

10 Care through craft

Making in defence of human rights

Tal Fitzpatrick and Stephanie Dunlap

Introduction

In early 2017 – in a world overshadowed by news of the climate crisis, growing inequality and the rise of nationalism and far-right rhetoric¹ – Stephanie Dunlap, an artist from Arizona reached out to Australian artist Tal Fitzpatrick, whom she had never met or spoken to before, on Instagram. Her message read, ‘I’ve had this idea to embroider the articles of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights for some time, and I was curious if you were interested in a longer-term collaborative piece?’² What unfolded over the next three years as a result of this communication was a collaborative craftivism project involving 131 makers from 21 countries that culminated in both a major exhibition at the Museum of Australian Democracy and a considerable donation to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the UN’s premier refugee agency. The UNHCR operates in over 130 countries and provides essential aid (including food, water, shelter, healthcare, and education) directly to refugees, asylum seekers, and forcibly displaced individuals.³

This project, known as the UDHR Quilt Project, revolved around the creation of four quilted wall hangings, each featuring 30 A4 panels hand-embroidered with the 30 articles of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. This chapter tells the story of this project in the hope of illuminating how the expression of care through craft can connect people with the broader process of societal transformation.

Craftivism is a simple portmanteau – popularised by USA writer and maker Betsy Greer in 2003 – that describes the combination of craft and activism. The practice of craftivism can best be understood both as a creative strategy for engaging non-violent activism and a mode of Do-It-Yourself citizenship that empowers individuals to engage in the everyday practice of democracy:⁴

At a time when the patchwork of liberties is fraying, craftivism is a global movement that combines craft and activism into quietly powerful protest to call for social and political change. Craftivism allows people to actively engage in democracy, contribute to social change, and transform the world one stitch at a time.⁵

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Figure 10.1 The four *UDHR Quilts*, 2018, clockwise from top left: Red Quilt, Yellow Quilt, Blue Quilt, Green Quilt. Images courtesy of The Museum of Australian Democracy, Canberra.

Like other forms of art-based activism, craftivism doesn't rely on existing power structures but instead involves individuals and small groups who use creativity as a way to intervene in public, private, and online spaces with the intent of driving social, political, and environmental change.⁶ In a contemporary adaptation of the longstanding practice of combining craft techniques with activist action, craftivists often utilise new technologies and social media as tools to ensure that their individual and collective actions become further politicised through sharing and networking online.⁷

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Change starts with one

The story of the UDHR Quilt Project begins with one. One person, Stephanie Dunlap, who in January 2017 found herself struggling to deal with an overwhelming sense of personal and collective grief. She explains:

I had just lost two close family members and found myself watching the rise of white supremacy and nationalism happening in real time. I was isolated in my grief and felt overwhelmed by the realities of the incoming Trump administration. At the time, it felt impossible to see a way out.⁸

The emotional impact of loss, compounded by the sense that the values she cares for were under threat, left Stephanie feeling compelled to *do something*. This is a feeling many of us are intimately familiar with, for as art theorist Jacqueline Millner explains, ‘When we care, we experience a surge of emotional energy that moves us to action.’⁹ At this point, the pivotal question Stephanie asked herself was – what can I do to make a difference? As an artist and an activist, Stephanie decided that she would do what so many artists, makers, and craftivists do when feeling overwhelmed by their emotions or by current affairs: she turned to her creative practice.

Engaging with creativity is a powerful strategy to combat the paralysing feelings of helplessness that so many of us experience when we are considering the prospect of challenging the complex systemic, structural, and existential challenges facing humanity. As British sociologist, media theorist and author of *Making Is Connecting* (2011) David Gauntlett explains, this is because the process of making shows us ‘that we are powerful, creative agents – people who can really *do* things, things that other people can see, learn from, and enjoy.’¹⁰ Similarly, in her reflections on what makes craftivism effective, Betsey Greer observes that ‘...the creation of things by hand leads to a better understanding of democracy, because it reminds us that we have power.’¹¹ The notion that the hands-on experience of making serves as a unique reminder that we, as individuals and collectives, have the agency to reshape the world around us, is the very foundation on which the practice of craftivism is built. Based on this logic, craftivists look to drive change by using craft as a way to bring into alignment their hands (physical actions), heart (feelings/emotions), and head (ideas/beliefs).¹² They hope not only to be ‘part of the solution’, but also to influence and inspire others to reflect on what they care about and consider the ways in which they can act on these values in their day-to-day lives.

Stephanie, when considering what she could do to connect her hands, heart, and head, turned to the work of the United Nations for inspiration. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (henceforth referred to as the UDHR) is seen as a significant milestone in the history of human and civil

rights. Developed by members of the United Nations in the wake of WWII, the UDHR was proclaimed by the United Nations General Assembly in Paris on 10 December 1948. The document outlines 30 articles detailing the basic rights and fundamental freedoms inherent, inalienable, and applicable to all human beings. Although not legally binding, the UDHR has shaped legal, political, civic, and social discourse across the globe and directly inspired the development of international human rights law, customary international law, and the International Bill of Human Rights.

More than 70 years after its proclamation, the UDHR is one of the world's most translated documents (525 languages to date).¹³ Its aspirational words continue to provide a foundation for the possibility of a just and decent future for all.¹⁴ Though not without its biases and shortcomings,¹⁵ the UDHR is a powerful tool that enables us to collectively define the nature of liberty, ensure the protection of vulnerable communities, and foster care across the globe by connecting people through shared values. As Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein, former UN High Commissioner for Human Rights and revered peacekeeper, wrote in 2015:

The power of the Universal Declaration is the power of ideas to change the world. It inspires us to continue working to ensure that all people can gain freedom, equality and dignity. One vital aspect of this task is to empower people to demand what should be guaranteed: their human rights.¹⁶

The UDHR can be seen as both a call to action as well as a powerful tool for resisting oppression, impunity, and all other affronts to human dignity. Embedded in the preamble of the UDHR is a recognition that it is through awareness and education that individuals, organisations, and institutions come to care about these universal rights and freedoms: ‘...every individual and every organ of society, keeping this declaration constantly in mind, shall strive by teaching and education to promote respect for these rights and freedoms....’¹⁷ Stephanie decided to use needle and thread to materialise this document in cloth, to renew focus on the UDHR and foment dialogue about human rights today.

Making connections

Daunted by the prospect of taking on this project alone, Stephanie decided to contact Tal – a craftivist whose work she admired – in the hope that she might be willing to help realise her vision of embroidering the 30 articles of the UDHR. Tal's response – a resounding yes – sheds light on one of the most powerful ways craftivists show their solidarity, build community, and mobilise change: by willingly getting involved in and supporting the projects of other craftivists. This generous tendency transforms strangers into collaborators and collaborators into friends, creating dispersed networks of

likeminded changemakers galvanised by shared values and a love for craft: a living web of care.¹⁸

According to Stephanie, the foundational goals of the project are:

First and foremost...to benefit refugees, so we decided that any profits from the project would be redirected to the UNHCR, or the UN High Commissioner for Refugees. We rewrote the articles to include she/her and they/them pronouns, which was important to our process of feminist intervention and disruption. We also wanted to give everyone who participated the opportunity to translate their article into any language they saw fit. Our intention was to decolonize and unsettle the pervasive structures of colonialism, support language preservation, and broaden the relevance of this project. Setting these initial parameters proved to be very effective and greatly enhanced the global perspective of our project.¹⁹

In the hope of tapping into the broader craftivist network, Tal's first suggestion was to open up this collaboration by inviting others to help them realise the time-consuming work of embroidering the UDHR. To their amazement, within five days of posting a call-for-artists on Instagram, they were inundated with requests to participate. In their messages, the artists and makers who volunteered to help stitch the UDHR shared powerful anecdotes about what compelled them to do this work.

Realising their idea struck a chord with the broader online craftivist community, Stephanie and Tal decided that instead of selecting the 30 'best' artists, they would instead make room for everyone who volunteered to take part in the project. This explains why there are four UDHR Quilts instead of one, but more importantly this decision set a precedent for what became the overarching politics of care that informed the project henceforth. The project was guided by the principles of attentiveness, responsibility, competence, responsiveness, trust, respect, solidarity, plurality, and honest communication,²⁰ reflecting the participants' commitment to ensuring the UDHR Quilt Project not only celebrated and defended the values and ideals enshrined in the UDHR, but also put them into practice.

Brought together by a shared commitment to the ideals enshrined in the UDHR, the 131 artists and makers who participated in the UDHR Quilt Project are a diverse group.²¹ Ranging in age from 17 to 62, the participants come from more than 45 different cultures and nationalities – including several participants who were descendants of the First Nations peoples of the lands we now know as New Zealand, Canada, the USA, and Brazil. Many are migrants, or the children of migrants, with the majority living in countries that are currently reckoning with the long-lasting impacts of colonisation and neoliberalism. While the majority of the participants identify as women, they were diverse too in their sexual orientation, their religious and political beliefs, and their skill levels as crafters – some made their living as

professional artists, but the majority identified as hobbyists, and a handful took up embroidery for the first time in order to be a part of this project. As a result, the panels are embroidered using a wide variety of materials and techniques and feature text in 26 different languages.

Making in defence of human rights

The key goal of the UDHR Quilt Project was to inspire participants and audiences alike to consider how they could do more to care for and defend human rights. Participants were invited to critically engage with the UDHR by using their embroidered panels to consider a contemporary human rights issue or to celebrate human rights victories. The resulting works tell a complex story about the shortfalls between humanity's noble aspirations and the realities of everyday life.

Another central goal was to push beyond some of the limitations of the UDHR to materialise a more hopeful conception of what a universal human rights declaration might look like in the future: more inclusive, more diverse, more attentive to the intersectional issues of race, class, gender, sexuality, cultural background, and religious freedom. The UDHR Quilt



Figure 10.2 UDHR Quilts detail: Clockwise from top left: Article 1 by Alicia Alvis, New Zealand (Red Quilt, 2018); Article 30 by KERA, Estonia (Yellow Quilt, 2018); Article 16 by Mogalakwena Craft Art Development Foundation, South Africa (Blue Quilt, 2018); Article 3 by Alexander Hernandez, USA (Green Quilt, 2018). Images courtesy of the Museum of Australian Democracy, Canberra.

Project participants looked to finish the work started by the diverse group of women who formed the Sub-Commission on the Status of Women that advised the UN drafting committee during the writing of the UDHR back in 1946.²² Among many issues relating to the rights of women and girls, this group, chaired by Bodil Begtrup of Denmark, advocated for the UDHR to refer to ‘all’ or ‘everyone’ as the holders of the rights, rather than ‘all men’.²³ Unfortunately, this attempt to ensure women’s rights and the rights of those who are gender-non-conforming was seen as ‘too controversial’ at the time.²⁴ As a result, the male-centred language used in UDHR leaves the rights of women and those who are gender-non-conforming as implied, thus open to interpretation and to being undermined. The UDHR Quilt Project used female and gender-neutral pronouns throughout, replacing ‘mankind’ with ‘humankind’, ‘brotherhood’ with ‘sisterhood’, and ‘he/his’ with ‘she/her’ or ‘they/them’. The quilts also place emphasis on the rights of women and the LGBTQIA+ community through the use of symbols and colours that centre and celebrate them, and through their very materiality, given the association of embroidery and quilting as ‘women’s work.’

The physical process of creating the four UDHR Quilts lasted 18 months, beginning with the allocation of a UDHR article to each of the participants (chosen based on their preferences and availability). Then it was up to each participant to design and embroider their panel before posting them to Tal in Melbourne. Once all of the panels arrived, Tal worked with a group of five local UDHR Quilt Project artists to patch together, quilt, and bind the panels to create the four UDHR Quilts.²⁵

The time and care that went into creating these quilts are clearly perceivable, particularly when the works are encountered in person. Hand embroidery, even for those who are professionally trained, is a time-consuming and physically challenging practice that takes a toll on one’s body. Voluntarily undertaking this labour is an expression of love and for this reason the act of stitching each word of the UDHR can be understood as an expression of the participant’s personal commitment to the values enshrined in the UDHR. A colourful example of this is Article 1 – *All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights* – on the Red UDHR Quilt (Figure 10.2) which was embroidered by New Zealand artist Alicia Alvis. Made using thousands of meticulously placed, hand-sewn sequins, this panel is a celebration of equality which centres the LGBTQIA+ community via its use of the rainbow flag and the transgender symbol. Another poignant example is Article 5 – *No one shall be subject to torture or to cruel, inhumane or degrading treatment or punishment* – on the Green UDHR Quilt, embroidered by Palestinian artist Joanna Bakakat. Joanna interprets the text of Article 5 as if it was graffiti scribbled on the West Bank barrier wall and incorporates traditional Palestinian cross-stitched embroidery motifs such as stars stitched in blue, cypress trees and ‘the walls of Jerusalem’ in the foreground.²⁶

Accompanying each panel of the four UDHR Quilts are artist statements that reveal the personal stories behind their work, including the careful and

nuanced thinking and process that went into each design. (For the Museum of Australian Democracy, these statements were collated in an interactive digital display alongside each quilt.) For example, Canadian artist Fraser Road interpreted Article 30 – *Nothing in this Declaration may be interpreted as implying for any State, group or person any right to engage in any activity or to perform any act aimed at the destruction of any of the rights and freedoms set forth herein*. Thousands of small stitches depict a railway track disappearing into the middle distance flanked by a row of trees, a seemingly tranquil scene belied by the artist’s heartbreaking story:

My piece pays tribute to Chanie Wenjack. He was only nine when he was placed in a school hundreds of kilometres from his home. For over 100 years, some 150,000 Indigenous children were put into these government-funded, Church-administered boarding schools to be assimilated into mainstream society. Many students lost their native traditions and reported emotional, physical and sexual abuse. When Chanie was 12, he ran away. It was October in northern Ontario, with snow squalls and freezing rain. Chanie had nothing but a cotton wind-breaker and a small jar of matches. A week later, his body was found, next to a railway track he thought would take him home.²⁷

Puerto Rican artist Erica Mena stitched Article 24 – *Everyone has the right to rest and leisure, including reasonable limitation of working hours and periodic holidays with pay* – on the Green UDHR Quilt; her panel features an empty swing set next to an empty wheelchair, of which she writes:

I chose Article 24 because I became disabled in 2016 and was bedridden, unable to work or create art in ways I had been doing before. I struggled intensely with feelings of despair, worthlessness, and terror of becoming uninsured and homeless. The image represents...the loss of childhood play, or adult rest, experienced by exploited peoples all over the world. The fabric is from a guayabera, a dress shirt worn in Puerto Rico and many places colonised by the Spanish...traditionally by labourers, but on days of celebration and leisure. Capitalism trains us to associate our value to our labour. Art allows us to consider associating our value to our rest: that you are valuable because of who you are, not what you do. And that you deserve to rest.²⁸

When stitched together, the panels of the UDHR Quilts and personal stories are transformed into a communal expression of care with the power to inspire others to reflect on their own values, consider their own surroundings and contemplate their capacity to live up to these ideals.

Of course, the UDHR Quilt Project is just one example of a creative project inspired by the UDHR. Other projects delivered around the same time as the UDHR Quilt Project include Meredith Stern’s linocut prints of the

UDHR (2017), the ‘Human Rights’ project (2018) delivered in collaboration between the Edmund Rice Centre WA, The Museum of Freedom and Tolerance and the Community Arts Network in Perth, and the New York-based Art and Resistance through Education (ARTE) ‘UDHR: REDESIGNED’ project (2019). All share the pedagogical goal of educating participants and audiences about human rights, using art as a medium for telling stories to inspire people to care. The UDHR Quilt Project centred care through craft as a hands-on strategy for making change, providing participants and audiences alike with a practical example of how it is possible to come together to actively care for, act on and critically engage with the ideals put forward in the UDHR. Projects that are driven by and exist largely in online platforms no doubt have their limitations, so therefore projects that creatively engage with and amplify the voices of communities who are not online, such as the Lihaaf project by Kabul-based artist Arshi Irshad Ahmadzai, will always be needed.²⁹

Caring through craft

Labour-intensive craft practices like embroidery and quilting are themselves an expression of care, embedded with cultural and historical significance in many different communities around the world. In *Threads of Life*, textile artist and author Clare Hunter explains that:

Community sewing projects have emotional and metaphorical currency. Much like the Chinese and Japanese idea of creating protective textiles by joining up donated cloth or collecting stitches from many different people, so community textiles are imbued with the spirits of the disparate people who create them, witnessed by others, as unique investments in, and registers of, community worth.³⁰

The finished UDHR Quilts, imbued with the spirits of the craftivists who made it, serve as a colourful, engaging, and tactile invitation to read and learn more about the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Alongside this project’s digital presence on social media, which can be traced using the hashtags #UDHRquiltproject and #UDHRquilts, the key public outcome of the UDHR Quilt Project was an exhibition at the Museum of Australian Democracy at Old Parliament House in Canberra – the very building where Australia’s delegation to the UN worked on the UDHR. The exhibition for the UDHR Quilt Project was delivered in partnership with the Museum and launched as part of the formal celebrations of International United Nations Day on the 24 October 2018. The exhibition was open to the public until the 10 March 2020, while the digital component of this exhibition, which includes an interactive interface that allows audiences to explore all four of the UDHR Quilts and read each of the 131 individual artists statements, continues to be freely available online: <https://quilts.moadoph.gov.au>.

The impact of the feminist ethic of care that underpins the UDHR Quilts was felt at every stage of the project, starting with the decision to create four quilts instead of one and culminating in the collective decision to sell the quilts so that the money could be donated to support refugees and people seeking asylum seekers. The participants of this project achieved their pragmatic goal of raising money to support asylum seekers and refugees (a community regularly denied the most basic human rights) in February 2020, when all four of the UDHR Quilts were sold to the Museum of Australian Democracy. 100% of the money raised through this sale was donated to UNHCR, the UN's refugee agency responsible for providing direct and essential aid, to refugees and asylum seekers in Syria, South Sudan, Iraq, Nigeria, Yemen, Bangladesh, and beyond.

The less obvious outcomes of the UDHR Quilt Project are relational. The overarching politics of care underpinning this project had ripple effects that created bonds of kinship and solidarity among participants and led some participants to transform their creative practice. There are many examples that demonstrate how this ethic rippled outward, for instance: at the very start of the project, Cape Town artist Kristine Berg (who embroidered Article 15 on the yellow UDHR Quilt) recognised that for the women from the Mogalakwena Craft Art Development Foundation to be included in this project, it would be necessary to compensate them for their work. So, quietly and of her own volition, she commissioned them to make a panel for the project (Article 16 on the blue UDHR Quilt). Another example is the range of projects started by UDHR Quilt Project participants that were directly influenced by their experience with this project. These include: Helen Fraser's *Yumi Olgeta* (2018–2020) in conjunction with the Museum of Australian Democracy;³¹ Ashley Catharine Smith's *Dear Mr. President Project* (2020) with Pop Up Polaroid,³² which debuted at the National Liberty Museum in Pennsylvania as part of the Philadelphia's Freedom exhibition in 2020;³³ and Diana Weymar's *Tiny Pricks* (2018–2021), a textile-based protest project that has garnered more than a thousand participants thus far.³⁴

Care as political action

The public expression of care is a kind of political action. Like other forms of non-violent direct-action activism, collaborative craftivism projects can be understood as calls for justice. As philosopher and political activist Professor Cornel West reminds us, 'Never forget that justice is what love looks like in public.'³⁵

To realise the possibility of a world where the inherent dignity and equality of every member of the human family is respected it is necessary to tell stories that inspire us to act and defend these ideals. The UDHR – and in turn the UDHR Quilt Project – tell a story of a world where the '...recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and invaluable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the

world.³⁶ A story that continues to be as pertinent today as it was when it was first told at the end of WWII. In their own soft, inviting, and tactile way, the UDHR Quilts call on us to engage in more complex, more honest conversations about the issue of human rights as well as the systematic and human shortfalls and hypocrisies that result in human rights violations.

The UDHR Quilt Project illustrates how craftivist projects enable artists and makers from around the world to come together to foster a more caring world by engaging with a feminist ethic that defies the authoritarian and neoliberal pressures that place profits and power before people and planet. Through its collaborative approach and unified commitment to support refugees and asylum seekers, this project models a methodology where values, process and outcomes are aligned. As a result, this project reveals how a careful attentiveness to the issues of human rights – materialised using needle and thread – can create bonds of kinship and solidarity across vast geographical distances, bonds that can transform the world around us. The project illuminates how, by focusing on our shared humanity and on the rights and responsibilities we share in common, it is possible to darn and strengthen the material integrity of our societies.

Notes

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- 5 Museum of Australian Democracy, The #UDHR Quilt Project Exhibition, October 25, 2018, <https://quilts.moadoph.gov.au/exhibition>.
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- 18 Maria Puig de la Bellacasa, "'Nothing Comes Without Its World': Thinking with Care", *The Sociological Review*. SAGE Publications: London, England, 60, no. 2 (2012): 197–216. DOI: 10.1111/j.1467-954X.2012.02070.x.
- 19 Stephanie Dunlap, personal communication, February 26, 2021.
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- 21 To learn more about the participants of this project visit <http://quilts.moadoph.gov.au> where you will find their names, artist statements and artist bios alongside detailed images of their hand-embroidered panels.
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