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Kilau. The coffeehouse with no front sign, just a set of glossy magenta doors leading into a narrow grey hall. If it weren’t for the ceiling to floor menu dangling just inside the portal you’d wonder even more than you do already… is this the place? Climbing the stairs at the back of the hall, it has an enigmatic secret-clubhouse feel. There is an explosion of concert bills and posters for eccentric, kooky, and generally youth-oriented art-house events. They set the tone of arty, effeminate urban-chic that continues inside. Its ambiance alludes to the popular television show, *Friends* – an image that’s for sale with your coffee. It’s here that the Knit Club meets. Young, affluent women gather once a fortnight to consume coffee and urban chic in a fishing town…

While this paper is in a session on “Images of Motherhood,” motherhood provides only a backdrop, part of the kaleidoscope of aestheticized self-presentation lived by a group of twenty-something knitters. Two of the members are in the midst of having their first babies while another is publicly infertile, and a fourth knitting in empathy with her older sister’s pregnancy. The title of this paper, therefore, reflects not only images of motherhood, but also notes it as one of the roles multiple facets involved in constructing the individual self in northeast Scotland. This is a Self influenced by traditional gender roles and intangible peer pressure towards domestic motherhood.

For my generation in Scotland, knitting has always been gendered, while simultaneously being historically non-gendered. Thus, a night at the Knit Club also illustrates the syncretism of American pop-culture with local realities and histories. These knitters draw on three different image-sources to create their syncretic performances of dwelling: 1. the American knitting fad with its consumerist bent; 2. the mythic images of traditional, Scottish knitting; and 3. the ideals of domesticity and gender roles so popular during the 1950’s, that also coincide with the rise of American consumerism.

Dwelling, in this context, refers to Heidegger’s concept of being-in-the-world. It is a mode of existence where subject and object are unified, and conscious and unconsciousness are too. It is characterized by the continuous possibilities of making and remaking the self. Dwelling is living our lives.¹

Often dwelling is equated with authenticity and essence, and set in opposition to performance, inauthenticity, and appearance. I argue that the Knit Club is a performance that masquerades as the everyday. Its members are women who dwell through performance, who create themselves with images and against the constant backdrop of traditional gender roles.

[Slide 3] As part of this dwelling, the Knit Club colonizes a bit of Kilau when they meet. They take it over, possess it, decorate it… but not all at once. It’s a sneak-attack. They come camouflaged in Indie-chic clothes with faces framed by dark-brown hair. They queue politely at the till. They sit at tables. They sip from those ubiquitous, snow-white cups that all urban cafés have and they have large handbags that sit like lumpy, obedient puppies by the sides of their chairs. Then… the bags become visible as the women pull them onto their laps or set them on the table and start rummaging. Needles, books, patterns, plush toys, wool, and half-finished projects emerge as part of a portable feminine décor. This gendered aesthetic wells up in an otherwise gender-neutral space.

**Friendly Images**

[Slide 4] It is here and now that urban chic becomes an important concept. More succinctly, Jonathan Friedman, Ulf Hannerez and others call this phenomenon *cosmopolitanism*. This term refers to an image of life with “the self… at the center of a series of concentric circles… [and] universal liberal values privileged above family, ethnic group, or nation.” These include values like gender equality. This cosmopolitan, liberal equality is based on the creation of sameness between genders, rather than on ideas of different-but-equal, as is a more common view in the former

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Soviet Bloc. *Cosmopolitanism* describes the common sense idea of the Self, held not only by these Indie knitters, but also by people like us academics. (Some of who are also Indie knitters!)⁴ It’s also embodied by the television show *Friends* whose characters and plot illustrate cosmopolitan ideals and life styles, as well as disseminate the urban chic aesthetic. Going to Knit Club, and being seen knitting nonchalantly, is a performance of a young, affluent, and feminine cosmopolitan identity.⁵

In contrast to this public, image-based dwelling, one of the members also makes wedding cards on commission and lives amidst these crafts. She spreads the materials and task through out the flat she shares with her fiancé. It gets in the way, makes a mess, and she starts and stops the craft in rhythm with the other things she needs to do in her everyday life rather than in sync with the consumption of £2 lattes. It’s these lattes that provide the first clue to the highly performative character of Knit Club gatherings.

The ways in which the women dance around drink reveals the importance of performing *to* the group and *as* a group. As Kate Fox points out, for this demographic you are what you *do not* eat, and the women make a point of not consuming two things: alcohol and caffeine.⁶ They are not tea-total. The abstinence isn’t complete, merely an aspect of creating a *Friends*-like image of cosmopolitan femininity, which they broadcast to any and all within immediate listening and seeing distance. But also to people in their wider social circle whom they tell about these wholesome knitting nights. Like *Friends*, the public and private collide here in a sort of public domesticity. The café is your private lounge, only everyone can see and hear what you’re doing in it… and sometimes that’s the whole point.

**Mythic Images**

[Slide 5] However, the particular dwelling performed in the Knit club has thick local roots and relates to the prevalent image of femininity in this part of Britain. This is an image of young women with partners or boyfriends or (preferably) husbands. It is an image in which these women have babies and knit as their key domestic

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⁵ Gendered version of cosmopolitanism characterized by different-but-equal gender roles for males and females.

activities. They perform womanhood through knitting and provisioning their homes and families, and in that sense they mobilize images of gender-specific dwelling. It makes you wonder, if you’re not a mother or not expecting, maybe you’re not a knitter?

First, let’s look at some of the gendered imagery that the Knit Club incorporates into their dwelling. The group creates their self-representations through the use of various sets of images that circulate in popular culture. The first one I’ll look at is part of the misty imaginings of national history that infuse Scotland and have transformed it from nation into branded tourist-destination for hundreds of years. Like a three-legged haggis or sexy kilt-clad highlanders, virtuoso knitting done by grannies in wee thatched cottages is an image that enjoys international popularity. And, perhaps unlike the first two clichés, the knitting granny actually has personal relevance for people living here. They invoke these images as representative of themselves by talking casually about this as history, as well as by trading awe-struck anecdotes about middle-aged co-workers who can knit Shetland lace shawls with their eyes closed. Thus, the image is both intellectually legitimized and made personally relevant.

As an iconic tradition, knitting is not particularly gendered, as most knitters acknowledge its undiscriminating history. Knitting for rural subsistence was everyone’s job. What this allusion does for the self-representation of the women links them to rural, non-capitalist roots, thus offering legitimacy to their contemporary knitting. In contrast, the Knit Club is undeniably linked to the McWorld via the heavily consumerist American knitting fad of Stitch’n’Bitch, which, by the way, is a movement that appropriates the “novelty” of public knitting to enhance its own celebrity.

Post-War Images

[Slide 6] The second set of inspirational image that I talk about comes from the post-war years, especially the ‘50’s. In the

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8 Those rural peasants knitting Shetland shawls, or working-class families engaged in the gansey-making cottage industry
9 Personal connection to older women who do this, lead these lives, live these roles
post-war years home making turned into American consumerism, with its attendant visual displays.\(^1\) These are displays not just of things, but entire demeanours and aestheticized spaces.\(^2\) Meanwhile knitting morphed into home making. Knitting no longer produced essential stockings and gansies, but home-décor. It became a gendered image – one of women and crinoline lady loo-roll covers\(^3\) – even though there are still people alive who remember men as knitters when the practice was a common cottage industry.

The members of the Knit Club can be seen incorporating this in their public performance of effortlessly exuding domesticity. After demonstrating their powers of home making by transforming a corner of Kilau into a den of feminine aesthetics, they proceed to create objects that allow them to mother in absentia. They extend their domestic agency\(^4\) as homemakers via the hats, gloves, and scarves they knit for their friends and family. One of the youngest members took this connection between domestic knitting and performance even further. In fact, she joined the group in order to take up knitting in empathy for an elder sister who became pregnant. Through this visible and gendered practice, she was able to live domesticity vicariously and thus represent herself as an adult woman more fully.

**Analysis & Conclusions**

[Slide 7] Professional fashionistas and academics alike have established the impact of *Friends* on Euro-American societies.\(^5\) American images of youth culture/dwelling have been accepted and appropriated into people’s worldviews – especially those of young women. Further, the knitters themselves agree with this observation that their “girly nights out,” bear an uncanny resemblance to a café scene in *Friends*. Examples from the Knit Club show that the influence of this aesthetic extends even further, and it becomes an unconscious model for the performance of self. Further, the themes of gender and visuality provide the context for their being-in-the-world.

\(^2\) Give examples of this 50’s stuff that reveal visualization and commodification.

The space, or ambiance, of the café is for sale. It is “your”
public lounge for hire. You buy it with the coffee, but you can only
consume it through the performance of lounging about and dwelling
in it. The women in the Knit Club know that you can only live in
your public lounge by acing as if it already is your lounge.

Contemporary performance, especially the Knit Club’s one
of the Domestic, Scottish Cosmopolitan, requires a host of
consumption practices. They buy and consume props like coffee,
public lounge space, and expensive wool and knitting books. (Keep
in mind; one should only use the chic, natural fibres.) Further,
consumption is necessary for performance, and performing activates
an image of Self. Consumption is necessary to create and dwell
certain images of one’s self, and the Knit Club illustrates this
through their use of the consumption of coffee and knitting in order
to integrate contradictory images of women and make them
meaningful.

The Knit Club, in its continuous paradoxes, is a space in
which young women develop and re-fashion individual image of
themselves as women. Like the coffeehouse scenes in Friends, these
women are dwelling, but this dwelling is simultaneously a
performance. It is not the daily dwelling of using a space constantly,
gaining the sort of familiarity that lets you navigate it in the dark
while half awake.

The idea of familial and familiar sociality in public penetrates the
consciousness/worldview of people in my generation, in this social
class. These young knitters produce self-representations that
simultaneously re-affirm local tradition and engage global
cosmopolitanism.

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Bibliography


