(S)examensarbete

Cecilia Pfaff

Konstfack University College of Arts, Crafts and Design

Tutors:
Åsa Cederqvist and
Susan Miller

Text Tutor:
Alexandra Falagara

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Preface:

Thank you to all the women in my life who have supported me through this process; to my mother, to my other mother (Susan), to Kara, to Jordan and, of course, to Dolly.

Summary:

(S)examensarbete is a journey through which I have questioned if knitting can be sexy. It begins as a need to occupy my hands and goes on to encompass social media, a feminist view of the body, Dolly Parton, pin-ups, craftivism, interactivity and humor as a mechanism to hide the urge/need to be sexy. Through the journey, I allow myself to rely on the process to carry the project along and that is why so many aspects of the theme are addressed. Eventually, I, as the artist, am present in the final piece to ask the public to share their personal view of knitting and to show my own process and understanding of this traditional technique. I combine social media in the form of Instagram to show one side of the project, a modern, instantly global form of filtered visual communication, with the performative aspect of being present during the exhibit to knit and interact with an irl audience.
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1.1 Background

During my studies at Konstfack, I have attempted to understand why I find knitting so satisfactory. According to my knitting bible, *The Culture of Knitting* by Joanne Turney, “Knitting is both fun and sexy, it is humorous and not particularly threatening.” I have a diplomatic personality and humor is my go-to form of communication so it makes sense that I have a soft spot for a technique with a similar description. To say knitting is sexy on the other hand may raise some questions.

In my years of working with this technique I have come to understand that knitting, as both the verb and the noun, is not viewed as desirable or even a method to create art for that matter. Knitting is considered to be the pastime of elderly women who have nothing better to do and the results from this hobby are neither attractive nor practical. In this definition, there is nothing sexy about it.

So what is sexy? According to the less-than-credible website *Urban Dictionary*, one of the popular definitions of sexy is as follows:

> “An intangible attribute. You need not be model thin nor movie star gorgeous to be sexy. Sexy is the whole package, including that “certain something” that you can’t quite put your finger on.”

I have to say that I agree with this definition. And perhaps knitting can have this “intangible attribute” if displayed in a slightly unconventional way. In my exam project, I have presented textile handcrafts on my body through the lens of social media to see if knitting can in fact be sexy.

1.2 Purpose and Questions

Knitting and humor seem to go hand-in-hand. In *The Culture of Knitting*, Turney introduces today’s knitting as a postmodern technique and goes on to explain that one of the main aspects of postmodernism is the use of humor.

> “Humour arises as a response to the presumed, expected or anticipated; it challenges and distorts what the audience believes they ‘know’. It is also disrespectful, rejecting traditional niceties and etiquette in order to make a challenging and witty statement.”

This is indeed one of the reasons I find using knitting to create art so accessible: knitting has a built-in sense of humor. Humor is a way for people to cross social boundaries and communicate and I aim to use it in my artistic practice to do just that. Art that can communicate with a variety of people has a particular strength, no matter how simple the concept.

In my exam project, I contrast the popular understanding of knitting and crocheting as outdated and undesirable with images of these techniques as youthful, sexual and thereby desirable in modern society. The purpose of this project is to use this humorous clash to invite the viewer into the piece and prompt the question,
“Can knitting be sexy?”

Although I have used different textile handcrafts in the making of the images, the focus of the project is on knitting. I have also chosen to briefly mention knitting as a feminist notion but will concentrate on the aspects of humor and sexiness. The images are all of me because this project has been an exploration of my relation to knitting and the “selfie” culture. The intended viewer of (S)examsarbete is the average adult of any sex living in the same society as me, fed daily by instant imagery and social media.

1.3 Method

I have chosen to use my exam project as a chance to break routines in my artistic practice. In the past I have always worked with long-term projects that have had little room for exploration in the processes. My last gig at Konstfack feels like the ultimate opportunity to redefine my approach to working with art. I have therefore chosen to have a loosely defined overall theme of using my skill and my own body to project sexiness. I have allowed myself to listen to my gut feeling and focus on the process, not the result. This concept has created a tension in my project which has affected the way I work and has influenced my choice in formatting this paper. I have narrated my process honestly and have included segments of my personal diary to enhance the feeling of sincerity.

2.0 Main Text

In December 2015, I began a process that I called Becoming Conscious. It was a step-by-step plan in how I should become more aware of the everyday choices I was making that were ultimately shaping my life. By January I had made some changes, like ending a long-term relationship, being more attentive to how I was dressing myself and brushing my teeth with my left hand. I realized that my “consciousness project” had become more focused on my physical body and I now referred to it as The Conscious Body.

January 2nd, 2016: I’m also glad I’ve started photographing my body once a day, starting January 1, 2016. I hope that I will continue with this process as well for at least the remainder of this project and ultimately every day 2016, 366 days to make a 366 image GIF/video. That would be an awesome project. This project is a lot about the body, my body. It’s about listening to it, dressing it, taking care of it, presenting it, piercing it.

I can directly relate to the thoughts of Roxane Gay in her book Bad Feminist. In her essay Reaching for Catharsis, Gay wonders if body fixation isn’t just part of the human condition since we can never escape our physical forms. I agree that we’re pretty much forced to focus on our bodies and I think becoming aware of this led my process in this direction.
Sitting in a discussion in class one day, I picked up some knitting simply to have something to occupy my hands. After an hour of mindless knitting, I realized what I was doing and decided to make my mindless knitting mindful and knit a pair of pants. These pants sparked new thoughts in my process.

January 20th, 2016: I can’t decide if I should post the picture I took of myself in the knitted pants on Instagram or not. I mean, you can’t see my face, but you see that I’m wearing a red push up bra and a red stringy thong and sky high glittery golden heels. Maybe part of my exam project is about not being afraid of expressing my body. My gut is telling me to do it. [...] I mean, it’s my body. I can do whatever I want with it.

I ended up posting the picture and received positive response from my friends and classmates. I knew that many of the people who had “liked” the image were strong females and other feminists, which I found very relieving. I had been afraid that these wimmin would feel as if I was just posing, using my appearance to get attention and validation, yet they seemed to accept the image. What made this image any different from any other young woman showing skin on Instagram? Was it the fact that they knew me and knew I was doing it ironically? Was it because I was wearing colorful knitted pants, in contrast to the sexy heels and underwear and typical mirror selfie?

After this initial image, I began researching Instagram in particular since it was the channel through which I made my image public. An article by Elizabeth Winkler entitled The Manufactured Life introduces Instagram as “our latest form of deception”. Winkler explains that the posed image controls our day-to-day lives in a sense that unless you post a picture of yourself doing something, it didn’t happen. Other people have to see what you did and acknowledge your action and its presentation by “like”-ing your image. In Notes to Self: The Visual Culture of Selfies in the Age of Social Media, Derek Conrad Murray delves into the “selfie” in particular, and how this form of imagery is dominated by young wimmin. Murray sees this self-expression from two angles. The selfie can be: a way for people with low self-esteem to desperately seek affirmation and/or: a method for wimmin to take control of how they are viewed by a male-dominated world and seize their inner feminine sexuality.

I relate both these texts to my exam project. Initially I simply wanted to show friends and family the work I was doing, as a sort of proof. When I noticed the contrast between the deceptive reality that digital imagery portrays and the honest materiality of the handcrafted subject, I decided to use Instagram as a tool in my process. Instagram is young, modern and sexy. Posting my images to this social media would contextualize them with the images of other undressed young wimmin. Would my images be sexy or would the fact that I was
dressed in witty handcrafts inhibit that feeling?

To explore these thoughts further, I began researching the relationship between wimmin and their appearance. I read the glorious book *The Beauty Myth* by Naomi Wolf. Wolf addresses how the beauty ideal forced on wimmin is the main reason why we are still not treated equally. Wolf discusses “beauty” in relation to a broad span of topics such as violence, religion, porn and eating disorders. On the second page of the book, early in the introduction, Wolf writes in plain text, “What I support in this book is a woman’s right to choose what she wants to look like and what she wants to be.” In the last chapter of the book, Wolf reiterates. “I am not attacking anything that makes women feel good; only what makes us feel bad in the first place. We all like to be desirable and feel beautiful.” Reading this encouraged me to continue exploring my project in relation to my own female body.

The next image I posted to my Instagram account under the theme #xxxjobb was a piece called *Titshirt*. I had taken a picture of my own hands covering my breasts. I printed the hands off on fabric transfer paper and ironed them onto a simple white t-shirt. I photographed myself in the *Titshirt*, again posing somewhat suggestively.

While on the topic of tits, I started relating my project to Dolly Parton.

*January 28th 2016: Dolly’s “look”: “If you’re a star, you owe it to your fans to look like one.” Dolly has this trashy look, she admits it herself. She maxes out, both her image and everything she does. She is extreme. And, her image is one of the reasons she is so well known. But the reason she is respected is because of the person behind the made up disguise. The Beauty Myth talked about how women should be allowed to dress exactly how they like, as long as they are putting on makeup and wearing accentuating clothes because THEY want to and not because of what men want. But that is a blurry line. Because we all desire to be desired. When do you know if you are doing something for yourself or when you are doing it for someone else? We want to be liked and respected. Maybe respect is a big part of it.*

I grew up listening to Dolly Parton’s music and have always seen her as a role model. When I moved to Sweden I realized that not only did I share this view with fellow Swedes but that the majority of those who looked up to Parton were outspoken feminists. How could someone who seems to build her entire image on the desire to fulfill modern body ideals at any cost be idolized by strong, independent wimmin?

After listening to Parton’s autobiography *My Life and Other Unfinished Business* and reading several articles focused on her “hyper-feminine” image,
I began to understand that Dolly Parton has simply used her image to manipulate the patriarchal system to achieve her own goals. She has, both in her musical career and in her star image, used her femininity to challenge social structures within the boundaries of what is accepted (and even desired) of modern wimmin. I saw a trend in my process that I could relate to Parton’s visual expression and wanted to document it, so I dressed myself up in a big curly blonde wig and false eyelashes, stuffed my oversized bra and posed for the camera.

One Sunday afternoon, my friend and I went to Drottninggatan with some sidewalk chalk and started drawing. We drew whatever came to mind and many of those who walked by encouraged us to continue. This activity inspired me to look into art in the public realm. I have always felt that art should be available to everyone and not locked inside a white cube for a select audience. I feel that simply making art outside makes it more approachable to a broader public.

Continuing on the theme of using my femininity to attract attention, I photographed myself knitting, dressed in lingerie with glued on eyelashes and nails. I titled the image *Just a Bit of Casual Knitting*. The purpose of the image was to show the obvious clash between the picture and it’s description. It is apparent that I had put effort into looking appealing to the viewer and was not simply relaxing with a handcraft (as that would have been nearly impossible with those nails). It was also a commentary on how much effort people put into projecting a flawless image of themselves on social media.

The next image in my #xxxjobb series was of my own bottom dressed in a pair of fuzzy knitted underpants. In *You Can Look Butt You Can’t Touch*, I contrasted the homely idea of knitting with the daring, young and sexy and also the pure irrationality of wearing knitted undergarments. In the title I incorporated the flatness of the image and the concept of Instagram itself; that the image could please only the visual sense when textiles are in general associated with tactility and real touch.

Next in line was *Not Your Granny’s Panties*, a matching crocheted bra/panty set. In the title of this image, I played with the terms “granny panty” meaning large, nonssexual wimmin’s underwear and “granny square”, a handcraft technique unmistakably associated with the unthreatening concept of a grandmother. By using both these phrases to contrast the image of the young woman in the skimpy underwear, I created a humorous
As research for this project, I explored a variety of knitting books focused on raunchy DIY patterns with titles such as *Domiknitrix*, *Naughty Needles*, and *Sexy Little Knits*. The modeled images in *Naughty Needles* by Nikol Lohr and the titles of the projects (*Baby Blue Ball Gag, Felt Up, Mrs. Robinson*) all have a jokey feel. It is as if the humor in the pieces make them accessible to people without causing them to feel guilt. Lohr writes, “Usually ball gags are menacing, but knit out of colorful acrylic grandma yarn, they’re downright cute.” Because of the general understanding of knitting as something nostalgic and historically domestic, as soon as knitting is used to create something that doesn’t fit that description, a clash occurs. It is within this postmodern clash that I hope to make my project accessible to a wide audience.

While some of the aforementioned books briefly address why they claim the act and the results of knitting are sexy, the majority of my understanding of textile handcrafts as something above and beyond that of hobbies for elderly wimmin comes from Turney’s *The Culture of Knitting*. Chapter four entitled *Unravelling the Surface: Unhomely Knitting* informs of how knitting and heteronormative sex are directly related.

Knitting as an activity is penetrative; stitches are formed through the penetration of a needle, the tight looping of yarn around it and its withdrawal. The equation of knitting with the sexual act is a theme that permeates the current knitting revival: [...] one can see the irony in knitting as a form of pornography. This new emphasis on knitting as sexually deviant and sexually empowering may well be a consequence of the new feminism, and indeed the ensuing rise of a raunch culture in which women are increasingly reclaiming feminine pastimes whilst expressing their desires in a way which, historically, had been the remit of men.

Although I find the comparison of knitting to penetrative sex pretty far-fetched, I feel that it still has enough weight to be mentioned. The fact that Turney has made this comparison and describes knitting as pornography examines a depth of knitting as an act that grants wimmin the opportunity to feel sexy within themselves. With this skill set, wimmin can express their own desires and the humor that so closely accompanies knitting can be used as an excuse or a justification for these expressions.

For *Fits Like a Glove*, I knitted a pair of gloves with extra-long ribbing and connected thumbs and sewed the gloves together to create a bra. Instead of knitting
two pieces that looked like gloves, I knitted two actual gloves so that hands could in fact fill them, as the title suggests. I feel that this factor adds a kind of flat tactility as the viewer is able to imagine even clearer how placing ones hands in this position (and vis-a-vis on the breasts of the wearer) would feel. I purposely made the gloves to fit my small “feminine” hands as to not make it possible for the average man to fill the gloves. In this way, I cater to the imagination of the heterosexual adult male viewer, but not the actual touch, as with the concept of the image.

If you image search for “sexy knitting” on Google, a selection of pictures of wimmin wearing very little yarn will come up. A few of these images are paintings by Harry Ekman, an American pin-up artist active during the 1960’s. The wimmin in a couple of his paintings are either knitting or unraveling the sweaters they are wearing to reveal the bottom halves of their breasts. I was instantly intrigued by these paintings because they seemed so ridiculous. There was something particular about the images where the models were working with handcrafts that made them feel unrealistic in comparison to the pictures of wimmin on the beach or in the bedroom. I knitted my own cropped sweater and posted an image of myself wearing and simultaneously knitting it (an act which is technically impossible). Perhaps the vintage concept of the pin-up is equivalent to the modern “post-up” on Instagram.

Now it was time to figure out how I wanted to present my project. This is what I said to myself: “I have three goals. I want to use simple contrasts (like sexiness and knitting), I want to use humor in the contrasts to communicate (a way to open up my project to the viewer) and I want it to be simple.” I decided I was going to make a short film of people’s hands scrolling through my Instagram images. This I would present indoors, to show my process as part of the exhibit. Based off of my experience of drawing on a public street with sidewalk chalk, I also decided to knit two sun chairs that I would present outdoors, in between the entrances of Konstfack and the Black Building. The fact that I had chosen to be outdoors felt symbolic. I see the strength in working from within one’s boundaries (i.e. inside the white cube or as Dolly Parton does within a male-dominated industry), yet the desire for my work to feel more relaxed and be exhibited where one might actually find sun chairs felt more relevant. I would be present during periods of the Spring Exhibit, sitting in one of the chairs and inviting others to sit in the chair beside me. The knitted body
of the chairs would be a silhouette of my body. A “selfie stick” would be present to make it easy for the person to photograph themselves and possibly post the image to their own Instagram accounts under the hashtag #123sexy. In this situation, I plan on asking the person sitting in the chair beside me, “Can knitting be sexy?”

Is it a coincidence that every artist that tutors have suggested I look into regarding my work are female? I have chosen to contextualize (S)examensarbete with the work of three acclaimed artists within different fields.

I relate (S)examensarbete to both the sculptural and photographical work of Sarah Lucas. Much of Lucas’ work addresses feminine sexuality with a humoristic tone. She uses banal symbolism, just as melons to symbolize breasts, as well as witty and punning titles of her work. Lucas is also often present in her photographs just as I am, posing for the camera. While my imagery identifies with the selfie culture, Sarah Lucas work caters to a more established art scene.

When I first started using Instagram as a place to project an alter ego, I immediately received obliging comments such as “Cecilia Sherman” and “The Swedish Cindy Sherman”. I can particularly relate to Cindy Sherman’s photography in (S)examensarbete. In an interview with John Waters in the book Cindy Sherman, Sherman discusses why single-handedly producing all of her own portraits came naturally to her. She expresses a desire she has to pretend to be someone else, someone she does not want to actively be around other people. (S)examensarbete is a way for me to explore other personalities through my own image that I wouldn’t dare actively exhibit.

I see similarities between the process behind (S)examensarbete and the French artist Sophie Calle’s work. According to an interview in The Guardian from 2009, Calle did not initially consider her activities to be artwork. She was simply living her life and filling her time. In the beginning of (S)examensarbete, my intentions were purely personal as well. Even after identifying herself as an artist, Calle seems to have very loose boundaries between her role as an artist and her everyday life. I admire this approach to working within the artistic field and hope that my exam project will lead me in this direction.

Beyond the realm of art and solo artists, I must also mention the world of public knitting and the term “craftivism” as a whole. In her book Craftivism: The Art of Craft and Activism, Betsy Greer describes the correlation of craft to activism as such: “The creation of things by hand leads to a better understanding of democracy, because it reminds us that we have power,” and that “the very essence of craftivism lies in creating something that gets people to ask questions; we invite others to join a conversation about the social and political intent of our creations.” (S)examensarbete is about questioning knitting as a form of sexual self-expression and therefore falls under the category of craftivism, however offputting the term may be. I have refrained from
mentioning craftivism earlier because I have yet to find a handknitted garment that I honestly find to be sexy, and that’s exactly my point. Through the craftivist movement, we can understand that textile handcrafts can raise awareness to an abundance of sociopolitical issues, but are the products or garments produced aesthetically pleasing or desirable?

That being said, I would like to mention the textile artist Magda Sayeg as an inspiration to my work. I stumbled upon her website while researching the “yarn-bombing” group *Knitta* and there is a certain degree of edginess in Sayeg’s work that I relate to *(S)examensarbete*. Although I am a huge fan of humor and see it as an important tool, I think Sayeg’s work is an example of how knitting can be a strong form of communication without the use of humor as a main focus. Much of Sayegs work is based on knitting in different objects, such as buses, statues, pilars, etc., and she has done several projects in cooperation with different businesses, like Gap, Toyota and 7-Up. Even if she knits by hand, the ending result does not have the same aesthetic as the DIY movement and that is what attracts me to her way of working with textiles. She seems to take knitting seriously, using it in a professional sense and in my opinion, successfully making knitting appealing.

### 3.1 Documentation

![Images of Magda Sayeg](image1.jpg)  ![Images of Magda Sayeg](image2.jpg)  ![Images of Magda Sayeg](image3.jpg)  ![Images of Magda Sayeg](image4.jpg)

### 3.2 Discussion

My project as a whole benefited tremendously from the comments and insights from my opponent, Johanna Rosenqvist. Having worked with very similar topics, she understood the purpose and goal behind *(S)examensarbete* and inspired me to relate my work to established knitting artists and craftivism. Through this, I was able to better understand why I had avoided comparing myself to these topics earlier. I realized that *(S)examensarbete* is about exploring an aesthetic (sexiness) that I hadn’t seen within the knitting field before.
So... can knitting be sexy?

During the Spring Exhibit, I sat in one of the knitted bikini chairs and knitted away, with Dolly Parton singing in the background. Due to cold weather, I was forced to sit inside much of the exhibit, next to my video of fingers scrolling through my Instagram images. Sometimes I felt embarrassed by the pictures on the screen, since I no longer had the virtual world of social media to hide behind. I was there, in the flesh, to see how people reacted. But past this feeling of shame, I also had many interesting discussions with a variety of visitors. I would ask the question, “Can knitting be sexy?” not necessarily with the intention of an answer, and I would usually receive a direct response, along with a suggestion or two. One visitor suggested I knit with latex, since latex is the textile directly associated with sex. Others suggested knitting with flashier yarn or bigger stitches.

I received stories from pubescent years of sexy sweaters and crocheted bikinis and see-through knitted dresses. Several older men told me that they had chosen textile studies instead of woodworking when they were in school and one of them had even been featured in a local newspaper since it was so unusual. I discussed sex, an array of different artists and even Eurovision Song Contest with people I would probably never had an excuse to talk to if it wasn’t for my project. After 10 days of being present at the exhibit and interacting and discussing with visitors, my understanding of the overall consensus is that knitting can be sexy. I’d like to think that (S)examensarbete sparked new thoughts in a few people’s heads about what a traditional handcraft technique like knitting can be.

The process-based process behind this project has lead to a better understanding of myself, both personally and as an artist. I have experienced both the freedom in not having a strict goal from day one and I have also felt the insecurity that has followed suit. I have relied on step-by-step plans in the past because they provide stability and a kind of safety net if my inspiration begins to falter. In the future, I see myself continuing to work with a goal in mind, yet forcing myself out of my comfort zone to test new methods as I did in (S)examensarbete, such as interactive pieces where I as the artist am present.
4.0 Bibliography

Books


Newspapers/Magazine/Journals


Websites
