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Leininger, Maggie, "ARTivention: Utilizing Fiber Art For Activist Engagement" (2012). *Textile Society of America Symposium Proceedings*. 707.

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ARTivention: Utilizing Fiber Art For Activist Engagement

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ARTivention was created in direct response to my interest in social practice and art activism. In 2004, I read *The Citizen Artist* edited by Linda Frye Burnham and Steven Durland. The book affirmed my inherent belief of art's capacity to simultaneously critique and give voice to cultural and social practices. Trained within the art school paradigm, I struggled with reconciling the production of art for a market driven system of purchase and collection and my own interest as an artist to communicate directly to a wide variety of populations that exist outside this system. So, as I struggled to make work that was both meaningful to me and relational to a broader audience, I began searching for ways to combine my formal art skills with socially engaged methods of practice.

Fast forward to 2008. By this time I had gained professional experiences as an arts administrator recruiting teens for a Chicago after school visual art program, an artist in residence for a juvenile detention center, an artist in residence at a children's hospital, and a faculty member at Roosevelt University. Collectively, these experiences provided opportunities for me to directly collaborate with evolving populations, work within



Figure 1, above. Figure 2, right.



constrained situations and develop methods of using a variety of media including fiber/textile processes to produce meaningful work to a broader scope beyond that of the individual artist. *Figure 1 & 2* depicts a project I did with Snow City Arts where I engaged with over 30 pediatric patients to weave a tapestry of rhythms observed within the hospital environment. Collaborating with Jamie Topper, a musician in residence, we recorded songs created by the patients that emanated from speakers placed behind the 7-foot long tapestry.

Infused with the excitement produced by such projects as the one just viewed, I became eager to move forward in developing an independent social practice that further embraced multi-media and incorporated actions that would directly impact, however minimal, social and political issues. At the time, I was a faculty member at Roosevelt University teaching among a predominantly Muslim population in suburban Chicago. I was increasingly aware of the affect that the media had upon our national understanding of Islam and the direct connotation it was developing with words like “insurgency”, “extremism” or “Jihadism”. According to the local papers, one might glean that all Muslims are armed and dangerous and a direct threat to our national security—a nation that was

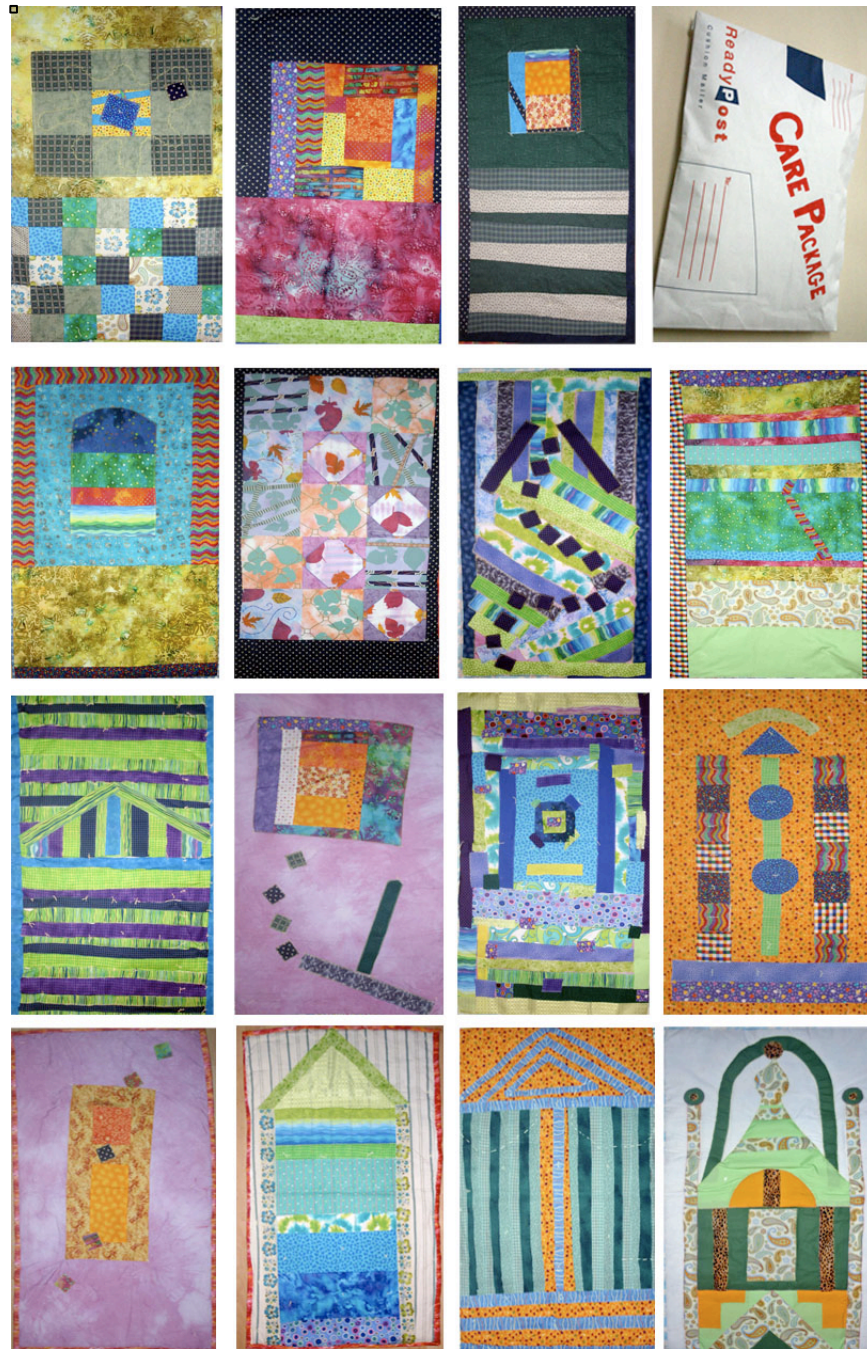


Figure 3. Care Packages.

predominantly not Muslim. I saw students in my classes struggle with maintaining a homogenous presence as they attempted to blend in through dress, pop culture conversations and social actions. At the same time, human rights issues regarding Guantanamo detainees were still under debate. In particular, the case of 17 Uighur detainees were most compelling as they seemed to exist in true limbo where a return to their home country would most likely be fatal. Articles I read about their situation documented daily habits and the solace provided by regular prayer. The prayer mat therefore became the object and symbol of connection between the detainees and the public.

I brought this project to the attention of my Roosevelt students. As a non-Muslim, I was very aware of the complicated issues about national, political, religious and gendered identity that I could not directly address as a white, Christian, middle-class, educated woman. I also feared increased tensions within the classroom during these open studio sessions. But instead, what occurred was such a transformational moment that it continues to fuel my passion for social engagement. I began by presenting a news article to the students that included a description of how inmates were sustained by their religious practice of daily prayer. Then, I outlined the project's framework to the students: to complete 17 prayer mats, submit letters of protest to the Department of Defense, and to mail the prayer mats to the detainees by the end of the Bush presidential term.

Titled *Care Packages*, the 17 prayer mats incorporated a variety of quilting techniques as all participants had some familiarity with this medium. Students were instructed to gather into groups in order to work together to complete a quilt top. After working for a bit, I circulated throughout the room. Muslim students began to immediately open up and tell personal stories of how they felt in response to the media's representation of them as a collective group. They related that projects such as this were very important in educating the general public about religious symbolism, prayer practices and that not all Muslims were Jihadist uni-bombers. Muslim students also related stories to non-Muslims of social practices that differed such as arranged marriages. Discussions among the young women about the benefits of arranged and non-arranged marriages ensued. Additional topics of discussion among students included locations of mosques in the vicinity, who attended and how they worshipped. The once tension filled classroom became a lively environment of exchange as students continued constructing the prayer mats.

On January 17, 2009, I mailed all 17 prayer mats (*figure 3*) to the address provided by the U.S. government that of course turned out to be a ghost address. Upon their return, I resent them to a non-profit organization that makes regular trips to visit the detainees and approximately one month later I received confirmation that the packages did indeed make it to the detention center. As a footnote, all Uighur detainees have finally been relocated as of April 20, 2012 with the remaining two resettling in El Salvador. Earlier resettlements include Switzerland, Palau, Bermuda, and Albania most of which occurred in 2009.¹

The second project undertaken by ARTivention was *Commune-ique*. Inspired by the act of communication that occurred with *Care Packages*, I wanted to develop a collaboration that again directly engaged a marginalized population in a way that invited dialogue. For this project, I collaborated with Roosevelt University and the School of the Art Institute, La Casa Norte and Lincoln Park Community Services in constructing a shelter made from hand-felted wool. Workshops (*Figure 4*)

¹ *The Jurist*: <http://jurist.org/paperchase/2012/04/uighur-guantanamo-detainees-released-to-el-salvador.php>



Figure 4. Commune-ique; workshops inviting interaction between homeless youth and adults, college students and the general public.

were held at locations that invited interaction between homeless youth and adults, college students and the general public. Again, the collaborative art making session functioned as the bridge between two diverse populations resulting in amazing moments of exchange. Students gained a greater understanding of the complications of those who struggle with maintaining stable living situations and clients were able to engage in a positive communal participatory event. Once the felting sessions were completed, the shelter was constructed and was placed throughout the city of Chicago for durational periods of time (*group figure 5*). Both my assistant and I shared the responsibility of residing in the space and inviting the public to engage in conversation. Installed in over 8 locations throughout the city, *Commune-ique* became a site-specific demarcation of dialogue, exchange and symbol of temporary shelter.

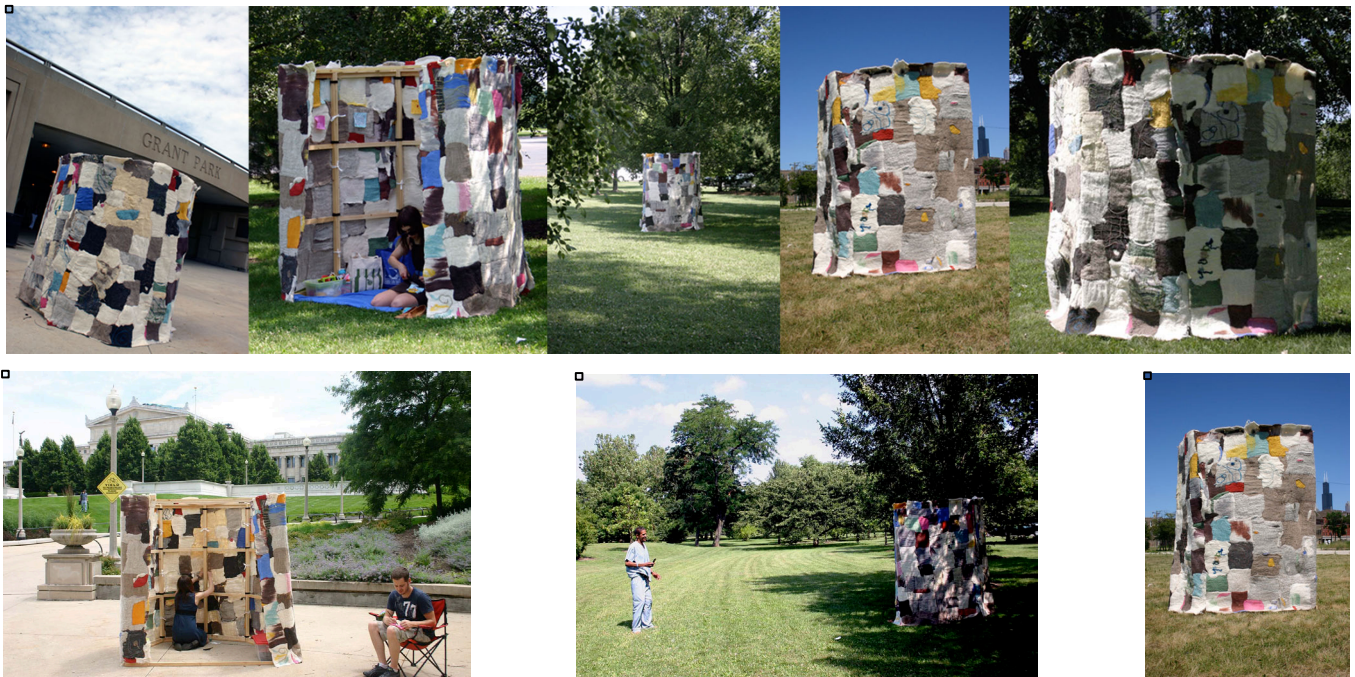


Figure 5. Commune-ique; felt shelters installed throughout Chicago.



Figure 6. Found Objects.



Figures 7 & 8. Found Objects collaboration.

Further inspired by the issues that arose from conversations with students, clients and administrators from both La Casa Norte and LPCS, the issues surrounding homelessness dominated my thoughts. Having personally experienced inadequate housing situations throughout childhood, I began contemplating the affects of marginal living situations upon a community. In addition, the country was entering a devastating economic downturn resulting from the home loan lending practices. All of a sudden, entire neighborhoods began to see and feel the affects of families forced to leave homes due to job loss and foreclosure. What once was a problem for only a stereotypical fringe population often plagued with mental and addiction issues became the problem of an entire nation. Motivated by these issues, *Found Objects* evolved (figure 6). Collaborating with knitters across the country and the National Coalition for the Homeless, 365 miniature knitted sweaters were placed in public places in almost every state (figure 7). Each placement was accompanied with a tag that asked the finder to make a monetary donation to the National Coalition for the Homeless and an image of each placement was posted onto a blog that highlighted the project (figure 8). *Found Objects* provided the opportunity to raise awareness and funds for the organization in addition to questioning the role that art plays in contemporary society. The knitted miniature sweater was on the one hand irresistibly attractive and on the other hand

symbolized the need for protection and warmth. By utilizing a knitting tradition often imbued with activism, *Found Objects* also created a bridge between art, activism and craft. The project was completed on December 31, 2011 and raised over \$500 of donations that directly referenced *Found Objects*.

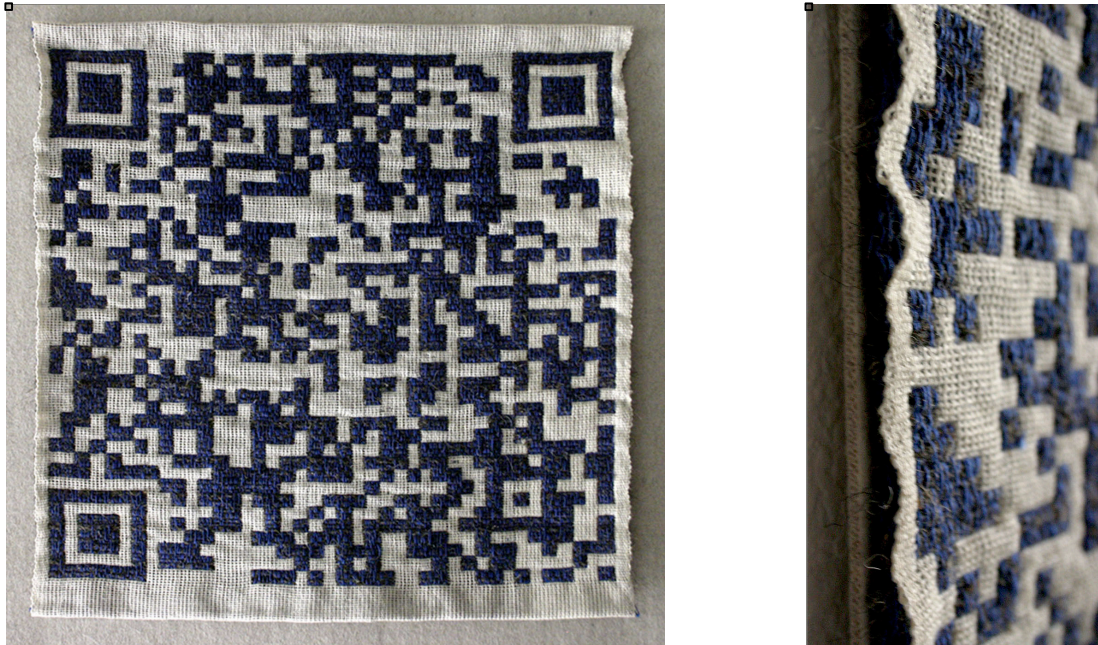


Figure 9. Visual Strata-sphere.

The next two projects presented while not directly related to ARTivention in that an activist and artistic action is combined, directly inform the fourth upcoming ARTivention project. Simultaneous to the production of *Found Objects*, I began working on *Visual Strata-sphere* (figure 9.) This project consists of 21 hand-woven quick response codes that when scanned with a smart phone leads the viewer to an interactive web site. For example, one of the hand woven codes will document the placement of work entitled *Tracing the Peripheries* (figure 10) that consists of over 1500 crocheted daises mounted onto 200+ feet of lace. The textile in this case, becomes a multi-purpose object that actively identifies site, boundary, connection and division as it is installed at various sites throughout the country including the National Mall in D.C. Remaining codes explore the interconnections between networks, systems, identities and cloth production.

Initially, I was intrigued with the textual nature of the code. Like a textile, it is saying something, but in this case it needs to be decoded using a digital device. Cloth has long functioned as an imbedded source of identity carrying aesthetic and historical information from one region to another through intricate and complex trade systems spanning the history of time. Furthermore, the woven design references the early American Colonial coverlet thus functioning as a connection between the present and the past. Not only are the codes woven with a traditional technique of double weave pick up, but they are also woven with hand spun naturally dyed weft for the darker cloth. By incorporating fibers that are locally sourced and produced, I am instilling site-specificity that is similar to the methods behind the production of the colonial coverlets. These iconic textiles were woven by displaced weavers from the Industrial Revolution upon their immigration to the colonies in search for meaningful skilled employment. The weavers were itinerant workers using materials that were often created locally by townspeople who were

bringing their goods to the weaver where they would be transformed into beautiful functional products. The patterns, however, in which the textiles were woven often were derivative of the weavers' home country. In this manner, the coverlet became the conduit between one culture and another.

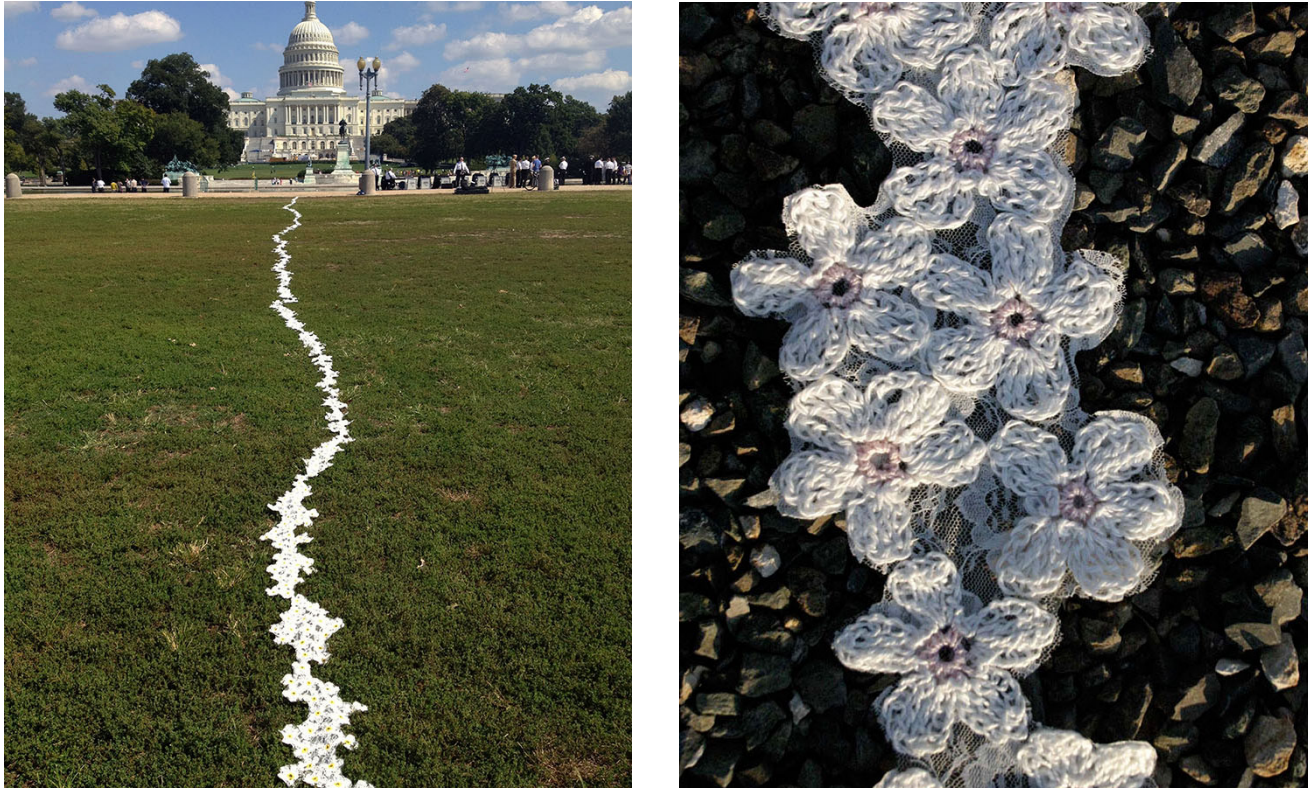


Figure 10. Tracing the Peripheries.

While working on *Visual Strata-sphere*, I was awarded a public interactive art commission from Scottsdale Public Art. The commission not only provided me the funds necessary to obtain a spinning wheel, fibers, natural dyes and other equipment, but also ended up fuelling my interest in the ability for cloth to physically represent a place. The project embodied several components which included walking the 27 mile length of Scottsdale Road in search for pedestrian interaction, visual imagery and an experienced geography; spinning yarn at various public events and storefront spaces; and the production of a banner constructed from hand spun naturally dyed cotton and hand spun wool that read *This Much I Know to Be True* (figure 11).

Needless to say, as I began working on mastering the production and incorporation of hand spun naturally dyed yarns, issues of labor practices, sustainability, production and consumption became of foremost interest. Additional issues regarding the ethnographic nature of cloth also arose. While other cultures exude a rich history of textile wealth, the United States lacks this cultural foundation. In part, this is due to the nature of our relatively young country that is composed of shifting immigrant populations, pop cultural ideologies, and a consumer driven post-industrial economy. I began to wonder what are our versions of the Japanese obi or kimono, African kente cloth, Guatemalan huipils, or the Mexican rebozo shawl. It seems that while there are many individual, cultural and micro-economy producers of cloth, they are often produced for specific niche markets or familial occasions but not

readily available or affordable to a wider national audience. And none are produced for the explicit purpose of encompassing a regional or national aesthetic flavor.

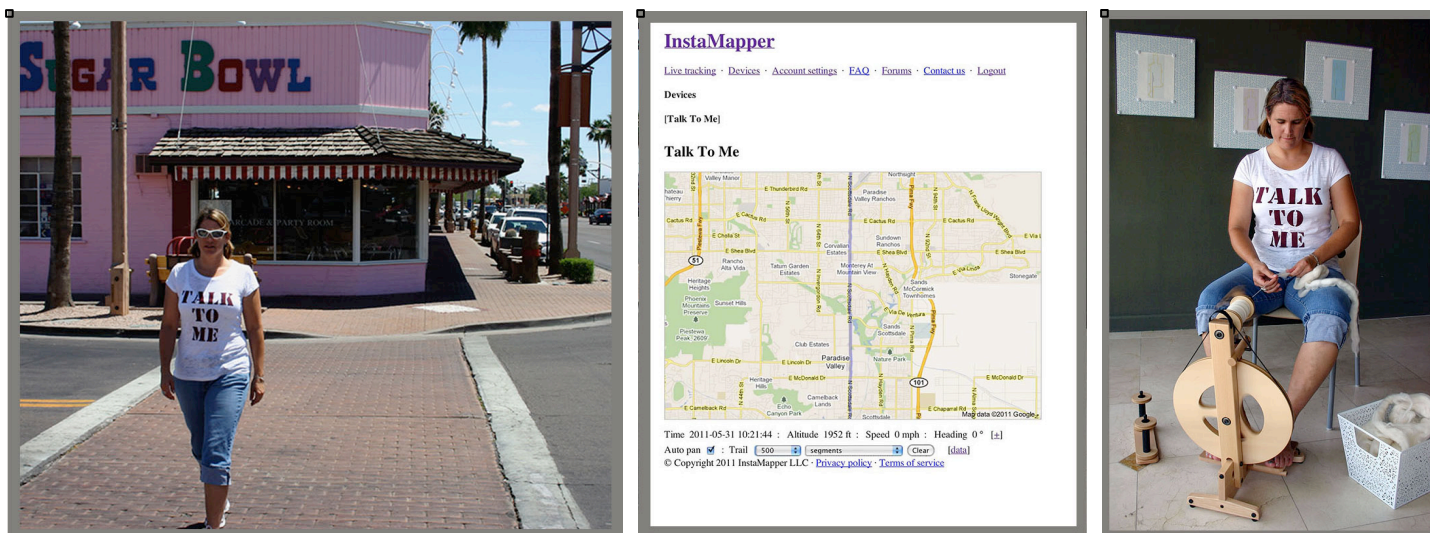


Figure 11. This Much I Know to Be True.

Hence, *Industrious Anarchy* came into being (figure 12). While listening to an article about the NATO summit in Chicago in May of 2012, the current definition of anarchy was discussed. The FBI now

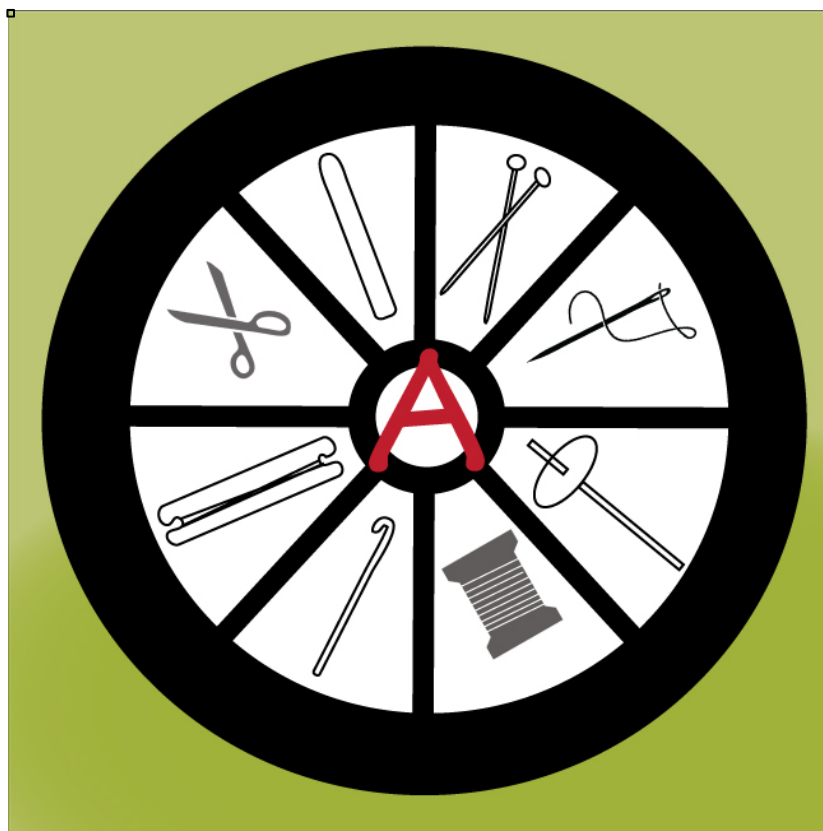


Figure 12. Industrious Anarchy.

defines the term to include any action taken against a state, government or *corporate identity is illegal and a threat to our national security*. Let's just pause here. So, now, corporations have the protection of Homeland Security in enforcement of any action taken against them. But, what if I don't want to buy a pair of homogenous socks from Wal-Mart, which by the way, contributes significantly to the 1 billion pairs of socks that are currently imported from China on a yearly basis? What if I want to take action against corporate structure by not participating in consumption of goods that are most likely not ecologically sourced or produced within the confines of fair labor practices and currency exchanges? What if my action to design and make my own socks is therefore an action taken against the corporation, i.e. Wal-Mart? Familiar with the work of Cat Maza and *microRevolution*, I wanted to come up with a project that would not only increase awareness regarding fair labor practices and corporate identity but would further take action against corporate identities by responsibly sourcing out ecologically sustainable materials, promote artistic and individual identity and provide a method in which the cultural consumer would be able to have a choice in how they wanted to contribute their monetary exchange.

One of the first actions completed within *Industrious Anarchy* will be *WeEconomy*. Consisting of 50 pairs of socks knitted from fibers from each of the states and knitters around the country, the socks will not only be produced by responsibly sustainable materials, but will also be designed in a manner that reflects the place that each sock represents. The second work that will be included is titled *Yarn Forward* referencing a specific trade practice where textiles produced within North and South America can maintain a duty free status to encourage movement of raw materials and affordable labor markets in order to compete with other regions. Hand woven cloth woven on a portable 24 harness dobbie loom will be used to create work that explores site specificity of its sources and its creative potential. Again, locally sourced materials including fiber and dye plants in addition to direct interaction with the community will provide creative impetus for the creation of a site specific/ethnographically inspired cloth. Through these actions, I hope to make viewers more conscious of the labor behind the production of textiles, the actual cost of the textile goods we import, and the value that textiles still plays in our economic and cultural identity as a nation. In a land of mass-produced disposable goods, *Industrious Anarchy* poses to raise awareness of the power that consumers provide corporations in the vicious cycle of consumption and production. Furthermore, the project aims to not only increase public awareness of the technical skills necessary to construct the items but also the creative artistic mastery necessary to produce a unique individualized item. After all, cloth should express who and what we are and we are all individually unique, not unlike the hand-produced cloth that is full of varied histories, subtle flaws and exquisite beauty.