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A Knitting Pattern for Feel-Good Feminism

Barbara Preisig

It has been a long time since as many people took to the streets in the cause of feminism as did for the *Women's March on Washington*. Protesters wore the hand-knitted *pussyhats* in such large numbers that they colored the crowds pink. The hats became a striking visual signature feature of the protest against the Trump administration. They stand for a feminism that has majority appeal, albeit with questionable references.




Jayna Zweiman and Krista Suh, initiators of the Pussyhat Project. Photo by Lucy Nicholson / Reuters

The Women’s March on Washington ranks among the largest demonstrations in American history. But people took to the streets in many other cities and eighty-one other countries as well. Around the world five million people are estimated to have participated.In Switzerland, however, it was calm and the protests merited no more than a side note in the local press. In the absence of international media one could have gotten the impression that the Women’s March was but a (feminist) niche movement. The opposite is true. Feminism in the U.S. has more majority appeal than ever and has moved into the mainstream of society. The illustrious list of speakers at the Women’s March included Madonna and Scarlett Johansson. In her presidential campaign Hillary Clinton proudly confessed to playing the «woman card». Even Ivanka Trump banks on women power, as she has built up a lifestyle company under the hashtag #WomenWhoWork [https://ivankatrump.com/womenwhowork/] [1]

Almost as popular as the Women’s March were the pussyhats — hand-knitted pink wool caps. Less than three weeks before the protest, three women spread the idea complete with knitting pattern on the web, setting off a veritable knitting rage among American women.[2] The pink hats became a distinctive visual symbol at the Women’s March. They proliferated and — as the initiators may indeed have hoped — the fact that so many people prepared for the marches by knitting had a unifying effect.


Women’s March on Washington, January 21, 2017. Photo by Martha Tesema / Mashable

As a positive, witty symbol, the pussyhat stands for a popular feminism that wants to be fun, too.[3] Yet the problem is that the fun ends up being detrimental to feminist causes. The pussyhat emerged in response to Donald Trump’s videotaped «pussy-grabbing» comments («Grab them by the pussy. You can do anything» [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l8U0IaMsRf4)]. Symbolically reinterpreting discriminating speech and converting it into a tool for resistance is a tried and tested strategy in feminism, too. But this doesn’t work if the feminist response to Trump’s call for sexually assaulting women is actually a hand-knitted wool cap. The symbolism of the pussyhat trivializes the protest against sexist statements and, what is worse, it also makes light of Trump’s comments. And it doesn’t get any better considering that the pussyhat has little resemblance with a vagina (which at least could have a deterrent effect). It is a shapeless hat with kitty ears. À propos cats: the word ‹catcalling› refers to verbal sexual harassment and crude come-ons on the street. A video worth watching by Shoshana Roberts [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b1XGPvbWn0A] that recently went around social media shows Roberts becoming the object of more than one hundred such catcalls during a ten-hour walk through Manhattan. She is spoken to, her appearance is commented on. One man follows her for minutes. A hand-knitted pussyhat would have been of little help to her in this situation.

One problem of the pussyhat symbolism is that it has a belittling effect and represents a lack of resistance. The Internet is full of selfies of women staging themselves with their pussyhats. They display a kind of fashion for cold winter days. Granted, there is an icy wind blowing at the moment when it comes to women’s rights. But do we have to do warm hats and once again confirm the image of the defensive role of women because of this? No. It’s the other way around: people like Donald Trump have to brace themselves for some cold weather!

The pussyhat aims to reevaluate traditional female symbols. As a result existing roles and power structures are cemented rather than questioned. The idea behind thepussyhat project was to induce women to get together with others of their ilk for contemplative knitting and thereby take a stance of resistance in the run-up to the Women’s March. Under the motto «Make and Give» the organizers called for women to knit an extra hat and use a preprinted note to write down a personal message to the recipient of these donations.[4] At the Women’s March there were collection points where people could drop off and pick up pussyhats.

At first, not much can be said against collective knitting. On the other hand, have women not been sitting in parlors and knitting (for others) long enough? Such actions hardly serve to promote public appreciation of feminist causes. And the idea of revaluating traditionally feminine activities by making knitting socially acceptable again has long been implemented. For instance, in the visual arts this revaluation took place as early as the 1960s: at the time handicraft materials and techniques came to be exhibited and appropriated in art in the context of a shift in values. Artists such as Louise Bourgeois and Eva Hesse used this to draw attention to the structural absence of women artists from the art establishment. At the same time they questioned rigid value categories, such as that of independent (traditionally male) and applied (traditionally female) art. Ever since — and not least owing to these artists — such hierarchies have increasingly softened. So if women today collectively knit hats this is not something that can be unequivocally understood as a feminist or generally political



Poster of the Pussyhat Global Virtual March, March 8, 2017

The Pussyhat Project focuses on forms of protest that are as convenient as they are individual, to the point that women do not even have to leave their homes: «Provide people who cannot physically march on the National Mall a way to represent themselves and support women's rights by creating and gifting pussyhats.» The personal choice of wool, color and technique

makes for as many individual hats as there are women. The pussyhat is a feel-good merchandising product that allows everyone to indulge in their creativity. How convenient to be able to support a good cause and at the same time do yourself some good! Self-optimization, consumption and feminism come together here without any friction. For several years now, by the way, this has already been demonstrated in advertising, for example, by Always' [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XjJQBjWYDTs] «Like a Girl» campaign.[5]



Missoni fashion show in Milan, February 2017. Photo by Elle Australia

Pussyhats are compatible precisely because they combine such up-to-date pop-feminist values. The question remains, though, whether they also help us make headway in the fight for equal pay or against sexism, rather than making us forget our worries over our homely knitting. On the occasion of International Women's Day the organizers of the Pussyhat Project call for a virtual rally: «March on Social Media! Pussyhat Global Virtual March!» Unlike the Women's March, this march doesn't even require you to leave your house anymore. Simply knit a pussyhat, craft a banner with a political message, make a selfie, post and the protesting is all done! A better option is to leave the pussyhat at home and, with a cleared head, make the streets unsafe. And those who absolutely want to reference Donald Trump may scream out into the spring air the slogan of this year's March 8 rally in Berlin: «Make Feminism a threat again!»

[1] Amanda Hess cites these examples as evidence of the current manifestations of pop-feminism in the U.S. See Amanda Hess, «How a Fractious Women's Movement Came to Lead the Left», The New York Times, 7 February 2017, https://www.nytimes.com/2017/02/07/magazine/how-a-fractious-womens-movement-came-to-lead-the-

left.html?rref=collection%2Fsectioncollection%2Fmagazine&action=click&contentCollection=magazine&region=ra

[2] See Sarah Young, «Pussyhat Project: How a knitted hat became a sign of defiance against Donald Trump», Independent, 17 January 2017, http://www.independent.co.uk/life-style/fashion/pussyhat-project-donald-trump-protest-sign-symbol-defiance-womens-march-washington-dc-president-a7531256.html.

[3] «Who wears pussyhats? Feminists wear pussyhats! And lots of different people are feminists», Pussyhat Project, FAQ, 2017, https://www.pussyhatproject.com/faq/.

[4] See Pussyhat Project, Mission, 2017, https://www.pussyhatproject.com/mission.

[5] As n. 1.

[6] Mahalia Chang, «Missoni Staged Its Own Women's March In Milan, Pussyhats And All», Elle Australia, 27 February 2017, http://www.elle.com.au/news/fashion-news/2017/2/missoni-pussy-hats-autumn-winter-2017.

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