

The art of gentle protest

It might be gentle, but there's nothing weak about "craftivist" Sarah Corbett's form of activism



I'm a gentle protester, and I teach other people how to do that.

For me, activism is about change, structures and systems. We have to be highly emotionally intelligent in figuring out strategy, but also in how we engage people, so that we don't demonise or exclude. That's more effective for long-term change. Otherwise we just scream at each other without looking for a common good that everyone can be part of.

I think "gentle protest" can be misinterpreted. It does not mean being weak. Especially as a woman, I'm very aware of not wanting to be seen that way. Gentleness is about doing things in a loving way, but also with self-control. It means channelling anger into something effective and loving. It's about not focusing on personalities, but policies, so that everyone can be part of the change without ego.

I never label people; people aren't 'bad people'. Some do bad things, some do good things, most of us do a bit of both. Gentle protest is about encouraging others to be the best they can be rather than just labelling them 'bad'. We can still protest their actions while encouraging them to do better. It's protesting in a loving way saying: "This is the solution and we want you to aim towards this." If the world we're in now has taught us anything, it's that we don't know how to talk to people we disagree with. I try to inspire people to know how to put their anger into action that's effective.

Activism is a craft like any other. For me, activism is a priority, and craft is the tool.

When the craft becomes the priority, the campaign isn't as effective. It's a question of what the issue is and how other people are tackling it, and then whether craftivism is the right tool to use. Sometimes it isn't.

It's never the aim to be patronising. If we're making street art to engage the public, it's about doing things that provoke rather than preach. I read so much about neuroscience and the senses as well as campaign strategies. We notice micro-expressions and tone of voice, and giving gifts with humility and with the intention of creating conversation is also a craft.

The majority of change is incremental. It comes from people regularly seeing how others are behaving and quietly thinking about it. So much change is not about being direct, it's about living those actions

for others to see. The small stuff has power, and it works. If it didn't work, I wouldn't do it. If it was more effective to shout at people, I would do that, but it isn't.

I'm a kind of activism agony aunt, I write a column called 'The Activist Whisperer' for Lush. People ask a real mix of questions, and I try to bring in lots of stats and facts that might help. What gets me up in the morning isn't cross-stitching, it's how to do more effective activism, and how to help

others do that. I directly lead on campaigns and consult with organisations, but I try to teach people how to do it too. People want to be changemakers. If I can help in some way - having come from a low-income area, but worked for big companies on big campaigns, and having done craftivism for ten years - I'm keen to share.

Physically making something using your head, heart and hands is really powerful.

It calms you, helps you to be mindful of what you're bringing to the issue. Some people in my workshops have never picked up a needle and thread before. It's accessible. It's a comforting tool to use to then ask uncomfortable questions. All of my projects have different objectives, but they are all about physically doing something. In a world where we make less and less, the power of making is even more important.

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My hope for the Craftivist Collective is to reach more people.

I use craftivism as a tool for gentle protest, but really my passion is for helping people become better activists! I hope we can have a bigger impact on the culture of activism. It can be for introverts too. When I'm on my deathbed, I want to have been able to show that activism can be so many things other than marches and petitions. ♦



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Sarah Corbett is an award-winning campaigner, and founder of the Craftivist Collective, which uses craft as a tool for gentle protest. She also runs workshops and consults with organisations on how to bring gentle protest into their work. She's recently become a columnist for Lush Times, giving advice on effective activism.