Chapter Twelve

CRAFTING COMMUNITY, CONNECTION, COMPASSION IN A PANDEMIC

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IN LATE 2019, the Centre of Democracy (CoD) began developing a community engagement project entitled *Stitch & Resist*.[1] The initial aim of the participatory project was to "create meaningful bridges between personal interests and larger sociopolitical issues," and in doing so, to encourage and support active citizenship.[2] This would be achieved through craftivism workshops in which participants would create political messages in cross stitch while discussing social issues and, where appropriate, developing civic actions. Two days before the project launch, the declaration of a major emergency was made in South Australia in response to the COVID pandemic, and everything we'd spent months planning was suddenly in jeopardy. Our only option was to "pivot," but how? Over the following months we worked (primarily online) with facilitators from our partner organizations and community groups to develop bespoke strategies for working with and supporting their clients, members, and communities.[3] Underpinning

1 The Centre of Democracy (CoD) is a joint project between the History Trust of South Australia (HTSA) and the State Library of South Australia (SLSA). It consists of a gallery that opened in 2017, and a public engagement program, much of which takes place outside the walls of the gallery. The CoD staff was made up of a very small team, consisting of the manager of CoD, a public programs coordinator (three days per week), and an SLSA staff member who was allocated one day per week to carry out collections-based research. Like the other three museums for which the HTSA is responsible, CoD draws on and displays objects from the State History Collection in order to showcase the people, ideas and movements that have shaped, and continue to shape, South Australia, particularly with regard to democracy.

2 Ioana Literat and Sandra Markus "'Crafting a Way Forward': Online Participation, Craftivism and Ravelry's Pussyhat Project Group," *Information, Communication & Society* 23, no.10 (2020), 1414.

3 The organizations and community groups with whom we partnered work with refugees, asylum seekers and multicultural communities (Welcoming Australia; Successful Communities, Multicultural Communities Council of South Australia), LGBTIQA+ youth and elders (Queer Youth Drop In; ECH; headspace; Feast; Stitchers & Knitters Group), Aboriginal women (Knucky Women's

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the various approaches that emerged was the question that became the lifeblood of *Stitch & Resist*: "How can we continue to resist injustice, engage in the everyday practice of democracy, and take care of our wellbeing in the midst of a pandemic?"

While COVID-19 clearly posed all sorts of challenges both personally and professionally, it also engendered affordances that we, as museum professionals, could not have previously imagined. It allowed us to slow down; to really listen to and learn from community members whose needs were diverse, shifting, and in some cases, urgent; to focus on processes rather than outcomes; to be more flexible and responsive than we were used to being; to conceive of "success" in different and more expansive ways; to create safe spaces for sharing, discussion, and compassionate listening in a context in which public fears and levels of stress were mounting exponentially; and to genuinely build, nurture, and reap the benefits of connection, community, and compassion. In short, the transformations that *Stitch & Resist* underwent as a result of the pandemic enabled us to become "facilitators of civic engagement, agents of social change and moderators of complex issues, built around relevance, reflectiveness and responsibility."[4] This chapter offers examples of the strategies developed in conjunction with communities, discusses some of the lessons we learned, and reflects on the ways in which our experience of "crafting community, connection, compassion in a pandemic" might shape future practice.

Craftivism as a Mode of "Doing Democracy"

I took up the position of manager of CoD in late 2018 and from the outset sought ways to make active citizenship more relevant to more people. A few months into the role, I visited an exhibition at the Museum of Australian Democracy in Canberra and, while there, picked up a very modest-looking but incredibly powerful book entitled *Craftivism: A Manifesto/Methodology*.[5] In it, Melbourne-based fibre artist and activist Tal Fitzpatrick describes craftivism—a portmanteau term, craft plus activism, coined by maker and writer Betsy Greer—as a means by which to transform one's anger at the injustices that are everywhere in our world into something else, something that "prompts people to engage in complex conversations, … that uses humour and irony to make people consider a different point of view, … that inspires the kind of love and generosity that gets people to open their hearts and change their minds, … that provides practical solutions

Centre), Vietnamese women (Vietnamese Women's Association of South Australia), Arabic-speaking communities (Arabic Language and Culture Association of South Australia), D/deaf communities (Deaf Can Do), unions (SA Unions), gamers (BrainHackr), rural communities, bushfire-effected communities, and communities seeking support around mental health and wellbeing (Wellbeing SA, headspace; Just Listening Community); embroiderers (Embroiderers Guild of South Australia), those facing homelessness (Shelter SA), and individuals looking to live sustainably (The Adelaide Remakery).

4 *21st Century Roles of National Museums: A Conversation in Progress*, White paper prepared by Office of Policy and Analysis, Smithsonian Institution (Washington, DC: Smithsonian, 2002), 18.

5 Tal Fitzpatrick, *Craftivism: A Manifesto/Methodology* (Melbourne: Blurb, 2018).

to local problems."[6] Craftivism, adds Fitzpatrick, can engender individual capacity-building and at the same time "strengthen social connections and enhance community resilience."[7] This understanding of craftivism seemed to my colleague Britt Burton and me to map perfectly on to what we believe the role of socially engaged museums to be: to inspire engagement, debate, and reflection; provide meaningful, nourishing experiences that enhance health and wellbeing; and create better places to live.[8] And Greer's claim that "the creation of things by hand leads to a better understanding of democracy because it reminds us that we have power,"[9] that power is literally in our own hands, just reaffirmed that craftivism was a perfect vehicle through which CoD could fulfil its mission.[10]

But why needlework? To some, needlework, with its historical associations with feminine subservience may seem like a strange choice of medium for political engagement.[11] After all, in her 1792 *A Vindication of the Rights of Women*, Mary Wollstonecraft conceived the two as antithetical, arguing that teaching girls to sew and "shutting them out from all political and civil employments … contracts their faculties more than any other [practice] that could have been chosen for them, by confining their thoughts to their persons."[12] But while this may have been the intent of those who, like author John Taylor, located women's value in their needles as opposed to their tongues, there is little doubt that needlework has, throughout history, been appropriated by women and other "others" to subversive ends.[13] (See Fig. 12.1.) Think, for example, of the embroidered banners made by suffragists and unionists, and of the abolitionist, AIDS memorial, and peace quilts created in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and now collected by museums internationally.

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6 Fitzpatrick, *Craftivism*, 2.

7 Fitzpatrick, *Craftivism*, 3. Disconnection, as many studies have shown, can lead to low self-esteem, anxiety, depression, dementia, and in turn, to poverty, homelessness, addiction, and so on. See, for example, Richard M. Lee and Steven B. Robbins, "The Relationship between Social Connectedness and Anxiety, Self-esteem, and Social Identity [Editorial]," *Journal of Counseling Psychology 45*, no. 3 (1998): 338–45, https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-0167.45.3.338.

8 Museums Association (website), "Museums Change Lives," 2017, 5, https://www.museumsassociation.org/app/uploads/2020/06/28032017-museums-change-lives-9.pdf

9 Betsy Greer, ed., *Craftivism: The Art of Craft and Activism* (Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp, 2014), 8.

10 Fitzpatrick and Literat and Markus conceive craftivism as a form of DIY (do-it-yourself) citizenship.

11 For a more detailed discussion of this see Rosina Parker, *The Subversive Stitch: Embroidery and the Making of the Feminine* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2010).

12 Cited in Naomi Clifford, "Women and the Needle," *Books and Talks* (blog), https://www.naomiclifford.com/portfolio/needlework-1/.

13 In 1631, John Taylor wrote *The Needle's Excellency: A New Booke Wherein are Divers Admirable Workes Wrought with Needles, Newly Invented and Cut in Copper for the Profit of the Industrious* (London: James Boler, 1631).The book included a poem that read: "And for countries quiet, I should like/ That Women-kinde should use no other Pike/ It will increase their peace, enlarge their store/ To use their tongues less, and their Needles more." Kristin Phillips, one of the participants in *Stitch & Resist*, created a piece that reproduced Taylor's words, along with her refrain: "FUCK THAT."

Values-Based Practice

One of the first people with whom we shared our initial ideas about *Stitch & Resist* was a colleague from Wellbeing SA with whom we had worked on previous occasions[14] We told her about the connections we'd begun to see between craftivism and the principles associated with the Slow Movement and she pointed us in the direction of resources that explore the relationship among mindfulness practises (such as hand stitching), self-care, and wellbeing.[15] As art historian Katia Olalde Rico has noted, one of the characteristic effects of needlework mentioned in condemnatory and positive accounts of its practice alike is what positive psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi refers to as "flow"—that is, a meditative-like state "in which people are so involved in an activity that nothing else seems to matter."[16] In that state of deep concentration, one experiences a profound sense of calm that allows the self to "reboot." And, as well-being coach and avid knitter Betsan Corkhill argues, flow switches off "self-monitoring" and allows speech

Figure 12.1. The piece in the background, "Use Your Needle Not Your Tongue," and the "Women Know Sexual Violence" tin were both designed and stitched by Kristin Phillips. See the project website: www.stitchandresist.com Photograph by Rudi Deco. © History Trust of South Australia. Used with permission.

14 Wellbeing SA is a state government agency that focuses on prevention and promoting and supporting the physical, mental, and social wellbeing of South Australians.

15 See, for example, Claire Wellesley-Smith, *Resilient Stitch: Wellbeing and Connection in Textile Art* (London: Batsford, 2021); Claire Wellesley-Smith, *Slow Stitch: Mindful and Contemplative Textile Art* (London: Batsford, 2015); and Emma Louise Swinnerton, "Mindful Stitch: Generating Dialogue In and Around the Threads of Wellbeing," *Fields: Journal of Huddersfield Student Research* 1, no. 1 (2015), http://eprints.hud.ac.uk/23102/. What has come to be known as the "Slow Movement" is a growing global phenomenon whose momentum is maintained by diverse individuals and organizations. Said to have begun with Carlo Petrini's protest against the opening of a McDonald's restaurant in Piazza di Spagna, Rome in 1986, the movement, in its multiplicitous articulations, advocates a cultural shift towards slowing down the pace of contemporary life, mindfulness, sustainability, and much more.

16 Katia Olalde Rico, "Stitching the Social Fabric Against Violence and Oblivion: The Embroidering for Peace and Memory Initiative Revisited through the Lens of Caring Democracy," *Artelogie* 15 (2020), http://journals.openedition.org/artelogie/4526; Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow: The Classic Work on How to Achieve Happiness* (New York: Harper Row, 2002), 4.

to become freer and often more in depth.[17] It is perhaps unsurprising, then, that flow engenders feelings of "togetherness," both within the self and in relation to others and to the world.[18]

Our colleague from Wellbeing SA also spoke of, and inspired us to learn more about, empathic listening and the role it might play in creating change, connection, resilient communities, and hand stitched works that lend voice to those who all too often remain unheard. In their work on civics education, Molly Andolina and Hilary Conklin note that while there has been much emphasis of late on the importance of providing opportunities for the voices of those who have historically been marginalized to be heard, very little has been written on the concomitant need to cultivate empathic listening as a necessary competency for civic engagement.[19] Listening, writes professor of politics Andrew Dobson, is a "democratic deficit," and yet it can positively impact on four democratic objectives, namely "enhancing legitimacy, helping to deal with deep disagreements, improving understanding, and increasing empowerment."[20] Listening, in the sense outlined by both Andolina and Conklin and Dobson, then, is a practice of care, it builds bridges, fosters understanding, empathy, connection and community, and empowers individuals and groups. Empathic listening has the potential to create radical social change through "a revolution of human relationships."

Another colleague connected these ideas to political scientist Joan Tronto's book *Caring Democracy*, which begins with the premise that (at the time of writing) Americans were facing a caring deficit, a claim that resonates with Dobson's identification of a "democratic deficit."[21] Tronto argues that in the market-driven context of neoliberalism we have little time to focus on the care of others or ourselves, and this, in turn, leads not only to diminished lives, but also to a disinvestment in political systems and political engagement. Contemporary life, as Tronto conceives it, and as many of the pieces created through *Stitch & Resist* suggest, is driven by values that ultimately are bad for people and the planet. Arguing that we need to make care the centre of democratic life, Tronto offers a vision of democratic caring as a practice that

> Requires … citizens … to accept that they bear the political burden of caring for the future. That future is not only about economic production but also about caring for the values of freedom, equality, and justice. That future is not only about oneself and one's family and

17 Betsan Corkhill, *Knit for Health and Wellness: How to Knit a Flexible Mind and More* (Bath: Flat Bear Publishing, 2014), 34.

18 See Olalde Rico, "Stitching the Social Fabric," 3 and also Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience* (New York: Harper Collins, 2008), 41.

19 Molly W. Andolina and Hilary G. Conklin, "Cultivating Empathic Listening in Democratic Education," *Theory and Research in Social Education* (2021), https://doi.org/10.1080/00933104.2021.1893240.

20 Andrew Dobson, "Listening: The New Democratic Deficit," *Political Studies* 60, no. 4 (2012): 860.

21 Joan Tronto, *Caring Democracy: Markets, Equality and Justice* (New York: New York University Press, 2013). It seemed to us, reading the book, that the situation Tronto described was by no means unique to those living in the United States.

> friends, but also about those with whom one disagrees, as well as the natural world and one's place in it. That future requires that we think honestly about the past and accept some burdens and responsibilities that have been deflected or ignored, realizing that if all such responsibilities are reconsidered, democracy will function more justly.[22]

Through these and subsequent conversations with colleagues from a wide range of community groups and organizations, and our immersion in the writings and projects they shared with us, *Stitch & Resist* began to take form. Key to the project and its success was an emphasis on slowness, voice, empathic listening, change-making, and democratic caring.

Pivoting

Our initial (pre-COVID) plan was to roll out the project via CoD-run workshops open to the public; closed workshops (safe spaces) run by partner organizations in which their clients and members could address issues specific to them; and a suite of resources available on the project website www.stitchandresist.com.[23] The aim of the workshops and resources was threefold: to create safe spaces for self-expression, discussion and compassionate listening; to foster and support civic engagement; and to contribute to building and nurturing connection, community, compassion and wellbeing. Our vision was informed by the "Five Ways to Wellbeing" framework developed by the New Economics Foundation in the United Kingdom. The "Five Ways to Wellbeing" are a set of evidence-based connected actions that have been shown to improve and promote per-

22 Tronto, *Caring Democracy*, xii.

23 Jocelyn Dodd and Cerie Jones, *Mind, Body, Spirit: How Museums Impact Health and Wellbeing* (Leicester: Research Centre for Museums and Galleries, 2014), 20. We very much agree with Dodd and Jones's claim that "working in partnership is critical for museums to address health and wellbeing." The resources on the *Stitch & Resist* site were designed to assist others who may want to run similar projects and/or to invite people from around the world to contribute to the project.

Figure 12.2. "7 Languages," designed and stitched by Knucky Women's Centre women and Belyuen Primary School students, contributes to the revitalization of the seven Aboriginal languages that were once spoken in the region. Photograph by Rudi Deco. © History Trust of South Australia. Used with permission.

sonal wellbeing. They are: be active, connect, take notice, keep learning, and give.[24] Each of these activities is at the heart of *Stitch & Resist*.

Of the groups and organizations with whom we partnered, most of those who work directly with clients and/or members agreed to run workshops, whereas others offered to assist with resources, messaging, recruitment, and promotion. The arrival of COVID presented a range of challenges for *Stitch & Resist*, not least of which was the cancellation of all workshops. During the first month of lockdown, we and our colleagues in partner organizations established new mechanisms for working from home, one of which was the use of Zoom. While we were initially concerned that being unable to meet in person sounded the death knell for the project, our access to Zoom, along with the increased flexibility that working from home afforded many of us, meant that in fact partner organization facilitators were able to meet regularly and to talk at length. At the suggestion of a number of our collaborators, we set up a private Facebook group where the facilitators could post ideas, share stories that inspired us, show off our own works-in-progress, report on our communities, put out calls for assistance, or just reach out for a chat or a check-in. We also set up a *Stitch & Resist* Facebook page that facilitators encouraged community members to follow. Through this we also e began following and connecting with craftivist groups internationally and sharing information about our project. Through this we attracted works from across Australia and, indeed, throughout the world. In the early days of the pandemic we worked closely with Tal Fitzpatrick to refocus the project so as to ensure its continued relevance in a context that, for most, was unprecedented. We wanted, on the one hand, to find ways to respond to the fact that some of the measures designed to "flatten the curve"—lockdown, social distancing, remote working, the cancelation of events and closure of businesses, home schooling, government payments such as JobKeeper, limitations on travel, and so on––would exacerbate existing issues such as housing and homelessness,

24 Jodi Aked, Nic Marks, Corrina Cordon, and Sam Thompson, *Five Ways to Wellbeing*, report prepared by Centre for Wellbeing, New Economics Foundation (2008), https://neweconomics.org/uploads/files/five-ways-to-wellbeing-1.pdf.

domestic abuse and violence, the many difficulties faced by asylum seekers and refugees, social isolation, racism, and more. But at the same time, we were mindful that many of the issues with which individuals and communities were struggling were present before the arrival of COVID, and would no doubt remain long after its departure. While COVID was undoubtedly having a massive impact on people both locally and internationally, discussions with collaborators made it clear that it did not, and should not, define us. (Fig. 12.2) And so, as I wrote earlier in this chapter, the question that became integral to *Stitch & Resist* in a context that was rapidly changing and unpredictable was: "How can we continue to resist injustice, engage in the everyday practice of democracy, and take care of our wellbeing in the midst of a pandemic?"

Unforeseen Benefits and Lessons Learned

As autumn moved towards winter, it remained unclear how long the pandemic would last and when, or whether, we might be able to reschedule the workshops we had originally planned. Keen not to lose momentum, the facilitators group began discussing the possibility of running online workshops. At the same time, we considered other ways to maintain connection and share ideas and works with community members who didn't have access to, did not want to, or could not use digital technologies. A couple of groups set up buddy systems. One, many of whose members are over fifty-five, wanted to ensure that those who couldn't attend online meetings had regular contact with others, were kept in the loop, and could be supported in ways that worked for them. Some buddies uploaded photographs of works made by participants who weren't comfortable using web portals and social media platforms, and others helped their friends to develop the skills to do so themselves.

From the outset, we wanted to ensure that the project was as inclusive and sustainable as we could make it. To avoid inviting people to participate in an activity which could prove prohibitively expensive, we put out a call on social media for unwanted cloth, thread, hoops, and needles, and were inundated with donations. The materials we received, along with those we purchased, were sent by post to project facilitators who then redistributed them to community members throughout the fifteen months that the project ran. The packages—which also often included patterns—were welcome arrivals in lives that were sometimes monotonous, lacking the pleasures that face-to-face encounters bring. Many recipients reported on the delight they felt as they unwrapped parcels of coloured aida cloth and variegated threads, of the sense of connection they experienced just knowing they were part of something that was not "all doom and gloom," something bigger and more expansive than the spaces in which they were confined. And this sense of connection, community, and compassion grew as they worked the messages they shared via SMS, email, and social media platforms. Work-in-progress (WIP) Wednesdays—a Facebook campaign that Tal Fitzpatrick suggested we create—was something that many participants looked forward to as it gave them a regular opportunity to "check in," to show off their stitching, to voice their concerns, to reflect on the issues raised through the works of others, and to offer and receive words of support and encouragement.

Some of the communities served by our partner organizations were harder hit by the pandemic than others. Many people in casual employment lost jobs and many of those on temporary visas found themselves ineligible for government support. For them, feeding their families and communities and keeping roofs over their heads took precedence over stitching. Facilitators who worked with these communities regularly shared stories about the challenges their communities were facing and sought emotional and material support from other members of the facilitators group. Individual facilitators responded in a number of ways, including putting out calls in their communities, collecting, and/or donating wool for a refugee group that was making beanies, and sewing machines, overlockers, and other materials for a sewing project designed by Congolese women and the team at Survivors of Torture and Trauma Assistance and Rehabilitation Service (STTARS). These kinds of opportunities for connection, which were way beyond our original vision, and which might well not have happened had it not been for COVID, enabled us all to learn so more about each others' communities, to develop empathy for people and issues with which we might have had little or no previous contact, and to forge deep and genuine relationships that will undoubtedly nourish both the individuals involved and the communities to which they belong long after *Stitch & Resist* has drawn to a close.

Working with others whose motivations and whose understanding of participation and of solidarity were different from our own also engendered opportunities to broaden the scope of *Stitch & Resist* and strengthen its potential for inclusion. About halfway through the project, the facilitator of one of the groups who had been meeting fortnightly online to participate in "lesbian conversations" expressed her concern that not everyone in the group wanted to stitch. While this could have been viewed in terms of "failure," the discussion that ensued led to the realization that participation can take many forms: some people may contribute ideas and inspiration, others, messages or phrases, and others still, patterns, designs, or artwork. This idea came as something of a relief to other facilitators who felt that a small number of stitched pieces meant that their communities were not participating to the extent they had hoped they would. It gave us pause to rethink "success" and "impact" and the ways in which we measure these things. It also resulted in facilitators bringing messages from their communities to the facilitators' group for stitchers from other groups to stitch, thereby creating (cross) connections none of us had anticipated. As we stitched the words of others and learned more about the experiences that informed them, empathy, compassion, and connection evolved alongside beautiful works; indeed, the two were woven together.

During lockdowns, craft, as media reports regularly attested, became increasingly popular. At the same time, the *Stitch & Resist* Facebook following grew, and the project was promoted through radio interviews, newspaper articles, blogs, and webinars with international attendance, as well as by word-of-mouth. All of these things contributed to a steady flow of contributions to our online gallery, almost a quarter of which came from overseas: Canada, India, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Paraguay, United Kingdom, the United States. These works and the stories that accompanied them reminded us that the situations in which we found ourselves were shared by others; that geographic and social distance need not be a barrier to connection, community, compassion; that together we are stronger.

Face-To-Face Encounters

Figure 12.3: "Stitch & Resist" promotional material, designed by B. Leideritz. See the project website: www.stitchandresist.com. © History Trust of South Australia. Used with permission.

The gradual lifting of restrictions in South Australia in late 2020 meant that we were finally able to run workshops for the general public, although a few had to be cancelled when infections spiked and restrictions were temporarily tightened.[25] Attendance at most of the workshops was at capacity and participants ranged from fifteen to seventy-five years of age and came from a range of cultural, linguistic, political, and class backgrounds. Most identified as women, some as non-binary. Some came alone, others in pairs or groups, but no one left without having made new connections. After a brief introduction to the project and its relationship to CoD, and some tips on how to cross stitch, Britt and I worked with participants to choose cloth, patterns, and thread, and, in some cases, helped them design their own patterns. For the remainder of the workshop, we moved between tables, answering questions and helping solve stitching problems as they arose. Through this process we listened and contributed to conversations that covered a diverse range of topics: health, travel (restrictions), better times (and worse times), football, family, food, working-from-home and jobs lost and gained, the environment, incarceration, Black Lives Matter, home schooling, and what the future might bring. Together we laughed and we lamented, and we wove a kind of togetherness that was all the more precious for having been threatened by a virus that still seemed like the stuff of sci-fi movies or Armageddon.

In late 2020 and early 2021, we also attended workshops hosted by partner organizations such as Wellbeing SA, Queer Youth Drop-in, and headspace. (See Fig. 12.3.) In October of 2020, during Mental Health Week, we ran four workshops on Kangaroo Island,

25 Attendance at workshops was free of charge and all materials were supplied to participants, although some chose to bring pieces they were already working on. They were held in metropolitan and regional centres. Due to COVID restrictions, places were limited and participants were required to book through Eventbrite. A significant proportion of participants attended more than one workshop. All workshops ran for three hours and participants took their works-in-progress home with them. Most, but not all, completed their pieces and uploaded them to the *Stitch & Resist* online gallery. All those who did, also displayed their work(s)—either digitally or in their original form—in the *Stitch & Resist* exhibition that was held at The Mill, Adelaide, July 2 to August 6, 2021. A downloadable pdf of the exhibition catalogue is available at https://stitchandresist.com/stitch-resist-the-exhibition/.

a small island off the coast of South Australia that, during 2019 and 2020, had been ravaged by the largest bushfires in its recorded history.[26] Two months later, the island, whose economic wellbeing is heavily reliant on tourism, was hit by COVID. The October workshops, hosted by Wellbeing SA, were well-attended by participants of diverse ages and backgrounds. For many, it was the first time they had gathered in a group in many months, and introductions were as heartfelt as the reunions that took place. In two of the four workshops, no mention was made of the bushfires, even though concern for the environment came through strong in many of the pieces that were begun and discussed there. In a third, talk of the bushfires and their devastating effects interspersed discussions of boarding school, domestic violence, local wines, community arts projects, and the unequalled talents and generosity of the women from the local bowls club who had provided platters of homemade goodies and decorated the tables in Christmas colours. In only one of the four workshops did the devastation that had impacted on the lives of almost everyone on the island take centre stage.

Britt and I reflected on this with our colleague from Wellbeing SA, herself an island resident. We wondered whether we should have played a more active role in facilitating conversation around wellbeing in the wake of the bushfires and the midst of a pandemic, but had been wary of "pushing our agenda" rather than listening to the needs, interests, experiences of participants at each of the different workshops, holding open space for them to emerge. We wondered too if the workshops had—as seemed to be the case—provided a positive experience for those who attended but we were loath to compromise the oft-times fragile bonds that had begun to be woven by asking people to fill in evaluation sheets, as if this was some kind of transaction that could be measured. We discussed the hesitancy expressed by a few of those who arrived thinking the workshops would be "less political" than they perceived them to be, and the ways in which we and other participants worked with those attendees to create an environment in which they felt comfortable, able to be themselves and to participate. The pieces they made, we explained, did not have to be "political": a cross stitched smiling sun could be just as effective in conveying or engendering hope as a strongly worded demand for ecological sustainability. During those workshops, we discussed the idea that "the personal is political," and explored the many forms that active citizenship can take: in particular, those like craftivism that can be gentle and healing. But we also learned from discussions during the workshops and feedback received afterwards that the success of the workshops should not, and indeed could not, be measured in terms of the number of works created, the "quality" and "impact" of the discussions—how would one even begin to measure such things?—or even the way participants felt as they left. What we have heard and seen is that in and through the workshops, the discussions, the weaving together of stories, lives, interests and threads, connections have been formed, communities have been (and continue to be) strengthened, that crafting has come to play an

26 Forty-six percent of the more than million-acre (400,000-hectare) island was burnt, wildlife—including endangered species—were severely affected, homes were destroyed, and lives were lost. Kangaroo Island is known as Karta Pintingga in the language of the Kaurna people, the traditional owners of the land.

important role in the personal lives, friendship groups, and change-making activities of many people, and that these processes are ongoing.

Our ideas about what constituted "a political message in cross stitch"—a phrase we had used in the initial stages of *Stitch & Resist* to describe the craft-specific project outputs—were also challenged and ultimately broadened in and through the relationships we formed with young, queer people who attended workshops hosted by the Queer Youth Drop-in and headspace. Reluctant to commit to large, time-consuming pieces, many chose the simplest pattern we had—a heart containing a pride flag of their choosing. These small pieces could (in most cases) be completed during the three-hour workshop, giving participants a sense of achievement. They also provided an opportunity to talk about identity, and, of course, difference. At the first workshop we ran at the Queer Youth Drop-in, one of the regular attendees had brought along a badge they were making using plastic aida.[27] They very generously walked us through the steps of creating a cross stitch badge. Having used badgemaking on previous occasions as a way to connect with young people, we jumped at the chance to incorporate what we had learned into subsequent workshops with queer youth.[28] While only a couple of these ended up in the *Stitch & Resist* online gallery and exhibition, many were made and worn with pride.

Mutual Humanization: Together We Are Stronger

There is so much more that could be said about *Stitch & Resist*, the things we learned, and the ways in which it continues to reshape our actions, identities, relationships. But I would like to end this chapter by expressing my gratitude to all those who actively participated in the project, who connected with ideas and people they might not otherwise have encountered, who took notice of what was so generously offered, learned, and gave of their time and their selves. This sentiment is not mine alone; it is something I have heard time and again from so many of those who attended workshops and/or connected to the project in other ways. In her account of the need to educate for empathy in literacy learning and civic engagement, Assistant Professor of Urban Teacher Education at Rutgers University Nicole Mirra offers an understanding of empathy as "mutual humanization or the idea that we cannot fully realize our own humanity until we recognize the full humanity of those who differ from us."[29] *Stitch & Resist*, I would like to think, has played a role in this process, and in doing so has contributed to repairing the social fabric of which we are all a part.

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27 Plastic aida resembles aida cloth and is sometimes referred to as plastic canvas. Designed for cross stitch and needlepoint, plastic aida has a grid-like structure with holes through which the needle is passed. Because it is stiffer than cloth it is an especially good medium for children and beginners.

28 Nikki Sullivan and Craig Middleton, *Queering the Museum* (London: Routledge, 2020), 91–94.

29 Nicole Mirra, *Educating for Empathy: Literacy Learning and Civic Engagement* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2018), 10.

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