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# Don't sweat about what you'll wear to this party

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**W**ITH their handmade patches, silk-screened slogans and multicolored panels, the T-shirts from Matrushka Construction are hardly run-of-the-mill. And that's precisely the allure for participants in the store's Tee Shirt Construction Nights, once-in-a-while events that allow shoppers to pick the individual pieces of their shirts, then see them sewn together on the spot.

Inspired by the assembly-line process of a Taco Bell drive-through, an interest in performance art and an acknowledgment that sewing is often mundane, the Construction Nights are the collective brainchild of Laura S. Howe, 36, and Beth Ann Whittaker, 28, artists and business partners.

The last event, in October, was nothing short of a scene as 200 people mobbed the tiny Silver Lake storefront. Part sweatshop, part nightclub, six sewers stitched up 85 shirts in four hours with a DJ working his turntables.

People get so excited, says Whittaker, that "a frenzy sort of takes over. People are ripping off their clothes."

So far, there have been three events — each with a light-hearted, leftist political subtext. The first centered on the proletariat, giving shoppers their choice of pieces in red or black.

Playing off the scuffle between the U.S. and French governments, Viva la France was the theme last October. Made from Marcel Marceau-esque black-and-white-striped fabric, the shirts were adorned with patches embroidered with French phrases such as "coup d'etat" and "super bon bon." The theme for Friday: Reap What You Sew.

"There's a huge sense of humor in it," said Howe. "If you can't laugh about what you're wearing, then you probably won't be as into it."

The whole operation runs like a sandwich counter.

Shoppers scan the menu in the window, which shows the shirt pieces, patches and prices. One person takes orders, another puts the pre-cut fabric into a brown paper sack. The pieces move down a line of sewers while the customer pays.

"They think it's magic or something that these things happen," says Howe. "They're just overwhelmed by the fact that they're actually watching someone sew a shirt."

Howe and Whittaker also keep the price-point for these custom-made shirts low. Depending on the style of shirt and number of patches, these wearable art concoctions run between \$14 and \$20.

"We have this weird working-class guilt about not charging hundreds of dollars for every piece we do," said Howe. "I like the idea that someone can come in here without having to break the bank just to have a shirt."