Comics craftivism: embroidery in contemporary Swedish feminist comics

Anna Nordenstam and Margareta Wallin Wictorin

ARTICLE HISTORY
Received 10 July 2020
Accepted 23 December 2020

KEYWORDS
Comics; craftivism; embroidery; Sweden; feminism

ABSTRACT
The aim of this article is to analyse contemporary feminist comics by the Swedish comics artists Åsa Grennvall/Schagerström, Lotta Sjöberg and Sara Granér in relation to the ongoing movement called craftivism, as defined by Betsy Greer and her fellow crafters. The article argues that embroidered feminist comics can be regarded as comics craftivism, since, although similar to drawings, they are all sewn by needle and thread, and often thematise topics connected to craftivism’s ideas concerning ‘raising consciousness, creating a better world stitch by stitch’. The comics artists use embroidered comics to create ‘wider conversations about uncomfortable issues’, e.g. feminist issues, such as being trapped in a violent relationship as in Schagerström’s cover image for Svinet [The Swine], or the unequal sharing of household work in Sjöberg’s sequential story in Det kan alltid bli väre. [It can always get worse]. The feminist, craftivist comics artists are engaged in the politics of the handmade – narrating through textiles. The content concerns political, environmental and gender issues. Comics craftivism contributes to the renewal of the comics medium, and while experimenting artistically with materials and techniques, practitioners thematise new ideas as well as new perspectives on lingering problems, often with irony and humour.

Figure 1. © Malin Biller 2008.

CONTACT Margareta Wallin Wictorin margareta.wallin-wictorin@kau.se

This article has been republished with minor changes. These changes do not impact the academic content of the article.

© 2021 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.
This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.
Introduction

In the drawn panel (Figure 1) the woman is screaming 'I was told that girls cannot draw comics, so I complied. But this bloody embroidering is killing me!!!'\(^1\) The panel thematises in a humorous and ironic way two gender stereotypical preconceptions: Firstly that girls cannot draw comics, and secondly, that they are rather expected to stick to embroidery. Since the millennium turn, Swedish feminist comics artists have shown a rising interest in using crafts such as embroidery for their comics. They are using traditionally feminine crafts to raise contemporary issues related to gender and politics.

 Åsa Schagerström (former Grennvall, b. 1973) has used embroidery for her comics album covers since 2003, and in her latest album *Urmodern* [The Original Mother] (2019) the story is told entirely in embroidered images. Lotta Sjöberg (b. 1974) has used embroideries in her comics since her debut in 2011 with the comics album *Family living, Den ostädade sanningen* [Family living. The untidied truth]. In her album *Det kan alltid bli värre* [It can always get worse] (2014), many of her comics are made in stem stitch and cross stitch. Sara Granér (b. 1980), is another cartoonist and comics artist in Sweden, who has used embroidery to quite a significant extent. She often mixes different forms of crafts and materials such as ceramics, fabric, and paper, and in her latest album *Allas lika mellangärde* she has included five embroidered works.\(^2\) Together with the comics artist Hanna Stenman (b. 1987) she participated in an exhibition with a collage in textile including embroidery.\(^3\) This article argues that some of the contemporary Swedish feminist comics can be seen as part of the ongoing movement called craftivism, in which three artists in particular, Åsa Schagerström, Lotta Sjöberg and Sara Granér, have used the technique of embroidery in their comics albums and instams. There are also other comics artists, such as Malin Biller (b. 1979), Lisa Ewald (b. 1987), and Marie Tillman (b. 1982) who have experimented with embroidered comics, and outside of Sweden e.g. Hanneriina Moisseinen (b. 1978) from Finland and Aurélie William Levaux (b. 1981) from Belgium.\(^4\) The aim of this article is to analyse a selection of comics by Schagerström, Sjöberg and Granér, and discuss how they can be regarded as comics craftivism.

Comics and craftivism

The comics medium offers many possible ways of varying form and content. As Roger Sabin argues ‘there is no limit of what a comic can do other than that imposed by a creator’s imagination’ (Sabin 1996, 8–9). How comics should be defined has been widely discussed and with varying results. Aaron Meskin argues that we do not need a definition of comics in order ‘to identify, evaluate and interpret comics’, but there are some formal and informal criteria that are often included when defining and discussing comics, such as sequences of interdependent images, various kinds of gutters between images, with or without verbal texts, the use of captions or speech balloons, story lines or not, etc (Meskin 2017, 227). Thierry Groensteen emphasises *iconic solidarity* as an important criteria for comics but also the continuous change of the comics medium:

> throughout history and civilisations, there have been historic states of comics art, which are equivalent from the theoretical point of view. The current form of the medium is just the
most recent one, and one should not give it a greater importance or make it into an autonomous form of art.\(^5\)

And now embroidered comics are on the scene. Depending on how one defines comics, the Bayeux Embroidery (1066–1082) could be regarded as comics, or at least sequential art, since it narrates a story with a combination of images and words Meskin (2017, 225). The comics we are presenting here are, however, digitally reproduced and published in printed albums, and often on internet and in the social media such as Instagram. They are also connected to craftivism.

The term craftivism was launched in 2003 by the crafter and writer Betsy Greer in order to join the separate spheres of craft and activism (Greer 2014, 8). ‘Craft’ can be described as an occupation or trade requiring manual dexterity or artistic skill. Examples of crafts are pottery, carpentry, and sewing.\(^6\) ‘Activism’, according to the Merriam-Webster Dictionary may be defined as ‘a doctrine or practice that emphasizes direct vigorous action especially in support of or opposition to one side of a controversial issue’.\(^7\) In Scandinavian Journal of Comic Art, the Swedish scholar Martin Lund defines the term in connection with comics: ‘comics activism’ refers here to the practice of creating comics in support of or opposition to one side of a controversial issue, and the term “activist comics” to comics that are created specifically and explicitly to present the creator(s)’s given politics on a specific issue’ (Lund 2018, 42). Craftivism is a merging of craft and activism. According to Greer: ‘the very essence of craftivism lies in creating something that gets people to ask questions […] to join a conversation about the social and political intent of the creations’ Greer (2014, 8). Another way of describing the phenomenon is ‘the use of craft to challenge patriarchal hegemony, advocate for political and social rights, and promote the recognition of women’s traditional art forms’ (Markus 2019, 2). Craftivism here includes various forms of craft, such as knitting, crocheting, embroidering, etc. In the anthology Craftivism: The Art of Craft and Activism (2014), edited by Greer, thirty-three crafters and artists declare why they combine their creative skills to make a better world.\(^8\) Later on, the craftivism manifesto was formulated by Greer together with twelve other women in Britain. The manifesto declares:

A craftivist is anyone who uses their craft to help the greater good. Your craft is your voice. Craftivism is about raising consciousness, creating a better world stitch by stitch, and things made by hand, by a person. It’s also about sharing ideas with others in a way that is welcoming, not dividing, and celebrating traditional skills in new ways. As well as remembering and respecting the makers that came before us, adding to the dialogue and leaving something for the next generations of craftivists. Craftivism is about creating wider conversations about uncomfortable issues. A craftivist is anyone who uses their craft to help the greater good or in resistance to a greater societal ill. A single individual crafting can make a difference. Or they can craft together and benefit from the fellowship or other crafters. [\(-\ -\ -\)]\(^9\)

According to Rozsika Parker, the art of embroidery has functioned as a means of educating women into the feminine ideal, but it has also been a weapon of resistance against the constraints of femininity (Parker 2019, ix). The craft has a long tradition among women. It has been used as an instrument for coercion in connection with marriage and the labelling of household textiles such as sheets and towels, but also as
a source of pride and socialisation in sewing circles. In the 1970s Swedish feminist movement, embroidery was seen by some as a form of oppression that should be opposed, while other women started to use it in free and creative ways to express feminist political messages (Waldén 1988, 24-34; Eriksson 2003, 63). The craft was brought out from female domesticity into the public domain, carrying freedom, joy and feminist ideas, strengthened by working together for better conditions (Parker 2019, xi–xxi). Feminist critique that formerly was encoded in the medium could now be more openly expressed (Radner and Lanser 1993, 4).

Craftivism has been used for thematising a variety of issues. A number of artists in the US have used crafts to link feminism and critical race consciousness, such as Faith Ringgold, who has crafted quilts on this matter (Mahdawi 2019). In the UK, artists such as Tracy Emin are also using embroidery to express feminist and political ideas, while in Sweden the Brita Marakatt Labba embroiders works about the oppressed Sami people (Ljungberg et al. 2018, 161). Increasing numbers in Sweden are posting craftivist embroideries thematising environmental, feminist and other political issues on Instagram, see e.g. #broderauttexten. Comics artists are increasingly using the craft, making and publishing embroideries on social media. The affordances of the new media have encouraged a growth of a participatory culture which is characterised by sharing, the need to make a difference and the desire for social connection. Within this context, third wave feminists, who grew up with the internet, have re-defined and reclaimed domestic crafts, such as knitting, sewing, embroidery and cross-stitch, as empowering and creative (Markus 2019, 11).

Åsa Grennvall/Schagerström

Åsa Schagerström (b. 1973) has long been interested in textile arts. While she was studying at Konstfack, [University College of Arts, Crafts, and Design] in Stockholm 1997–2002, she started to draw comics fanzines with feminist themes. Drawn in black and white punk style, they were meant mostly for her friends, but spread into wider circles. She also made comics for newspapers and journals such as Bang. Her first comics album Det känns som hundra år [It feels like a hundred years] was published in 1999. The latest one is her eleventh album Urmöder (2019). (With this book’s publication she changed her family name from Grennvall to Schagerström, the name we will use in this text.) Recurrent themes in Schagerström’s albums are problematic family relations and violence in close relationships, retrospectively told from a safer social position.

As early as 2003, for her fourth album, Det är inte värst sådär i början [The beginning is not the worst], Schagerström embroidered the cover image. The title paraphrases and reverses a figure of speech that can be used to deny the importance of a problematic situation by pretending that things will soon get better; It’s always worst in the beginning. The title can be understood as a reference to a trait in contemporary culture; one should deny problems and pretend to be happy (Jönsson 2014, 73-74). Figure 2. The cover image is a cross stitched visualisation of a couple, a woman, in dark green and brown, and a man, in blue and black, isolated on a white background and with a void between them. The entire cover consists of the photographed textile, and the title is embroidered as well with cross stitching in black with some red stitches on the first letter. The design of the man and the woman is rather abstract, resulting from the sewing technique, similar to
pixels in a digital context. The style connotes traditional embroidered images, which have been frequently crafted in many households in the western cultural sphere since the 18th century (Eriksson 2008, 30). However, it is also reminiscent of the embroidered images with text that have recently become popular among young people on internet and social media. Åsa Schagerström has also posted embroidered images on internet (under the name Grennvall). Her book cover image here, with the isolated couple separated by empty space, can be interpreted as an indexical sign of the bad relations recounted in the comics stories within. The red stitches on the first letter may well indicate blood and violence. The comics inside are drawn by hand in black and white.

In 2007, after two more comics albums, Schagerström published Svinet [The Swine] also with an embroidered image on the cover. Figure 3. The comics story inside, drawn with black ink on a white background, tells of a man who has mistreated and beaten several women, including his mother and the female protagonist. The image on the cover is an embroidered paraphrase of a well-known Swedish painting, Den döende dandyn [The Dying Dandy], by Nils von Dardel, 1918. Here the embroidery consists mainly of
chain stitches, which is a filling technique that can be made to look like painting, like brush strokes. Stem stitches are used for soft lines and hatchings, and satin stitches are used for curly hair. Schagerström’s embroidered image can be interpreted as a visualisation of the dandy-like male protagonist, who in the comics is described as having unrealised artistic dreams and vacillating between hubris and self-contempt. He starts new relationships which all end in jealousy, domination and the beating of women, none but one of whom manage to leave him, hoping that the problems will pass. This is a well-known phenomenon in this kind of destructive relationship (Enander 2006). In the embroidered image on the cover, there are four women who are all taking care of him, not as a dying man, but as some fragile person who needs help. The conclusion, which the focaliser of the story makes clear, is that they are all stuck in a destructive pattern of behaviour, and that the only solution would be to leave the male protagonist. Treating this theme in this and several of her other comics albums for many years, beginning with 

Sjunde våningen [The seventh floor] in 2002, Schagerström exemplifies feminist comics craftivism. She has been perseverant in visualising the theme of violence in close relations, and in a variety of emotions, from black humour to serious depression, thereby adhering to the craftivism manifesto’s ideas of:

\[\textbf{Figure 3.} \ © Åsa Grennvall, Svinet, 2007, cover, 23.5 \times 17.5 \ \text{cm.}\]
‘creating a better world stitch by stitch’, and her craft ‘is about creating wider conversations about uncomfortable issues’\textsuperscript{12}

After three more comics books, two of which have embroidered images on the covers, Schagerström in 2019 published \textit{Urmodern} \textit{[The Original Mother]}, a book consisting of 78 pages with embroideries. Here the entire story is told in embroidered images, some of them combined with applications. The story is more fragmented and associative than her previous albums. However, it is sequential and has been characterised as a graphic novel, but also as embroidered visual poetry.\textsuperscript{13} All the verbal texts as well are embroidered. The images are sewn on recycled fabric from tablecloths, sheets and odd bits of cloth. The story in \textit{Urmodern} elaborates on break-ups and uprootings, but also on new beginnings and the will to grow a new family tree. Prior to the release of \textit{Urmodern}, Schagerström exhibited the original embroidered images at Handarbetets vänner [a gallery of the Friends of handicraft] in Stockholm (3.12.2019–21.1.2020).

In two of the images in \textit{Urmodern} Schagerström narrates the difficulty of telling what needs to be told without being misunderstood. In \textbf{Figure 4} the protagonist is lying down, thinking or dreaming of a group of people who are standing like a choir behind her, and who want things to be told. Brown, square patterned fabric, in the form of upper halves of bodies, is attached with a sewing machine above the embroidered form of the prone woman. Brown threads hang loosely, and could be interpreted as indications of sound, of

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=0.5\textwidth]{image.png}
\caption{\textbf{Figure 4.} © Åsa Schagerström, \textit{Urmodern}, 2019, n.p. 29,5 x 21 cm.}
\end{figure}
voices. An embroidered text, made up of lines sewn in stem stitch, says 'Det är många som vill ha saker sagt' ['There are so many who want to have things said']. On the next page, which is not shown here, there are two embroidered texts. The one on the upper half of the page says: "Snälla, läs det jag redan skrivit en gång till" ["Please read what I have already written once more"] and the one at the bottom: ‘Jag orkar inte förklara mer’ ['I’m too tired to go on explaining']. Apparently the protagonist has tried to express something that has not been understood. This can be interpreted in accordance with the problematic mother-daughter relationship which Schagerström has thematised previously in several books. On the third page (Figure 5) the protagonist is out walking in the forest, thoughtful, her arms dangling, and the embroidered caption reads: ‘om jag broderar orden höras det bättre då?’ ['If I embroider the words, will they be better heard?']. This is reminiscent of one of the sentences in the craftivism manifesto: ‘Your craft is your voice’. Groensteen’s concept ‘iconic solidarity’ is relevant here, since the meaning of each embroidered image in Urmodern is anchored by its neighbouring images (Groensteen 2007, 18). The book can be seen as a graphic novel, as comics, and it can also be regarded as comics craftivism.
Lotta Sjöberg

"Don’t worry everything is gonna be alwrong" (orig. in English). This text, cross-stitched in several colours, is embroidered by Lotta Sjöberg and published in her comics album *Det kan alltid bli värre* [It can always get worse] (Sjöberg 2014, 167). It is also available on Sjöberg’s own website, placed under the tab 'handicraft', together with more examples of her work.\(^9\) In *Det kan alltid bli värre*, Sjöberg mixes different kinds of expressions and techniques. There are comics, some drawn in black and white and some in colour, collages, embroideries and crochets. The embroideries are sewn on cloth or on clothes, and some are framed. Ever since her comics album debut with *Family living* (2011), she has used an ironic strategy, emphasising the contemporary context. According to Claire Colebrook: 'Understanding something *other than what is said* does not rely on perceiving some private or hidden meaning behind my words; we understand if a word is being used ironically because of the context' (Colebrook 2004, 16). Sjöberg’s embroidered comics all comment on current phenomena in Swedish/Western society, such as mindfulness, which has become a buzzword during the last years. A text in one of her embroideries reads "Mindfullstress" with letters in various colours, with a running deer embroidered below, in red (Sjöberg 2014, 142–143). The deer isn’t quite finished, and a needle with a red thread is still hanging on the cloth in the image. The thread with the needle could indicate that the writing is unfinished and as close at hand as ‘mindfullstress’ itself. The new word mindfullstress is ironic, as it pinpoints the stress to squeeze this activity into an already fully-booked calendar, so common in Sweden today, where the individualistic idea of engaging in mindfulness is popular. Another embroidery comments on topical neoliberalism, with its individualism and commercialism, and the advertisements surrounding us, urging us to buy more and more again (Bauman 2007). Sjöberg makes a reference to the slogan "Because I am worth it", a milestone from L’Oréal, the Parisian cosmetic company, launched in the US in 1971.\(^{20}\) She turns this reversed statement into an ironic comment: "Because I am not worth it" (orig. in English).\(^{21}\)

On the cover *Det kan alltid bli värre*, the title is drawn in cross stiches. Figure 6. The slogan also appears on a sewn tote bag on Sjöberg’s website, with ‘alltid’ (always) underlined.\(^{22}\) The comment on the situation of the frightened woman on the cover is done with blue cross stitching on a yellow background placed in what appears to be an old photo frame. Instead of 'It can always get better’, a cliché in books about positive thinking, in which readers are told to shape up and make the best of the situation, the text reads: 'It can always get worse'. This becomes an ironic comment on the culture that insists that people must be happy, have fun and see endless opportunities rather than protesting against such realities as lowered retirement pensions and deficiencies in the public sector. Sjöberg’s embroidery makes an ironic and political comment. The embroidery can be seen as a critique of neoliberal politics and related, exaggerated optimism, and her strategy is both ironic and reactive.\(^{23}\)

Sjöberg makes frequent use of portraits and medallions here, in the ironic drawings inside the album as well as on the cover. The cover image contains six frames hanging on a wall over a woman drawn in the grey scale, sitting on a couch, staring at the reader with a sorrowful gaze, perhaps depressed. The queen of Sweden peers angrily down from her portrait, and a small, angry child grimaces in another frame. A wedding portrait of a heterosexual couple hangs upside down, the woman with a sad expression on her
wedding day. In another frame, rain falls from a little cloud, and in the last, a little animal is lying down. All the portraits have golden frames and ironically comment on the usual fare in portraiture: happily married couples, smiling royalties and young, cute children. The anger shown in the portraits is a critique of the society in which even the queen is dissatisfied. This attitude coincides with other feminist comics, evoking recognition and empathy (Streeten 2020, 47).

A strong theme in Sjöberg’s work is the private home with heterosexual family life. In her debut album Family living (2011), an image drawn to resemble embroidery in black and white cross stitching reads: "Hemsk ljuva hem" [Horrible, sweet home], which of course is an ironic comment on the well-known proverb ‘Home, sweet home’ (Sjöberg 2011). The caption in the image reads: ‘Folkhemskt broderi’, [‘embroidery of the people’s home’ or ‘horrible folk embroidery’] which functions as an ironic comment on the thousands of traditional embroideries, made by women and hanging in Swedish homes, especially in country cottages (Eriksson 2008, 30–31).

Sjöberg uses intertextualities, often quickly recognised, from popular culture as well as the sociopolitical sphere. Often there are ironic references to gender relations, e.g. on a spread in the album Det kan alltid bli värre. The two images (Figure 7) can be read sequentially. The border between the two wallpapers surrounding the frames functions as a gutter and the contrast between the rounded frame and the square one strengthens the

Figure 6. © Lotta Sjöberg. Det kan alltid bli värre, 2014, cover, 21.0 x 15.5 cm.
worsening narrative. The embroidered image to the left shows a heterosexual couple standing under a flowered canopy, a traditional sign for marriage in many Western cultures. Instead of saying yes, they both say no. The speech bubbles, typical for the comics medium, are used here to amplify the situation of the man and the woman (Cohn 2013, 7). This couple do not want to marry, their attitude strengthened with black capital letters. The embroidery is placed in a white photograph frame, hung on a wallpaper with an antique pink hue, connotating romanticism, thus making this image ironic as well.

The embroidery to the right, resembling a country painting, can be read as a continuation of the first. It hangs on a green and white flowered wallpaper. This idyllic image of a small, red wooden cottage close to a forest, the Swedish flag wafting above, lovely weather with blue skies, evokes nostalgia. It conveys a longing for times past, perhaps to an Astrid Lindgren world, where the home is closely connected to happy childhood, an imaginary, paradisal, idyllic world (Salmose 2019, 47). This expression of nostalgia is often used in marketing and popular culture and has become a cliché for Sweden. In fact, the story also refers to an idea of Sweden as a place where people are regarded as living in more equal relationships than in many other countries, since active attempts at achieving equality through laws and regulations have indeed been taking place. In reality, there remain many inequalities, such as the salary gap between men and women and the fact that women still do far more household work than men. Women’s household work currently averages 13 hours per week compared to men’s 7.5 hours. Higher positions in Swedish society, be they public or private, continue to be dominated by men. In the right-hand image above, although no people are visible, via the speech bubble we can ‘hear’ someone screaming: ‘Hjälp till med disken för helvete’ [Come on, help me with the
washing-up dammit].26 The invisible protagonist could be interpreted as the woman in the house and she is really angry, once again doing all the washing-up. Her anger is common in the history of women’s liberation, and in related comics from the 1970s in the UK and Sweden.27 The style of the speech bubble here indicates a scream and the word ‘helvete’ (hell) is sewn in capital letters with red thread. In Western societies, the colour red often symbolises anger, but also love and revolution.

Sjöberg also uses comics hand-drawn in black and white metafunctionally to underline the crafting activities she also employs, particularly together with other women. Here the overall rhetorical strategy is ironic, political and humorous. The irony is based on empathy with female characters who have had depressing experiences, and it targets a patriarchal and neoliberal society. The comics in question is a four-page story, sequential, hand-drawn, and including photographic collage on the last page. In Figure 8 we see its three last pages. A group of women are doing a variation on the traditional sewing circle, but they call it ‘psykjunta’ [psychic circle], a study circle about the snarls of life. They are crafting together, and they are chatting happily, combining dialogue with repeated crafting terms to help themselves make the right moves in the crafting process. In the upper left image, above the circle of women, a voice-over text reads: ‘Hantverk är den enda sorts meditation som fungerar i praktiken. Som medlem i en psykjunta hittar var och en sitt eget mantra för att kunna närma sig Nirvana.’ [Crafting is the only kind of meditation that really works in practice. As a member of a ‘psykjunta’ everyone finds her own mantra to be able to approach Nirvana.]28 This is ironic as well as seriously meant. Even those who don’t believe in Nirvana often long for peace and calm. But an ironic reference to Westerners’ fanatic, fashionable and misanthropic adulation of Asian religions can also be discerned. Irony is also evident in the manner in which they exchange ideas about gender inequalities. One of the women says that she is knitting a beard that she will wear when she demands a higher salary the next day. Another says that she will hand-felt a woollen cock. Their common project, to make a Big Sweden Blanket, is also ironic, with its references to the national Swedish welfare project, here turned into a warm, woollen, and wet blanket to hide under. One of the women comments on the
blanket by saying: ‘Det här stycket skall täcka Vellinge och Sjöbo. Ersätta det här nuvarande rasistiska mönstret.’ [This part of the blanket shall cover Vellinge and Sjöbo (two xenophobic communities in Sweden). Replace the present racist pattern.] Another woman replies: ”Bra! Den här delen ska täcka riksdagen. Bort med allt blått. In med rött och grönt . . . ” [Alright, this part shall cover the parliament. Take away all the blue. And in with red and green . . .]. 29

The humour also involves many verbal puns, hard to translate from Swedish, but e.g. they are knitting a tvångströja [straightjacket], an offerkofta [victim cardigan] at their psykjunta instead of sewing circle, [in Swedish sjyunta]. The political rhetoric is also humorously expressed in the final manifesto, expressed by the fourth woman, reminiscent of the craftivist manifesto: ‘Och en dag släpper vi lösa den osynliggjorda kvinno-hantverkskraft som i generationer lagrats i lådor, linneskåp, vävar och vindar. Fatta vilket enormt världsomspännande nätverk av trådar! En dag drar vi åt dem och spänner vårt största nät över patriarkatets feta arsle och förvandlar det till kassler.’ [And one day we will release the power of the female craft that has been made invisible for generations and stored in drawers, linen cupboards, weaves and attics. Understand what a huge world wide web of threads! One day we’ll gather them together and span our biggest web over the fat arse of the patriarchy and turn it into pork chops!] 30

The humour in this comics sequence expresses the feelings of joy and power experienced by the women when crafting and chatting together. It is similar to Nicola Streeten’s text about her experiences of laughter, pleasure and delight encountered repeatedly within groups of women, especially feminists: ‘We have laughed through our tears of pain and anger.’ 31 The women in the comics here agree about the problematic aspects of society, and are criticising them with irony and satire.

To sum up, Sjöberg is embroidering, which she calls ”broderiterapi” [embroidery therapy]. 32 The artist masters her fear of vital problems by doing something as practical as crafting and at the same time make a political act. In her works she continuously comments on global political and social issues; she has embroidered the climate crisis, family conflicts, menstruation and consumerism. Since February 2020, when the CV19 pandemic first appeared in Sweden, the corona motif has emerged in her embroideries. Figure 9. The first image was posted on Instagram on 22 February 2020 with the comment ‘Coronaviruset i mikroskop, del 1’ [The corona virus in the microscope, part 1].

Figure 9. © Lotta Sjöberg, ‘The corona virus in microscope, part 3’, Instagram 22 February 2020. Printed in Galago, 2020:3, p. 67.
following post she comments the text: ‘Så här är det: jag är rädd för pandemier. De kickar igång katastrofkänslor. På nåt sätt är det skönt att få något att kroka fast oron på, nåt konkret liksom.’ [It’s like this: I’m afraid of pandemics. They trigger feelings of catastrophe. Somehow it’s nice to have something to pin the worry on. Something, well, concrete]. In an interview in Dagens Nyheter 2020–03-19, Sjöberg emphasised that craft is political: ‘Det finns också något politiskt i själva handlingen att brodera, säger Lotta Sjöberg. Det går långsamt, och är inte det minsta lönsamt.’ [There is also something political in the act of embroidering, Lotta Sjöberg says. It goes slowly, and it is not at all profitable]. The corona embroideries also appear on the inside surfaces of the front and back covers in a corona-theme issue of Galago, a well-known Swedish alternative comics journal.

Sjöberg also performs what she calls ‘guerilla embroidery’. In Sweden ‘gerillaslöjd’ [guerilla craft] means various kinds of environmental-friendly craft, creative regarding material and technique, containing sociopolitical messages, and placed in public spaces (Engström 2014, 128). Her work can surely be regarded as craftivism since she is ‘creating a better world stitch by stitch, and her craft is about creating wider conversations about uncomfortable issues’.

Sjöberg also draws and writes comics, i.e. sequential stories with interdependent images combined with verbal text, and they are made and published in a comics context, a comics craftivism context.

The boom

In recent years the making of embroidered comics has increased significantly in Sweden. Growing numbers seem to find handicrafts satisfying, and embroidery has become cool. An art and design group called Fuldesign [Ugly design] was established in Stockholm in 2005, and they have been working ever since to establish the old Swedish tradition of embroidery among the hip, young members of the population. They started selling embroidery materials at Designtorget [The Design Square], in Stockholm, and then at branch shops in other Swedish cities. Fuldesign is marketing embroidery with contemporary texts such as ‘Homo sweet homo’, ‘Det är inte jag, det är du’ [It’s not me, it’s you], and the motto is clear: it is powerful when it is ugly (Engström 2014, 77). On websites, blogs, facebook pages and(instagrams amazing amounts of embroideries are being published, and the comics artists are right on target. Not only Lotta Sjöberg and Åsa Schagerström, who have been creating this sort of comics craftivism for a long time, but also others, such as Lisa Ewald (b. 1987) who, in her comic album debut Allt kommer att bli bra [Everything is gonna be alright] (2013), includes two humouristic embroideries in a naïve style. Ewald, educated at the Comic Art School in Malmö, often creates short comics with graphite, spray paint, collage techniques, and embroidery. Marie Tillman’s comic album Tänk positivt annars kan du dö [Think positive or you might die] (2018) also includes an embroidered comics. Sara Granér’s Atlas lika mellangärde (2019) is based on Granér’s Instagram, where she calls herself el-granero under the hashtag #dagensord [the word of the day]. The book contains a mixture of cartoons in ink, linoleum print, aquarelle, gouache, acrylic, pastel, oil paint and embroideries. The cartoons all include short sentences, with ironic and double connotations. Granér plays with words, often arranging them in new, odd ways, with a satirical and humouristic
tone. One of the cartoons is an embroidery about the United Nations, Figure 10. Three gender-neutral figures are designed in an anthropomorphic style, like teddy bears, which is a signum for Granér since her debut with the comics album Det är bara lite aids (2008) [It’s just a little AIDS]. The three humans/teddy bears are holding an emergency meeting, and the text reads: ‘FNs säkerhetstråd’, which means ‘The security thread of the United Nations’ (Granér 2020). In Swedish this is a verbal, rhyming pun: säkerhetsråd (Security Council) becomes here säkerhetstråd (security thread). Each of the three figures holds up a pen-like needle, with a piece of thread in each needle’s eye. They are probably trying to stitch up a solution, but the threads have not yet been connected. The thread is here a metaphor for the weak and difficult work at the UN, and the creatures in the council seem to be rather stressed, illustrating the thought: will this meeting really work out?

The holding of exhibitions has recently become a frequently employed method for increasing interest in comics. In 2012 Sara Granér and the comics artist Hanna Stenman (b. 1987) held an exhibition in Landskrona, at which they showed textile collages including embroidery. Granér has held several exhibitions in recent years. During the single week of 30 October – 6 November 2019 at Gallery Backlund in Gothenburg, Sweden, she exhibited and sold the embroideries and cartoons originally published in her book Allas lika mellangärde. The exhibition was a great success with over 500 people attending the vernissage.
Discussion

This article argues that embroidered comics can be seen as part of an ongoing craftivism in Sweden and that the feminist comics by Åsa Grennvall/Schagerström, Lotta Sjöberg and Sara Granér can be regarded as comics craftivism. These comics, although resembling drawn works, are all sewn with needle and thread, and often thematise topics directly related to craftivism’s aims of ‘raising consciousness, creating a better world stitch by stitch’. The comics artists here discussed use embroidered comics to create ‘wider conversations about uncomfortable issues’, e.g. feminist issues, such as being trapped in violent relationships as in Schagerstöm’s cover for Svinet, or unequal sharing of household work, as in Sjöberg’s sequential story in Det kan alltid bli värre. Another comics craftivism method is the sewing of ironic commentary on today’s stressful society, such as in the image “Mindfullstress” by Sjöberg, or her images of the unequal situation of the married couple.

The craftivism manifesto, written in different colours, like threads, posits that crafting is a radical movement, which strives for a better society and for women getting their voices heard (Greer 2014, 8). Comics artists in Sweden are clearly active in the craftivist movement. They move between the spheres of high art and low art, between exhibitions, albums, Instagram and Facebook and the borders between these spheres are increasingly blurred.

Åsa Schagerström’s works are craftivist because “her craft is her voice”, and because she is “raising consciousness, creating a better world stitch by stitch [...] celebrating traditional skills in new ways [...] and] creating wider conversations about uncomfortable issues...”. Lotta Sjöberg’s works are about “raising consciousness, creating a better world stitch by stitch”, and, being hand-made objects, they are also craftivist. In addition, they concern sharing ideas with others in a way that is welcoming, not dividing, and “celebrating traditional skills in new ways.”

Greer (2014, 8). Sjöberg is a comics craftivist, who uses her craft in resistance to the combined greater societal ill: neoliberal individualism and commercialism. Sara Granér is incontestably a craftivist, working as she does in a variety of methods and materials such as drawing, paper maché, ceramics, and embroidery, and using her ‘craft to help the greater good’.

Today, in 2020, notwithstanding earlier coercion into crafts such as regulated embroidery, the mental barriers for feminists’ engagement in textile crafts have been lowered or erased. The problematic relationship, described and analysed by Rozsika Parker, has changed to a freer one, based on voluntary activities. Women use traditional techniques freely, combining manual crafting with digital technology. Embroidery traditions provide a bank of techniques, patterns and styles, but are now used creatively via methods similar to sampling. The digital has been introduced into the craft, and by scanning, photographing and uploading on internet and social media such as Instagram and Facebook, it is possible to communicate quickly, even instantly, with audiences that can see photographs of the works and then directly comment on form and content. The works frequently concern political, environmental and gender issues. The aspect of do-it-yourself is important, and the creators of this generation want to be producers, not simply consumers. The feminist, craftivist comics artists are engaged in the politics of the handmade – narrating through textiles. They contribute to the renewal of the comics medium, and, while experimenting artistically with materials and techniques, they
thematising new ideas as well as new perspectives on lingering problems, often with irony and humour.

They are all methodically following their paths, creating art that pertains to issues they have prioritised for several years, Schagerström working with gender issues and human relations, and Sjöberg and Granér with unfair economic conditions, environmental problems and gender issues. They are involved in comics craftivism in Sweden, a serious, important, and ongoing movement.

Notes

1. Biller (2009). Our translation.
2. The title is an ironic verbal pun, literally meaning Everbody’s equal diaphragm, but referring to ‘människovärde’, the Swedish word for human value and dignity, i.e. referring to Everybody’s equal value and human dignity.
3. https://gramho.com/explore-hashtag/hannastenman, accessed 10.6.2020.
4. Thanks to professor Gunnar Krantz, Malmö University for the information about embroidered comics outside Sweden.
5. Groensteen (2012). In this text Groensteen refers to Thierry Smolders and Harry Morgan.
6. https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/craft, accessed 29.6.2020.
7. https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/activism, accessed 22.6.2020
8. http://www.hellobetsysgreer.com/, accessed 2.6.2020
9. http://craftivism.com/manifesto/, accessed 2.6.2020. Original in colours.
10. Fredrik Strömberg ”Interview with Åsa Grennvall”, Bild & Bubbla, Seriefrämjandets tidskrift om tecknade serier, 2002:1.
11. Anna Nordenstam and Margareta Wallin Victorin, ‘Swedish Feminist Comics and Cartoons at the Turn of the Millennium: Joanna Rubin Dranger and Åsa Grennvall (Schagerström)’. Forthcoming.
12. http://craftivism.com/manifesto/ accessed 2.6.2020. Original in colours.
13. Fredrik Strömberg review of Uromodern, in Bild & Bubbla, Seriefrämjandets tidskrift om tecknade serier, 2020:2, p. 28.
14. Åsa Schagerström, Uromodern, 2019, n.p. Our translation.
15. Schagerström, Uromodern, n.p. Our translation.
16. Det känns som hundra år, 1999, Mie, 2001, and Familjealbum, 2005.
17. Schagerström, Uromodern, n.p. Our translation.
18. http://craftivism.com/manifesto/, accessed 2.6.2020
19. http://www.lottasjoberg.com/hantverk/, accessed 6.6.2020.
20. https://www.theglobeandmail.com/life/fashion-and-beauty/beauty/loreal-because-im-worth-it-slogan-marks-a-milestone/article554604/, accessed 6.6. 2020.
21. http://www.lottasjoberg.com/hantverk/, accessed 6.6.2020.
22. http://www.lottasjoberg.com/hantverk/, accessed 6.6.2020.
23. Jönsson, ”Ironiska, groteska och reparatorativa strategier i samtida feministisk seriekonst”, p. 74.
24. Especially in Germany where this idealised image of Sweden is seen in popular culture such as the Inga Lindström-Filme, see Källström (2012, 121-134).
25. Women and men in Sweden – Facts and Figures 2018, Stockholm: Statistiska centralbyrån, 2018, p. 45.
26. Sjöberg, Det kan alltid bli värre, p. 163. Our translation.
27. Nicola Streeten, chapter 3 ‘The 1970s: Anger and the Humourless Feminist’, UK Feminist Cartoons and Comics. A Critical Survey and Anna Nordenstam & Margareta Wallin Wictorin, “Women’s Liberation. Swedish Feminist Comics and Cartoons from the 1970s and 1980s.” European Comic Art, Vol. 12, Issue no. 2, 2019, p. 77-105.
28. Sjöberg, Det kan alltid bli värre, 37. Our translation.
29. Sjöberg, Det kan alltid bli värre, 39. Our translation.
30. Sjöberg, *Det kan alltid bli värre*, 39. Our translation.
31. Streeten, *UK Feminist Cartoons and Comics*, viii.
32. *Dagens Nyheter*, ‘Lotta Sjöberg hanterar coronaviruset genom broderi,’ 19.3.2020 https://www.dn.se/kultur-noje/lotta-sjoberg-hanterar-coronaviruset-genom-broderi/, accessed 6.6.2020.
33. *Dagens Nyheter* 19.3.2020, Our translation.
34. Lotta Sjöberg, *Galago* 2020:3, p. 2 and p. 67.
35. http://www.lottasjoberg.com/hantverk/ accessed 6.6.2020.
36. http://craftivism.com/manifesto/ accessed 2.6.2020.
37. https://galleribacklund.se/utstallningar/sara-granr/, accessed 10.6.2020.
38. https://gramho.com/explore-hashtag/hannastenman, accessed 10.6.2020
39. https://galleribacklund.se/utstallningar/sara-granr/, accessed 10.6.2020.
40. http://craftivism.com/manifesto/ accessed 2.6.2020. Original in colours. The following quotes in colour are also from the same manifesto.
41. http://craftivism.com/manifesto/ accessed 2.6.2020.

**Disclosure statement**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

**Funding**

This work was supported by Swedish Research Council, project Contemporary Swedish Feminist Comics as Medium for Political Activism and Critique, under Grant number VR2018-01165

**Notes on contributors**

Anna Nordenstam is Professor of Comparative Literature at the University of Gothenburg, Sweden. Her main research areas are feminist comics, children’s and YA-literature, and educational perspectives on literature. She has published several articles about comics such as “Women’s Liberation. Swedish Feminist Comics and Cartoons from the 1970s and 1980s” (in *European Comic Art*, 2019) together with Margareta Wallin Wictorin. Nordenstam is the project leader of the research project “Contemporary Swedish Feminist Comics as Medium for Activism and Critique” (Swedish Research Council, 2019-2022.)

Margareta Wallin Wictorin is Associate Professor in Art History and Visual Studies and Senior Lecturer in Culture Studies at Karlstad University, Sweden. She has published articles and chapters with postcolonial, educational, and feminist perspectives on comics, such as “Women’s Liberation. Swedish Feminist Comics and Cartoons from the 1970s and 1980s” (in *European Comic Art*, 2019), together with Anna Nordenstam. Wallin Wictorin is a member of the research project “Contemporary Swedish Feminist Comics as Medium for Activism and Critique” (Swedish Research Council, 2019-2022).

**ORCID**

Anna Nordenstam http://orcid.org/0000-0002-2780-8275
Margareta Wallin Wictorin http://orcid.org/0000-0002-1639-6180

**References**

Bauman, Z. 2007. *Consuming Life*. Cambridge: Polity.
Biller, M. 2009. *LyckoBiller*. Malmö: Egmont Kärnan.
Cohn, N. 2013. “Beyond Word Balloons and Thought Bubbles: The Integration of Text and Image.” *Semiotica*, no. 197, pp. 35-63.

Colebrook, C. 2004. *Irony*. London and New York: Routledge.

Enander, V. 2006. *Women Leaving Violent Men: Crossroad of Emotions, Cognitions and Action*. Diss, University of Gothenburg, Department of Social Work, Gothenburg.

Engström, F. A. 2014. *Gerillaslöjd. Garngrafti, DIY och den handgjorda revolutionen*. Stockholm: Hemslöjdens förlag.

Eriksson, Y. 2003. “Den visualiserade kvinnligheten ur ett feministiskt perspektiv. Ett 1970-talsprojekt.” In *Från modernism till samtidskonst*, edited by I. Brinck, Y. Eriksson, and A. Göthlund. Lund: Signum, pp. 48-77.

Eriksson, Y. 2008. “Korstygn och värkning - om folkkonst och kreativitet.” In *Visuella markörer. Bild, tradition, förnyelse*, edited by Y. Eriksson. Stockholm: Carlssons, pp. 26-53.

Granér, S. 2020. *Allas lika mellangärde*. Stockholm: Galago.

Greer, B., ed. 2014. *Craftivism: The Art of Craft and Activism*. Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press.

Groensteen, T. 2007. *The System of Comics*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi.

Groensteen, T. 2012. “The Current State of French Comics Theory.” *Scandinavian Journal of Comic Art (SJoCA)* vol. 1, no. 1, pp. 111-122.

Jönsson, M. 2014. “Ironiska, groteska och reparatoriav strategier isamtida feministisk seriekonst.” *Finsk Tidskrift* no. 3-4, pp. 73-74.

Källström, L. 2012. “Var ligger egentligen Bullerbyn? Föreställningar om svensk idyll i tysk populärkultur.” In *Barnditeturenens värden och värderingar*, edited by S. Kärrholm and P. Tenngart. Lund: Studentlitteratur, pp. 121-134.

Ljungberg, J., L. Malm, S. Mostyn, and J. Pousette, eds. 2018. *In & Beyond Sweden: Journeys through an Art Scene*. Stockholm: Art and Theory Publishing.

Lund, M. 2018. “Comics Activism, A(Partial) Introduction.” *Scandinavian Journal of Comic Art, (SJoC)* vol. 3, no. 2, pp. 39-54.

Mahdawi, A. 2019. “The Quilts that Made America Quake: How Faith Ringgold Fought the Power with Fabric.” *The Guardian*, June 4. Accessed 23 June 2020. https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2019/jun/04/faith-ringgold-new-york-artist-serpentine-gallery-london .

Markus, S. 2019. *The Eye of the Needle: Craftivism as an Emerging Mode of Civic Engagement and Cultural Participation*. Diss, Columbia University, Published by ProQuest LLC.

Meskin, A. 2017. “Defining Comics.” In *The Routledge Companion to Comics*, edited by F. Bramlett, R. T. Cook, and A. Meskin, . London and New York: Routledge, pp. 221-229.

Parker, R. 2019. *The Subversive Stitch: Embroidery and the Making of the Feminine*. London: Bloomsbury Visual Arts.

Radner, J. N., and S. S. Lanser. 1993. “Strategies of Coding in Women’s Cultures.” In *Feminist Messages. Coding in Women’s Folk Culture*, edited by J. N. Radner. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, pp.1-29.

Sabin, R. 1996. *Comics, Comix & Graphic Novels. A History of Comic Art*. London: Phaidon Press Limited.

Salmose, N. 2019. “Den nostalgiska ikonotexten i *Emil i Lönneberga*.” In *Astrid Lindgrens bildaVärlden*, edited by H. Ehriander and A. Almgren White. Göteborg/ Stockholm: Makadam, pp. 41-64.

Sjöberg, L. 2011. *Family living. Den ostädda sanningen*. Stockholm: Bonnier fakta.

Sjöberg, L. 2014. *Det kan alltid bli värre*. Stockholm: Galago.

Streeten, N. 2020. *UK Feminist Cartoons and Comics. A Critical Survey*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan.

Waldén, L. 1988. “Den tidskrävande onyttighetens betydelse.” *Häften för kritiska studier* vol. 21, no. 2, pp. 24–34.