Laura. "Lady Jane Grey." Online posting. *Indigonightowl's Photostream*. Flickr. 16 Sept. 2009. Web. <<http://www.flickr.com/photos/indigonightowl/sets/72157622392174858/>>.

¹⁰ Private written interview, 2009.

fiber” that she has with cooking, and pursues traditional skills and techniques in order to appreciate the nature of fiber and spinning.

Each of these artists has been individually motivated to extend herself and expand her spinning through the online community, and at the same time the online interaction strengthens the sense of connectedness and communal effort in furthering this art form. The global interconnection of the spinning community was recently and dramatically embodied by Lexi Boeger’s Handspun Revolution gallery show, held in Galleri Zink, Lillehammer, Norway, in May of this year. When Lexi was offered the one-woman show, she conceived of a grand, global scheme to involve as many people as possible: a giant skein of yarn, made of handspun from anyone willing to contribute. The call went out, online of course, and the yarns started arriving at Lexi’s studio in California. Spinners responded from all over the world, and the skein was 10.5 miles long and weighed about 70 lbs.

From her blog post “The Revolution is Here”:

“Spinners Unite! There’s a lot of us. We’ve been at this for awhile. It’s time to show the rest of the world what we’re talking about.

And what are we talking about? What is the thing we are tracking down? That fine line. The line between Art and Craft. Or maybe it’s the net cast around them both. Spinners don’t hold one above the other. Spinners inherently seek balance. When art and craft blend seamlessly together you have integrity and beauty. We know this. But outside of the fiber community not many people understand what all the fuss is about. Until now that is....

Galleri ZINK will be hosting this yarn-only, yarn-as-art, yarn/art show. People go to art shows to have their perceptions challenged. To learn new things. To be surprised. To be engaged.

...spinning right now has entered an active phase so it’s not only a craft but it’s a movement. Spinners are moving the craft, pushing its boundaries, changing its form as well as its purpose and this is happening because we’re all doing it together. Building on each others’ momentum. And so it seems like this gallery show should reflect the current state of spinning. And that means you people.”¹¹

Each spinner sent in a statement about spinning, and these were collaged onto one wall of the gallery. Some skeins made by Lexi and others were displayed individually, and the second largest skein was spun by Lexi using a 5-foot-long cement-mixer-mounted spindle. (Fig. 7)



Figure 7. Giant skein of yarn, Lexi Boeger’s “Handspun Revolution” show at Galleri Zink, Lillehammer, Norway, 2010. © Silja Hohljem

¹¹ Boeger, Lexi. "The Revolution is Here." Blog. *Pluckyfluff1 Live Journal*. *Live Journal*. N.P., 17 Dec. 2009. Web. <<http://pluckyfluff1.livejournal.com/70487.html>>.

This show, and Lexi's attitude, exemplifies the way in which artists who spin are strongly involved, connected, and influenced by each other, even if they are outrageously individual in their creative work. The traditional spinner and the innovative spinner rely on one another to advance the medium, and we all rely on the Internet to promote these interactions and keep our work not only viable but visible. I ended my statement for the Lillehammer show with "We are all in this together," and that is the message that is reinforced again and again, every time a new skein is spun, photographed, and posted. (Fig. 8)



Figure 8. Giant skein of yarn – detail, Lexi Boeger's "Handspun Revolution" show at Galleri Zink, Lillehammer, Norway, 2010. © Silja Hohljem

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