

How ELLEN LESPERANCE transmits messages about history, feminism and labour through the art of knitting
by Jennifer Kabat

Pattern Recognition

ON US ELECTION DAY IN NOVEMBER LAST YEAR, I wore a chunky grey sweater. It was hand-knitted with striped sleeves and, across the chest, a labrys: the double-headed axe symbolizing female Greek deities and lesbian pride. I had a smile on my face. I was voting for a woman, voting for women, voting for my mother who didn't get to cast her vote because she'd died that spring, and wearing a sweater that was also a piece of mail art. Knitted by Ellen Lesperance, *Congratulations and Celebrations* (2015–ongoing) had been sent to people around the US. She'd fashioned the jumper after one in a photo of a protestor at Greenham Common in the UK. I wore it again two days later, this time crying in front of my students at New York University. I tried to talk about the election, protest and art—the fact that art could be private, not in a gallery or museum, but something just one person experienced—and about what the women at Greenham Common had done, living in ad-hoc camps outside a military airbase for nearly two decades campaigning against nuclear missiles.

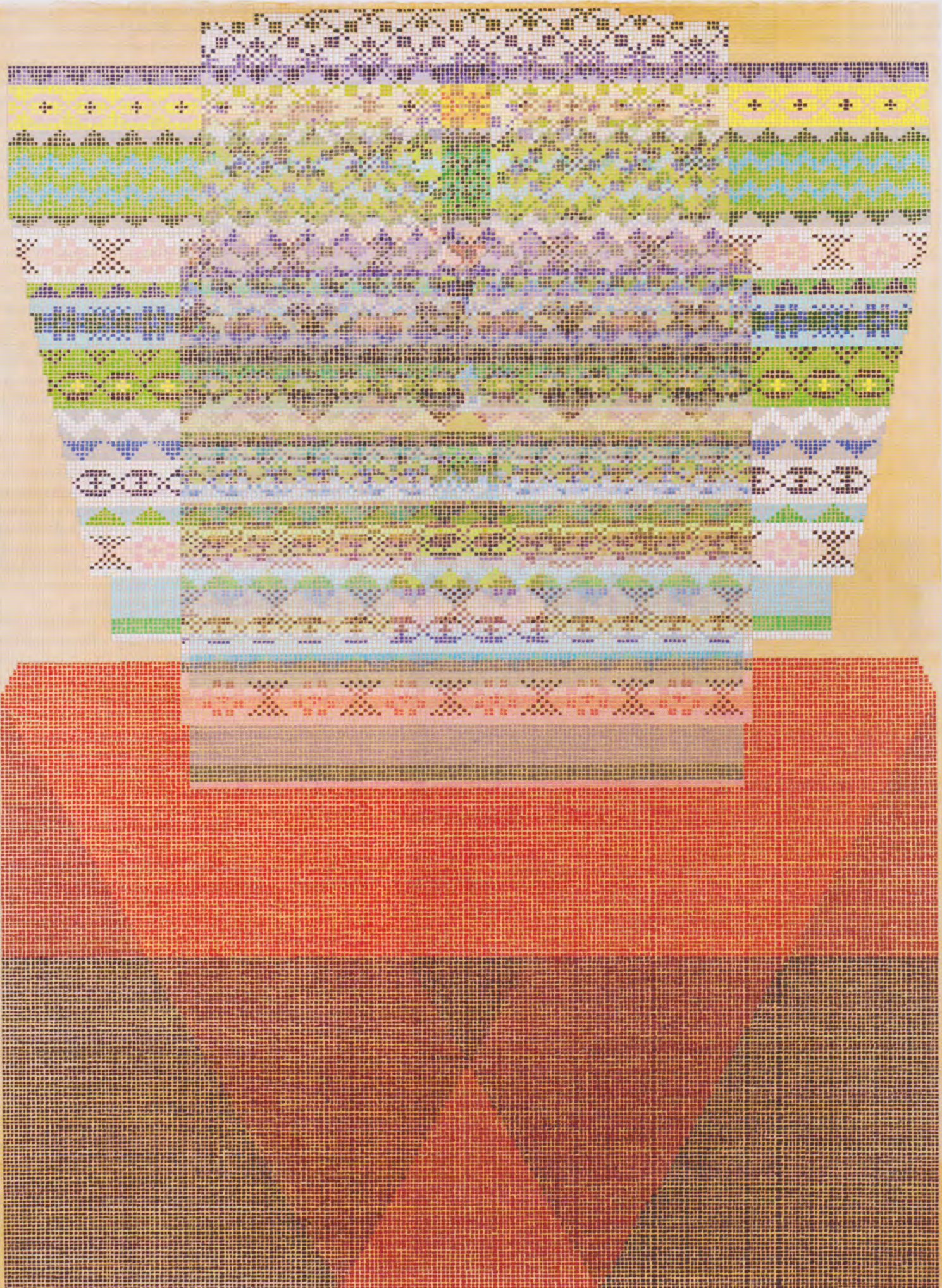
By the time I received the jumper, it had been worn by many others: one who put it on with her hijab and described how both cloaked her in safety; another while starting the hormones for transitioning; someone else protesting poisoned water in Flint, Michigan; and others doing simple things, like having morning coffee with their multi-racial family. The sweater connected me to all of them and the original protester as if that history was telegraphed through the fibres.

OPPOSITE PAGE
Velvet Fist, 2014–15,
gouache and graphite
on tea-stained paper,
107 × 75 cm. All images
courtesy: the artist
and Adams and Ollman,
Portland

Images from Greenham Common have informed Lesperance's paintings and knitting for nearly a decade. In a sense, her paintings are knitting. Composed of hatchings that look like pixels or marks on graph paper, they are made using American Symbolcraft, the language of knitting in the US. It's the shorthand that communicates the stitches needed to make a garment.

At art school, Lesperance had been frustrated by painting and how it was encoded with Western patriarchy's representations of the female form, so she turned to Symbolcraft as another language to describe the body. She created directions to knit her self-portrait and rendered her body in soft fluffy yarn. Every part of her—ears, anus, tattoos, feet and toes—was reproduced in 1:1 scale. The flat shape of her toes only start to look familiar when you know what you're looking at. The ear curls like a white felt leaf; her rectum puckers like cabling on an Irish fisherman's sweater; the black knit squiggles of the tattoo resemble the one on her wrist. But there's a gap, too: even though the proportions are exact, there is no verisimilitude, as you get in painting. Plus, there's the sheer obsessiveness of knitting a body. (Though, in making garments, women have always used knitting to describe bodies.)

When Lesperance was young, her grandmother taught her to knit and, in her early 20s, she returned to it. She was living in Seattle and driving a bus. It was a good union job, she explains, but she had no seniority, meaning she had the worst routes and was often harassed. She found herself



THIS PAGE
Wounded Amazon
 (for Sandra Bland), 2017,
 gouache and graphite
 on toned cyanotype,
 104 × 75 cm

OPPOSITE PAGE ABOVE
*We Are the Gentle Angry
 Women and We Are
 Singing for our Lives*,
 2015, gouache and
 graphite on tea-stained
 paper, 56 × 75 cm

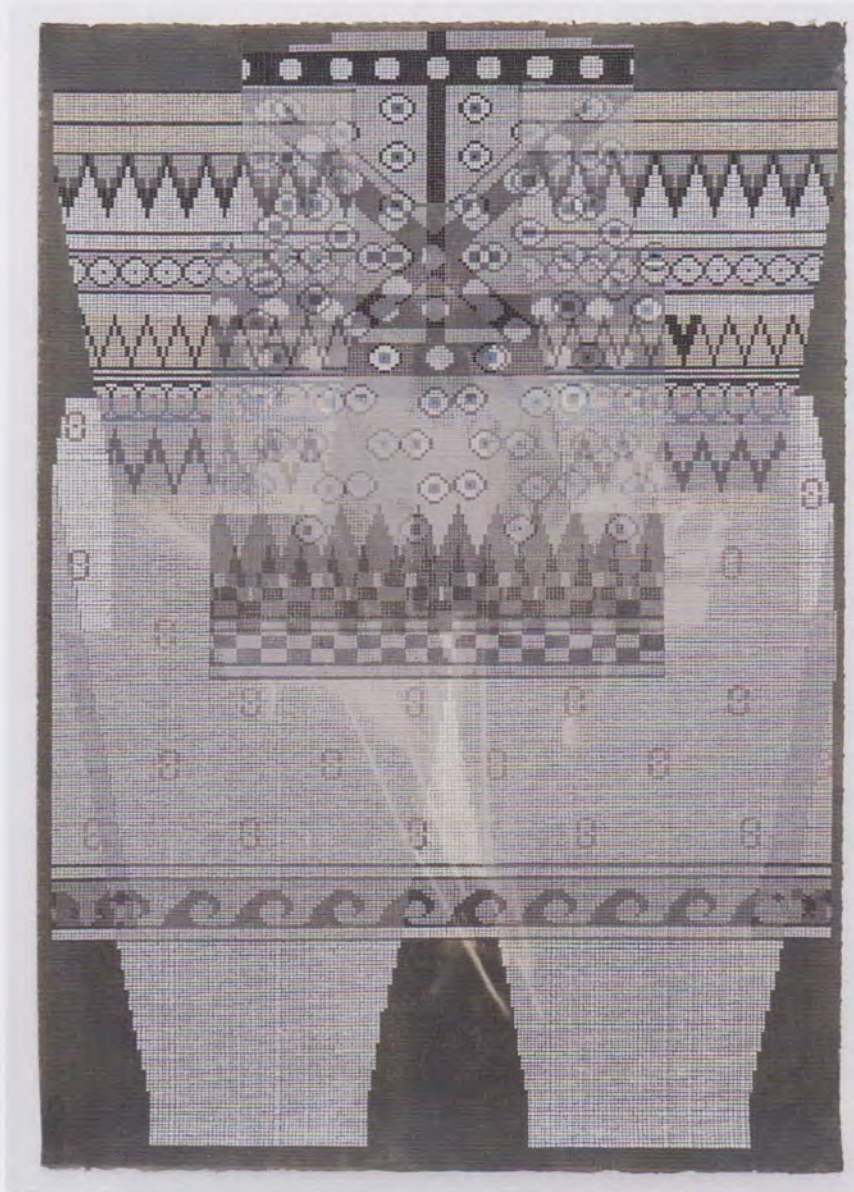
OPPOSITE PAGE BELOW
*Congratulations and
 Celebrations*, 2015—
 ongoing, performance
 documentation

knitting clothes to wear beneath her uniform as symbolic protection. This is another element of her work: magic. Instead of the power traditionally given to conceptual art, where the artist, Duchamp-like, can declare an object art and thus transform it, Lesperance invokes a totemic power. It's built on personal, private connections and intentions that transmit over time — the kind I felt in that lecture hall wearing the sweater in front of my students.

The sweater's original source photo was blurred but, in it, the woman wearing the labrys stands with her legs apart and her head cocked, as if taunting: I am here, what are you going to do about it? The camera flash nearly obscures a keep-out sign behind her. Lesperance found the image in The Women's Library at the London School of Economics, but she happened upon Greenham Common almost accidentally when she collaborated with the photographer Jeanine Oleson. Lesperance was seven months pregnant and the two were at a commune in Arizona. They stayed with a woman who'd been at Greenham. She talked about the community, creativity and protest there as she hennaed Lesperance's belly. Soon after, Lesperance found herself living again in her parents' house with her newborn and toddler. She started researching the camps and visited archives in the UK. She scrolled through hours of video and read letters and poems the women had written. In photos, she noticed the sweaters, all of which were hand-knitted. Despite a stint working as an editor at *Vogue Knitting*, Lesperance had never seen patterns like them. The 1980s, she explains, was an era of figurative sweaters, but these sported peace signs, rainbows, anarchy symbols, phoenixes, witches and the labrys. She began reknitting the axe — not as art, but in garments like the ones she'd wrapped herself in to drive buses.

She started to paint the sweaters too, translating them into Symbolcraft. *We Are the Gentle Angry Women and We Are Singing for our Lives* (2015) took its cue from a sweater in a photo of a street blockade at Greenham Common. The artist fitted all of the yellow sweater, with its blue chevrons and stars, onto one page. The arms fold in on themselves, darker where they're doubled over. In the original image, the protester wears a blue scarf with hearts, which becomes a stripe down the left margin of the painting. Including all the clothes from the photograph creates something more than a knitting guide: it becomes a portrait of the wearer. In part, Lesperance is documenting a history that might otherwise be lost — a compendium of signs and symbols and life in the camps — but also a way of seeing women's bodies in a language women have used and passed down for years.

In *Velvet Fist* (2014–15), Lesperance renders the skirt the Greenham Common woman wore as well as her sweater. The skirt is folded in, simplified to geometric shapes; the sweater pattern looks like a dot-matrix print in blues, pinks and greens. The diamonds and stars double up and repeat on the back of the jumper, and her painting collapses both sides to render them in one plane. Still, if you know Symbolcraft, you can re-create the sweater. The painting is essentially a set of directions. It reminds me of Lawrence Weiner's work, in which the piece can be the object itself or the instructions for how to make it. At first, along with each painting, Lesperance would knit the jumper, too. She hoped that, when a work was sold, the new owner would wear the sweater and keep it alive. Except, collectors didn't, and the clothes would just sit in storage. *Congratulations and Celebrations* was born of her desire for the garments to be used. Her focus on people using the work strikes me as the opposite of conceptual art. The magic is not in deeming it art: the transformation comes from the values a person brings to the sweater by wearing it, investing it with something personal and private — and that meaning haunts the work.

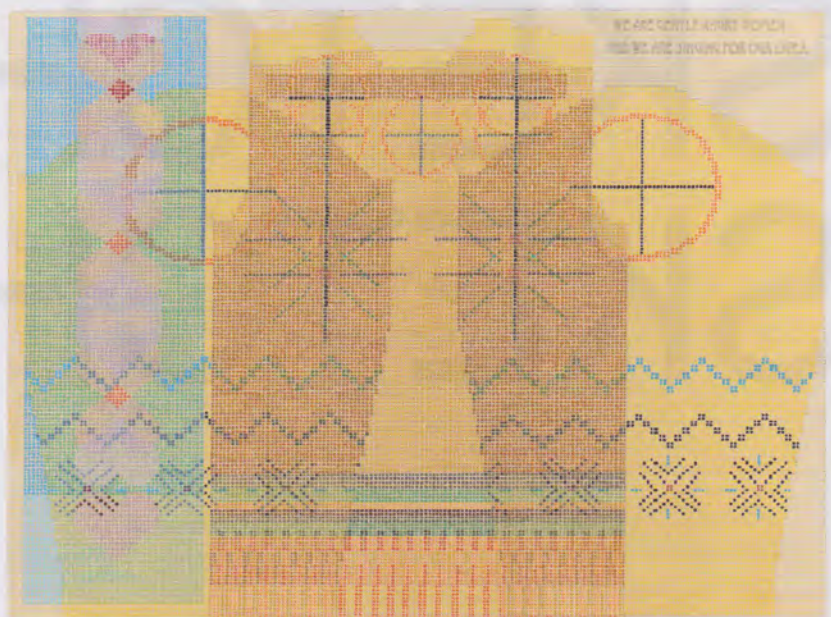


Over the last year, this haunting has inhabited Lesperance's paintings, too. She's been re-creating the garments Amazons wore on Greek pottery from the 6th century BCE. The women warriors are the only figures depicted on the pottery wearing patterned garments – chevrons and snowflakes, like we have on sweaters now. The men just wear white. Lesperance started painting the Amazons, thinking of the patterned clothes as armour, of knitting as making armour. At the same time, something that had started as a private act of mourning crossed into the work. She went for a walk on Sandra Bland's birthday, the year after Bland was killed in police custody. Lesperance collected plants and used them in a cyanotype. She did the same thing on the day of the Ghost Ship fire in Oakland and the Pulse nightclub shooting in Miami. She decided to paint Amazons over the cyanotypes, and the spectral image remains just below the surface. The garments are folded double, like the Greenham sweaters, in order to fit a whole Amazon's outfit on one page. The patterns are in shades of grey and brown, as they were in the original pottery, but a phantom of fern frond or leaf shows through. In *Wounded Amazon (Ghost Ship)* (2017) a grey rectangle hangs across the centre. Intended to be the cloak of an Amazon, it feels like a shroud with three dots in a pattern like a pixelated fleur-de-lis. Looking at *Amazon (Sandra Bland)* (2017), with its muted cross over the heart, I keep wishing the garments could have been unfurled to protect Bland herself.

The full title of *Congratulations and Celebrations* is *Congratulations on every Section of Fence ever Pulled or Cut Down, on every Minute in Police Custody, Court, and on every Day in Prison. Celebrations for every Police Vehicle Marked, Challenged, Stopped! Congratulations and Celebrations!* The wording comes from a letter written by a Greenham Common camper, and I think of it in light of our new moment of protest, which saw five million women around the world stand up on one day in January. But what if their protests were every day, lived full-time? In the 1980s, many dismissed the women at Greenham Common as crazy for living in the camps for so long with the barest minimum but, as Lesperance writes in her 2011 essay 'Creative Direct Action: The Greenham Common Women's Peace Camp 1981–2000': 'These challenges to delicate status-quo sensibilities seem to prove quite the opposite of faltering ideological communities.' They stand for lived beliefs, and the creative actions spurred by protest were powerful because they couldn't be pigeonholed as 'art'. In her work, Lesperance re-inhabits the past, hoping to telegraph that information into the present. At a time when the pussy hat appears on the Missoni runway, and you can buy a 'resist' stencil on Etsy, her focus on the values lived, the values transmitted in simple objects like the sweater, is important. It's not just the image on the front; it's the labour that went into it, the wearers who shaped it, the beliefs that are communicated through it. That is the magic and the meaning, the congratulations and celebration – and it gives me hope as well as offering a template for our current reality ●

JENNIFER KABAT is a writer based in upstate New York, USA. She teaches at New York University and the New School and is working on a book of essays titled *Growing Up Modern*.

ELLEN LESPERANCE is an artist based in Portland, Oregon, USA. Her solo exhibition, *The Subjects and W.I.T.C.H. 1985*, opened at the Portland Art Museum in August, concurrent with the publication of her novel, *Peace Camps (Container Corps)*. Earlier this year, her work was included in group shows at Derek Eller Gallery, New York, USA, and Adams & Ollman Gallery, Portland. This autumn, she will also be featured in *'Trigger: Gender as a Tool and a Weapon'* at the New Museum, New York.



“At a time when the pussy hat appears on the Missoni runway, Lesperance’s work celebrates the creative actions spurred by protest.”

