

The Woolen Blitzkrieg. Yarn Bombing for a Cozy City¹

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Abstract

A movement begun by Magda Sayeg in Houston (Texas) in 2004, but only documented since the late 1990s, a new kind of texture —fiber— has made an appearance and made its presence felt on the street art scene. The practice of what is usually referred to (more or less interchangeably) as “guerrilla crochet”, “knit bombing”, “yarn bombing”, or “graffiti knitting” mostly consists of interventions with customized crocheted or knitted cozies in different 3D elements of street ‘furniture’ such as sculptures, benches, poles, pipes, signage, railings, door handles fences and, above all, trees. Unlike other genres of art in public space, knit-bombing is rooted in the practice of crafts and activism. In fact, most actors started crochet or knitting as a hobby, as a fundraising campaign or as political activism rather than to pursue fame or reputation in the so-called ‘art world’.

This paper aims to serve as both an introduction to as well as an analysis of yarn-bombing practice in street art and post-graffiti contexts. It discusses how this medium impacts, challenges and disrupts the perception and use of contemporary cities by humanizing them and making them more approachable. In a broader sense, the medium’s rootedness in the everyday generally appears to result in a positive reception by the city users who engage with it.

Key words: yarn bombing, fiber art, textile graffiti, soft intervention, street art, post-graffiti, craftivism, activism.

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1. Preliminary clarifications: terms and genres

This article explores interventions in public space that use fiber. These interventions have been usually referred to with a variety of names. The label “yarn bombing” is one of the most common ones, and sources from the field usually attribute it to Leanne Prain¹, who used it for the first time in 2009. Later, artist and writer Lauren O’Farrell² introduced the term “yarn storming” because she wanted to reduce the perceived aggression implicit in Prain’s coinage. Other popular terms for the practice include “guerrilla knitting” and “guerrilla crochet”. These two expressions seem to be interchangeable because often the two techniques —crochet and knit—are used for similar purposes in the context of public space. Moreover, some practitioners speak of “graffiti knitting” or “textile graffiti”³. Evidently, the terms’ connotations are twofold. On the one hand, “yarn”, “crochet” and “knit” refer to the material and medium —needle-based work— and situate the activity in the broader area of textile art, folk art⁴ and craft. On the other hand, descriptors like “guerrilla”, “bombing” or “graffiti” are borrowed terms from the

1 - Daly Goggin explains that “The term “yarn bombing” was coined by Leanne Prain (a graphic artist, writer, knitter, and crafter) for her 2009 co-authored book, titled *Yarn bombing: The art of crochet and knit graffiti* (Moore and Prain 2009).” (Goggin 94, footnote 1).

2 - Lauren O’Farrell, who works under the nickname “Deadly Knitshade”, also developed the concept of “stitched story” which consists of dropping amigurumi characters to tell a story.

3 - All these labels also correspond to the most used hashtags on Instagram: #yarnbombing, #gerrillacrochet, #textilegraffiti, #woolgraffiti, #woolbombing, etc.

4 - Considering that the majority of knitters admit to having been taught by their grandmothers who, at the same time had learnt from their mothers, “folk art” can be another label to define yarn bombing in many instances. According to the expert Jo Farb, “folk art” can be used “to distinguish [it] from contemporary environmental works created by mainstream artists” and explains “... the term “folk” implies work linked to a communal heritage, reflective of shared standards and aesthetics, and transmitted across generations” (Farb 19). Moreover both the material and the techniques can also be considered folk or outsider. There are in fact various forms of sewing, embroidery and crochet patterns (whose authors are unknown) that have been passed on and developed throughout centuries in different cultures.

field of graffiti writing and street art. These lexical choices entail a sort of declaration of intent on the part of the actors involved, as well as expressing a desire to align their practice with certain other kinds that are deployed in public space, something which is also made clear in their frequently-published manifestos. Regardless of the visual result of these practices, the terms used to describe them can themselves be confusing. For this reason, they deserve analysis. Just as “street art” seems to be an umbrella term used by the general public to refer to practices that experts in the field prefer to subcategorize, the abovementioned terms are an attempt to merely describe a medium deployed in public space, even if some of this terminology seems liable to be mixed up. In fact, within the area of fiber art in public space we can differentiate genres like New Genre Public Art⁵, urban art, community art, street art or post graffiti⁶. Due to the lack of space and the plethora of examples and cases that exist, this publication will primarily focus on fiber-based interventions as

5 - Although it is possible to argue the case, we suggest that cases of fiber art that can actually fall under the category of “public art” or “muralism” are in fact scarce for many reasons. On the one hand, the material does not allow for durability in public space and it does not adjust to flat verticality as easily as paint. On the other hand, yarn as a material lacks a certain sense of the grandiose and the monumentality expected in public art. Finally, fiber art usually operates within certain ethical collaborative principles and attempts to engage the community, which distances the activity from pure plasticity or decoration. All these characteristics make the practice closer to New Genre Public Art. A groundbreaking example of muralism and New Genre Public Art, for instance, was the CAFAM project in Los Angeles. The project consisted of a temporary installation that covered the façade of the Craft & Folk Art Museum with 14,000 granny squares sent by crocheters from all around the world. It was organized by the collective Yarn Bombing Los Angeles between October 2012–November 2013.

6 - For this article, I am following the working definitions sketched out by Ulrich Blanché in “Street Art and related terms- discussion and working definitions” SAUC, Journal V1, N1. Lisbon, *Street Art & Urban Creativity*, 2015. The case of New Genre Public Art refers to Susanne Lacy (editor) as introduced in *Mapping the Terrain*. Seattle: Bay Press, 1995.

community art, street art or post graffiti⁷ pieces.

Therefore it will consider self-authorized pieces only⁸. For the purpose of this paper, we may refer to them as yarn bombing or soft interventions.

2. Street Craft

The turn of the 21st century witnessed a creative elaboration of the traditional concept of 'tag-writing' in street art. Several years later, once the phenomenon had begun to be assimilated, some artists went a step further by creating contextual installations using domestic crafts such as gardening or crocheting, thus transforming street art "... into a multidisciplinary pick-and-mix of arts and crafts, as artists and makers take their uncommissioned street creations from flat surfaces into three-dimensional installations" (Kuittinen 7). As Kuittinen posits, this trend is a "street art cousin" that "... draw[s] inspiration from street art while taking it in a different direction altogether" (10). This movement challenged the status quo in terms of the relationship between the domestic and the public. Unsurprisingly, it also put female hand-making center stage; this is not coincidentally a practice dominated by women.

As with any other cultural practice, it would be overambitious and oversimplifying to propose a monogenetic theory about the origin of this kind of intervention. There are diverse customs and traditions inside and outside the art world that include the presence of fiber in public space like that of wishing trees, *clootie* well, may

pole⁹, red ribbon¹⁰ or, ones more directly related to urban culture, such as the custom of shoe tossing¹¹. The tradition of crocheted or knitted cozies for objects can be traced back to examples like the projects *Cozy* (1999-2000) by Janet Morton, or *Yarn Works* (1993-1998) by Bill Davenport. Neither is the use of textile in public space new if we think of the famous fabric-wrapped installations that Jeanne-Claude (1935-2009) and Christo (1935) developed during the 1960s. As we see, yarn bombing is a multi-rooted practice that draws from folk, crafts, *arte povera*, contextual public art and graffiti. Each element provides the activity with specific characteristics, such as celebration of the past, hand-making, use of unconventional materials, subcultural and site-specificity.

Today the yarn bombing community, not always being aware of these rich and diverse origins, usually recognizes Magda Sayeg as the initiator of this practice¹². In 2005, she covered the door handle of her yarn shop in Houston¹³ with a knitted cozy that she would call "the alpha piece". The result was successful and immediately she formed the Knitta Please crew (or, simply 'Knitta'), comprised of Magda herself as PolyCotN, Purl Nekklas, P-Knitty, The Knotorious N.I.T., GrannySQ, MascuKnitivity.

9 - In many cultures trees are receptors of wishes in the form of coins, or, more frequently, knot pieces of fabric. Sometimes they are used in the same way to indicate that there is a well nearby. Some cultures celebrate the arrival of spring with an outdoor dance that includes wrapping laces around a pole.

10 - "The red ribbon is the universal symbol of awareness and support for people living with HIV" <https://www.worldaidsday.org/the-red-ribbon/>

11 - Also known as "shoefiti". As explained in the website <http://www.shoefiti.com/> "...is the term used to describe shoes hanging from power lines. The term was coined in 2005 by Ed Kohler, and led to the formation of Shoefiti.com. Shoefiti shares some similarities with graffiti, such as the artistic statements of the work, possible connections to nefarious activity, and correlation with troubled neighborhoods".

12 - Daly affirms that the first yarn bombing was anonymous and took place in in Den Helder, in the Netherlands in 2004 (note 4).

13 - The Independent webzine Dioniso Punk suggests that Magda Sayeg could have seen the exhibition of crochet-covered objects held in Houston in the 1990s by the artists Bill Davenport (1962) <http://www.billdavenport.com/>. Different sources also appoint a project of cozies for stump trees in Oregon in 2002 by Shannon Schollian.

7 - I am going to refer to "street art" as an unsanctioned project in public space. As for "post-graffiti", I understand unsanctioned street pieces based on identity (tag) and repetition therefore the idea of bombing with a characteristic needle-based work piece.

8 - I am indebted to many publications that approached yarn bombing before me. The bibliography list at the end of this article is evidence of that. However, most publications referred to come from the fields of crafts, sociology, communication, politics, cultural studies, institutional or outsider art, etc. These fields raise/pick up terms like graffiti and place them on the same level as commissioned public art, which is confusing for people in the field of graffiti and Street art.

The idea generated a lot of interest thus inspiring other people to start yarn bombing in their own cities and funding their own crews under similarly madcap names such as Stich & Bitch London, 2005, later Stich London, 2011; Masquerade, 2006 (Stockholm, founded in Paris); Micro-Fiber Militia (MFM), Chicago, 2007; Ladies Fancy-work Society, Denver, 2007; Knit the City (London, 2009); Jafa Girls (Ohio, 2009) or Teje la Araña, Valencia, 2011 to mention but a few¹⁴.

In the manner of that first piece, yarn bombing generally includes small, colorful and soft knitted or crocheted cozies for 3D objects in the city, specifically vertical objects such as sculptures, street lights, traffic lights, benches, poles, pipes, signage, railings, door handles and, above all, trees. These elements are often partially or entirely wrapped. The medium is based in needlework such as basic knitting and crocheting and sometimes it also includes more elaborate, sophisticated techniques such as intarsia, amigurumi, doilies, banners, lace, embroidery, quilting, sawn-written messages or the attachment of other alien materials such as intervened dolls or stuffed animals. The adaptability and flexibility of the medium —especially when it forms a cozy— make yarn bombing a very site-specific art practice and tactic¹⁵.

14 - For some of these crews the date(s) they were founded or established is unclear.

15 - I am using the concept of “tactic” according to De Certeau as the response to the power strategy: «I call a “tactic,” on the other hand, a calculus which cannot count on a “proper” (a spatial or institutional localization), nor thus on a border-line distinguishing the other as a visible totality. The place of a tactic belongs to the other. A tactic insinuates itself into the other’s place, fragmentarily, without taking it over in its entirety, without being able to keep it at a distance. It has at its disposal no base where it can capitalize on its advantages, prepare its expansions, and secure independence with respect to circumstances. The “proper” is a victory of space over time. On the contrary, because it does not have a place, a tactic depends on time —it is always on the watch for opportunities that must be seized “on the wing.” Whatever it wins, it does not keep. It must constantly manipulate events in order to turn them into “opportunities.” The weak must continually turn to their own ends forces alien to them» (De Certeau XIX). The tactic is the method of reaction that counteracts the forces of the strategies. In this way, the tactic is acts on the space of power previously indicated and delimited by the strategies.

However, as we will see, the possibilities of textile work in the street can extend beyond this.

3. Soft activism: the woolen Blitzkrieg¹⁶

“Street installations can also be a form of protest, whether as a spontaneous comment or part of an organized campaign ... political content can also be delivered with gentle humor.... The approach of these protest crafters is a subtle, non-confrontational one, drawing the viewer in by using something gentle and beautiful while delivering a strong message” (Kuittinen 14).

Fueled by specific TV shows and social media¹⁷, we have in recent years witnessed a renewed, romantic interest in hand-making and the recuperation of pre-machine guilds such as calligraphy, bookbinding or knitting. This resurgence can be explained on the one hand as a reaction against over-digitalization in the context of a new

16 - According to Daly the writer Sabrina Shirobayashi, the curator and writer David Revere McFadden and the curator Jennifer Scablan (*Radical Lace & Subversive Knitting*) had already used fiber art with activist purposes before the term “yarn bombing” had been coined.

17 - Most social media were founded around that time, more specifically Facebook that started as a social media for Harvard University students in 2004. The popularization in the use of Internet marked a new era in many aspects of people’s lives. In the specific case of street art, most experts agree that social media totally distanced the concept of street art from its predecessors, New York graffiti and 1960’s-contextual practices in public space. Given the fact that the practice started in 2004, Yarn bombing from early on started depending on the Internet —interestingly a textile metaphor— and social media as much as street art does. Specific Websites for needle-base craft such as Ravelry (2007) contributed to the resurgence of crafts and also of their application in public space inspiring the formation of crews and the development of projects on a global scale: “Knitting’s increased popularity has been assisted and promoted by the Internet and the growth of a virtual community of knitters who subscribe to the many popular and well-established websites, online journals, and magazines. There are many Internet bloggers and photo bloggers who regularly show images of their work, provide links to other Web pages, and are active in encouraging readers to become involved in discussion forums.” (Brown 1).

interest in ‘slow living’, and generally in the transformation of the way we view crafts from a hipster perspective. On the other hand, it can also be taken as an elaboration of DIY ethics, in addition to the postmodernist and nostalgic fashion of vintage and retro lifestyle: “For our grandmother’s generation, sewing, knitting and crochet were a necessary means of making clothing and linens. The decoration of everyday items with embroidery may also have served as a creative outlet, perhaps the only one available. But now crafts have emerged as a trendy hobby to escape from the tiredness of new capitalist behaviors... meditative and de-stressing quality of the practice, as the repetition of thousands and thousands of loops or stitches forms a slowly emerging pattern” (Kuittinen 10-11).

Thus, traditional feminine knitting circles have been transformed into weekly mixed gender groups who meet to work with textiles in an attempt to replicate the metaphor of the urban fabric in their activity and social relations. These local collectives use their interventions as a way to reinforce the fragile human connections in the city as well as a way to protest against the forces that threaten them such as real estate speculation, touristification or gentrification. On many occasions, the activity of communal knitting and yarn bombing is in fact linked with educational, solidarity or fundraising projects¹⁸. Some of the

18 - “Another current trend is the growing interest in knitting as a community activity. Groups meet regularly in churches, cafés,

most important social issues that can often be addressed include: the abovementioned defense of the social fabric; a growth in environmental awareness through the promotion of ethical consumption and DIY and recycling culture; the combat against ageism; and, of course, challenging gendered dichotomies of feminine-masculine¹⁹ and their associated spaces: domestic-public.

The political nature of yarn bombing is evidenced by the sheer number of collectives and crews that have published manifestos. In the manner of avant-garde movements at the beginning of the convulsive 20th century, manifestos reveal art groups’ interest in developing an activity bound to certain shared ideas ranging from ideology to lifestyle, or simply the defense of an attitude towards the work (all of which have a political content). For example, the Craftivism manifesto clearly advocates

and on the street to sit, knit, and chat, sharing ideas and swapping patterns. Some groups meet to socialize, learn, and develop new skills, while others knit for charity, for therapy, or to “knit” for social change” (Brown 7).

19 - Following the popularity and increased interest in knitting as a hipster activity that challenges the traditional feminine-masculine and domestic-public dichotomies, in 2005 Danielle Landes launched the World Wide Knit in Public Day that it is celebrated on the second Saturday of June and that it is open to any knitting group around the World. The event’s motto and first motivation was to prove that “not only grannies knit”: <https://www.wkkip-day.com/>



Author’s grandmother crocheting



Guerrilla Crochet as a trans generational activity in an educational center. IES Francisco Nieva, Valdepeñas, Ciudad Real. Spain

[Figures 1 & 2] - These two pictures show the evolution of the activity of knitting from generation to generation.

using handicrafts for activist purposes, including: consciousness raising; creating conversations about uncomfortable social issues; challenging injustices; celebrating traditional skills; subverting stereotypes about the medium etc.: “Craftivism is about reclaiming the slow process of creating by hand, with thought, with purpose and with love. Because activism, whether through craft or any other means, is done by individuals, not machines”²⁰. In short, to make cities (and, ultimately, the world) warmer and more humanized. In the case of the Sweden-based crew, Masquerade, their manifesto is a mockery of the seriousness inherent in the very concept of manifesto, as well as a celebration of yarn bombing as, above all, a playful activity. Their manifesto explicitly welcomes knitting mistakes, all kinds of colors and pattern combinations, all kinds of ‘cheating’ when it comes to bombing in the street and general rule-breaking. Their last statement-cum-motto speaks for itself: “Nemo attexet sobrius” (Nobody knits sober)²¹. By a different token, the British crew Incogknito suggests dashes of green ethical awareness and objectives by emphasizing the non-threatening, non-discriminatory, non-destructive, and unnecessarily productive nature of their actions: “actively contributing to a more positive type of global warming”; “Do you have too much responsibility in your life? Do you yearn for something pointless?”²². Finally, the Craftivist Collective stresses the qualities of beauty, small, humble, positive, and slow-made objects as advancers of activist causes²³.

20 - Manifesto written by Mary Callahan Baumstark, Ele Carpenter, Joanna Davies, Tamara Gooderham, Betsy Greer, Bridget Harvey, Rebecca Marsh, Manna Marvel, Ari Miller, iris Nectar, Abi Nielsen, Elin Poppelin and Catvarvis. <http://craftivism.com/>

21 - Complete manifesto in Moore & Pray, 69.

22 - Complete manifesto in Moore & Praine 106.

23 - Many practitioners share a particularly personal relation to the medium. It is very common in fact to hear that either they arrived to crochet or knitting activities after having been taught by friends, mothers or grandmothers (therefore not in a formal context), or they having discovered it as a way to express their creativity and as an outlet in this sense alongside other more challenging mediums such as drawing or sculpture. They all agree on the easiness and versatility of the technique, which provides an immediate sense of satisfaction and application in the street.

Of course, not all yarn bombers have social or political causes in mind when planning their actions; they might be simply interested in the adrenaline generated from doing something without permission or might find motivation in decorating and beautifying the city. However, those motivations may themselves be considered political due the disruptive power of the medium.

Active since 2011, the work of the Spanish collective Teje la Araña (Valencia) sticks to a more traditional idea of yarn bombing. Lavapiés is one of the main areas where their interventions can be found; especially on the bollards in the street of the same name, where they return every November 7th.



Figure 3: Lavapiés, Madrid, 2013 by Teje la Araña

Greer also agrees here: “The fact that art is often seen this way inevitably leads a large portion of society to feel cut off from it. I think this is another factor for the significant growth of interest in craft: it’s not art. It’s not “the other.” Craft is something you can toy and experiment with instead of worrying that you are striving toward a certain goal or are setting yourself up for failure. The expectations for craft have always been completely different than those for art. Art goes on the wall to be admired, whereas craft is meant to be used ... craft has fewer preconceptions and a more fluid definition, there are no limits to what can be done with it” (67-68)

To the question of whether their work has any socio-political message or if it was simply decorative, they answered: “It’s not contemplative, it is to be touched! It is to be felt, hugged and if the passerby smiles, we are more than satisfied. Then you take the image to your place and that’s when the social and political dimensions of the work begin; switching off the TV (or your cell phone) to start making something (whatever; everything works). Thinking of your mother or your grandmother because they might be knitters and finally deciding that you want to learn from them. Thinking of the large number of hours that it takes to knit an installation like the one you saw and realizing that the sweater (t-shirt, pants purse...) that you are wearing also took many hours to do. Double-thinking the next time you feel the impulse of buying something to use and throw away”²⁴. This answer reveals the tremendous power that a seemingly benign material may entail as well as the level of complexity and awareness behind the apparently simple act of relocation. And these are all shared aspects involved in the practice of textiles: the immediate sense of pleasure elicited by hand-making, the reconsideration of the concept of time, the (re)connection with other people and/or family (in the matrilineal sense, especially) and general social awareness addressed to and from the textile industry (therefore a greater critic of the industry practices – labor conditions, pollution emission or encouragement to hyperconsumerism).

4. Domesticated medium.

What makes this practice unique is that it brings domestic craft to public space. Moreover, textile as a material and as an industry has always been at the center of many social and political causes: “...since the rise of industrialization, textiles have been central to many pas-

24 - “Contemplativo no...jes para tocar!, sentir, abrazar y si además sonrías me doy por satisfecha. Luego te llevas esa imagen a casa y empieza lo social/político: que te den ganas de apagar la tele (o el móvil) y ponerte a hacer algo (lo que sea todo vale). Que te acuerdes de tu madre o abuela porque son tejedoras y te apetezca (finalmente) dejar que te enseñen. Que pienses en el montón de horas que toma tejer una instalación así y te des cuenta que el jersey (la camiseta, el pantalón, el bolso, etc.) que llevas puesto también y te cortes la próxima vez que tengas el impulso de comprar algo de usar y tirar” Interview to Teje la Araña, 6th May 2019.

sionately anticapitalist movements and artistic initiatives, including within the workshop of nineteenth-century British Arts and Crafts leader William Morris (Brian-Wilson 8). Sewing circles as safe spaces for women to meet and discuss their problems²⁵, suffragettes’ banners, or Chilean arpilleras²⁶: those moments in history have also impregnated the practice of needle-based work today, making it a perfect vehicle for activism: “Fabric has served as a tool of political communication throughout history, and at times it has been as a medium of communication in places where it was illegal, or even deadly, to speak or to write” (Prain 81).

Textile arts have not been taken seriously within the academic discipline of art history²⁷. Some reasons for this lie in the fact that yarn has strong associations with family, comfort, coziness, warmth, protection, softness, color, the home, etc. There has been considerable mental space wedged between these spaces, criteria and characteristics and the accounts of art history. However, many contemporary artists are using the characteristics of textile as a medium to both subvert what the very medium represents as well as to help spread and pass on

25 - “From quilting bees to sewing circles, taking while you make something by hand is a wonderful way to socialize. For centuries, the sewing circle was where women could convene and speak their minds in a private sphere, away from men” (Prain 236).

26 - Chilean Arpilleras (burlaps) were made by women (“arpilleristas”) during the dictatorship (1973-1990). They worked as a source of income, as a way of expression and as a way to celebrate the memory of their relatives that were not around anymore –disappeared, exiled or dead.

27 - In Greek Mythology the fable of Arachne already informed of textile arts as inferior: “A very skilled weaver and embroiderer, one day she came superbly to challenge her patron goddess, Athena. Although she, transformed into an old woman, tried to persuade her and give her modesty, Arachne insisted on her challenge. Athena made a tapestry representing the Olympic gods and the punishments inflicted on the mortals who challenge them, Arachne replied in another in which appeared the scandalous loves of the gods. Athena, enraged, struck him with her shuttle, so Arachne, humiliated, tried to hang herself. The goddess saved her, but transformed her into a spider, the animal that continuously spins and weaves its webs” (Falcón Martínez, Fernández Galiano and López Melero, 73).

their messages²⁸. The following cases provide evidence of that.

4. 1. Subversive use of time: Hanna Hill

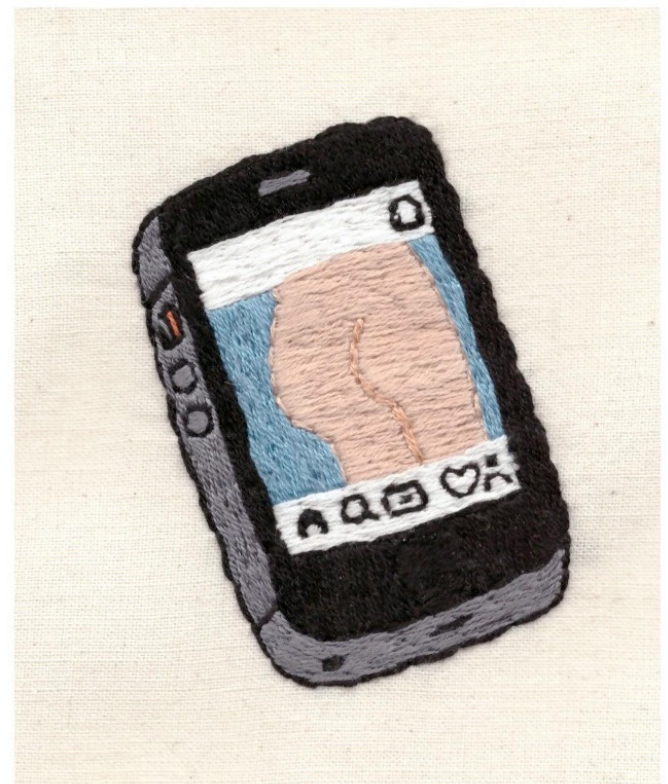
British artist Hannah Hill (1994) illustrates that contrast by embroidering the image[s] of smartphones and laptops. On October 2016, she posted in her Instagram account (@Hanecdote) the following message: “Spent about 15 hours stitching this feminist art meme”. The image showed an embroidered image of a hand holding a needle next to an also-embroidered critical text commenting on embroidery as a traditional feminine work. This Instagram posted by Hills foregrounds the concept of time throughout history and emphasizes the quickness of our actions in the social media. The image by Hannah Hill received more attention and observation time thanks to the medium. Albeit un-

28 - The groundbreaking publication by Rozzika Parker, *The Subversive Stitch* (1984) elaborates on this subject extensively. Drawing inspiration from previous historic cases where civil disobedience through stitching proved to be effective, she explains how people have found in knitting a very accessible medium at the service of not only aesthetic purposes but also of social causes.

fairly, the appreciation for time-consuming pieces of work (versus those that can be made, say, in a matter of seconds) is still a very prevalent logic when judging art images. In addition, questioning why anyone would devote so much time to embroidering these days also helps establish a connection. A peculiar aspect of this medium is that it is based on repetition and sometimes even mechanical movements. According to many knitters this specific act brings an opportunity to both relax and think²⁹. On the one hand it allows you to totally enter a new dimension of time in what seems to be a celebration of slow-living, consciousness and mindfulness of the moment³⁰. Although these two actions –relaxing and thinking– might sound contradictory, the peaceful mindfulness that the task may

29 - Words of the artist Bettina Matzkuhn (Vancouver): “We have a cult of efficiency. I think the DIY movement is a response to the digital age. I like my Mac, my phone, my digital camera, but embroidering gives me the time to think” (Prain 207).

30 - “At the core of the Slow Movement is the philosophy of wanting to do well and to do good. Quality is the priority, not quantity; sustainability, not speed; ethically produced, not cheaply made” (Corbett, cap. 3). Furthermore, the first point in the Craftivist Manifesto is “Be the tortoise”.



[Figures 4 & 5] - Hannah Hill (1994, UK)

bring can actually help to organize thoughts in a clearer way. “I work in hand embroidery and cross stitch because I get the time to reflect while making the pieces” (Sarah Corbett in Kuitten 35). This apparent oxymoron takes us to another double-edged dichotomy embodied in fiber arts: one between labor and leisure (Brian-Wilson 8). On the one hand, the activity has for so long been associated with unoccupied or idle women who needed to kill their time. It is therefore perceived as an unproductive pastime because of this. On the other hand, when used for a social cause, it is the appearance of knitting as a hobby that makes it all the more efficient. Sarah Corbett continues: “I also find that the medium is a great way to engage a wide audience ... in a non-threatening and thought-provoking way” (35). This leads us to the conclusion that, today, making something by hand and investing time in the activity can be considered a subversive act in and of itself. Furthermore, the slowness of the time it requires to perform the craft, when contrasted with the sense of speed and immediateness in almost all aspects of life today, provokes a sense of interest and ultimately an engagement effect in the audience.

4. 2. Embroidering messages: Bass Cross Stitch

Another artist who embroiders political messages (usually feminist ones) and uses her Instagram account (Badass Cross Stitch, @BadassHERstory) as her vehicle to reach the public is Shannon Downey (1978). Following the popular fashion of posting inspiring messages on social media, Downey takes the idea further by posting sewn messages on cloth that remain in their embroidery frame. These frames work not only as Downey’s hallmark but also as a way to stress the nature of the medium. Some of her stitched statements are, for example: “I have never wanted children”; “Stop telling women what empowers them”; or “Animals are not objects”.

In *Strange Materials*, Prain wonders about the difference between writing out a message on paper or on textile: “Why commit words onto cloth rather than into the pages of a journal? What makes textiles different than paper?” (Prain 103). Her core argument is twofold. On the one hand, she posits that the medium is both simple and powerful enough to trigger memories and emotions, therefore helping us establish an immediate connection



[Figure 6] - Shannon Downey (Badass Cross Stitch) (Chicago 1978)

with the object: “Artists may have many reasons to work with textiles, but often, their love for the medium of fabric, has to do with the sense of touch...fabric can evoke memories. Our childhood memories are filled with fabric, from the blankets we were wrapped in to the scratchy sweaters we were forced to wear to school. Quilts, embroideries, and weaving can hold remembrances both personal and collective, and artists can use them to create biographies, autobiographies, genealogies and memorials” (103). The emotional triggering power of textile is based on the fact that we live in regular contact with the material and, unlike wood, paper or other materials, we have a very close and intimate bodily relation with it⁹¹. On the other hand, 31 - Corbett gives many examples in *How to be a Craftivist*. The

she identifies the traditional use of handicraft techniques as being for ‘serious’ objects such as wedding quilts, contrasting with today’s commemoration of the ordinary (Prain 187). In fact, behind their appearance, both Hill’s and Downey’s messages distil high doses of contemporaneity and daily life.

4.3. Stitched bombs: Sarah Corbett

art of Gentle Protest: “The Creative Director of Bystander Revolution, Michael Wood, writes that: “Transforming something as everyday and disposable as a sticky note into a hand-stitched, lasting message reminds us that with a little bit of effort and creativity, a few simple words can make an indelible impact” (Corbett, cap. 6)



[Figure 7] Courtyard of Somerset House. London fashion week September 2012.

Photographed for craftivist collective by photographer Robin Prime.

The Craftivist Collective: www.Craftivist-Collective.com

In 2003 Betsey Greer coined the term “craftivism” out of the combination of craft and activism³². Later on in 2009, activist Sarah Corbett would found the group Craftivist Collective in London as a way to transform it into a substantive movement and tool for activist campaigns. Corbett has delivered talks and has written some books on craftivism, which she also refers to as ‘gentle’ or ‘soft’ protest. Some of her books are planned as genuine handbooks for the practice with ideas, tips and guidelines. Corbett is a passionate defender of craft, and more particularly needle-based work as a tool to provoke change. In her publications, Corbett explains that after years of experience as an activist - sometimes with discouraging results - she realized that messages delivered through crafted objects (she refers to fiber works, in particular) had more potential, provoked more curiosity, invited people to spend more time thinking of them and were more widely shared via social media, therefore reaching greater degrees of visibility. In short, she noted increased engagement and better general effectiveness.³³ She counterposes these characteristics of the medium with the associations traditionally attributed to activism which, unfortunately, are often featured in the media: violence;

32 - Greer, B.: <http://craftivism.com/>

33 - Corbett provides examples of material, real-world changes won by craftivist campaigns. One of her most famous achievements was helping to secure higher wages for retail employees at Marks & Spencer <https://ideas.ted.com/how-a-gentle-protest-with-hand-embroidered-hankies-helped-bring-higher-wages-for-retail-employees/>



[Figure 8] -Extended bench by the collective Deb-van_deE

sense of threat or menace; signs that care for the purpose or end and not for the appearance or medium, etc.

The project called “minifashionprotest” consisted of a series of banners hung up in different places around the world with the purpose of raising awareness around the textile industry during the London Fashion Week in September 2012. The banners had been elaborately put together with different fabric layers, buttons, pins, and sewn messages such as: “LOVE FASHION. HATE SWEATSHOPS. Who made your clothes? What do they earn?” As we can see, fiber art provides a safe space to address a wide diversity of social problems³⁴; Farinosi, M., Fortunati even speak of “urban knitting” (in their words) as a social movement³⁵.

4. 4. #publicspacereclamation: Deb_van_deE and

34 - One of the more powerful actions that informs of the, many times unseen, interwoven relations between textiles and politics was deployed by Calgary Revolutionary Knitting Circle: “The first major action initiated by the Revolutionary Knitting Circle was the Global Knit-In held during the 2002 G8 Summit. Groups in a number of cities and towns hosted protest rallies featuring knitting outside of major corporate sites, especially bank office towers. Notable among these was the mass rally held in Ottawa, Canada - where protesters set up a ‘social safety net’ made of knitted squares”. <https://www.revolvvy.com/page/Revolutionary-Knitting-Circle>

35 - Farinosi, M., Fortunati, L. “Knitting Feminist Politics: Exploring a Yarn-Bombing Performance in a Postdisaster City” in *Journal of Communication Inquiry*. 2018.



[Figure 9] - String Art by the collective Deb-van_deE



[Figure 10] Happening by the collective Deb-van_deE



[Figure 11] Tag Uday 1973

#textilegraffiti: Uday1973

The Collective Deb_van_deE is made up of three members @holamerzi, @irene-lume and @guillermoenforma. Their works are based on string art, using urban elements or nails to hook a string and then connecting them thus drawing geometrical forms in the air. They propose a playful relationship with city space by extending benches or cancelling, rearticulating and redefining transit areas and urban furniture with their threads. Sometimes their fibers are introduced into public space in the form of participatory performances in which people need to wrap, unwrap, or connect the strings. Their spatial installations push us to look at urban architecture in a different way, while their whimsical performances celebrate public space as an area in which to share, socialize, connect and play³⁶.

36 - In "Towards the politics of whimsy: yarn bombing the city", Joanna Mann argues that: "... whimsy arises in between our familiar conventions to present itself as disconcertingly both recognizable and obscure, without any obvious reason to exist. Despite or perhaps because of, its out-of-planeness, I argue that whimsy can function as a powerful political force that is able to alter bodily dispositions and foster ethical spaces and modes of political action ... I also argue that whimsy's efficacy emanates

Uday1973, a current member of SNC Crew, represents textile graffiti. Based in Valencia, Uday1979 arrived at street art through the practice of textile arts in collaborative and activist local groups around 2011³⁷. Although he started in the street with a more classical version of yarn bombing by knitting a cozy for a bollard, he would later explore both the street and the medium in order to develop his own personal style. Inspired by other practitioners from other cities - especially by Eric Rieger (Hottea), who was already tagging with fiber in the

from its elusiveness, for once whimsy is used in an intentionally political way it evaporates as other forces come to the fore" (1-2) 37 - It is important to notice that at that moment, the city of Valencia witnessed an explosion of creative resistance led by neighbors' associations that wanted to protect certain areas of the city that had been threatened with destruction or submitted to real estate speculation. The Indignant Movement, also known as Occupy Movement or Spanish Revolution with great visibility in Madrid had replicas in other Spanish capitals like Valencia, a city particularly impacted by political corruption. Like in many other cities, street art played a key role in the regeneration and gentrification of some neighborhoods in Valencia since 2010.



[Figure 12] Etero by Uday1973

USA³⁸ - today he sews his letters into city textures that can contrast with fabric like fences, balustrades, trash bins or handrails. At the beginning he was simply tagging his nickname, but later he incorporated messages ranging from poetry to activism – words and phrases from dating apps, gay codes, reclamation of urban fabric for neighborhoods or issues around social injustices.

His pieces can be situated at an even more complex intersection between tradition – learning from others about an endangered guild, craft etc. – since he adopts textile as well as any kind of haberdashery materials and between street art because it consists of self-authorized visual and contextual interventions in public space, but also with a high doses of graffiti cultures of different kinds. Starting with his chosen nickname, the letter and number combination of which echoes the first writers in the US Subway. In addition, his interventions are based on writing and his techniques imply the development of a very stylized letter style. Finally, his mode of activism in terms of the content and location of his messages channels political graffiti.

38 - Conversation with Uday1973, June 2019.

His letter style depends on the surface being engaged, hence his often sharp and geometrical strokes resulting from the strength of the fiber from one point to another. Despite the apparent limitations of the technique (based on string art), Uday1973 gets to emulate diverse graffiti styles such as 3D effects, round letters in almost bubble appearance or the contrast of thin and wide strokes by embroidering. Today, he also works in other media inspired by textile arts and combines his activities with commissioned works. Uday1973 represents a rare trend within fiber art in public space in which the reminiscence of graffiti world in relation to identity allows us to know his name and to associate him with a particular style³⁹.

39 - Only few names are known within the field. Indeed, most yarn bombers despite their background – many hold art-related degrees – do not aspire to make a name as artists. On the contrary, yarn bombing seems to be more connected to ideas such as exploring and playing in the city, fighting for social causes or weaving collaborations. Another simple and blunt possible answer might be the fact that yarn bombing is both based on domestic labor and dominated hence it replicates the discrimination



[Figure 13] Shot from a video of NeSpoon using a doily as a stencil. El Cabañal, Valencia, 2017.

5. Main yarn targets: #genderequality & #womenissues

As we have set out, yarn bombing deals with social justice and politics, but if there is a topic yarn bombing gravitates around above all it is that of feminism and women's issues. And it has been that way since ancient times; Greek mythology, for instance, provides some examples of problem-solving or the tackling of problems through the use of textiles such as the case of Philomela, who reported sexual abuse through the needle⁴⁰. Another archetype is Lysistrata. As narrated in the play by Aristophanes, Lysistrata takes on the role of the problem-solver and mediator by simply proposing recourse to common

traditionally suffered in the domain.

40 - "The legend of Philomela ... is inseparable from that of her sister Procne. ... Pandion gave his daughter Procne as wife to his ally Teseo, king of Thrace. But when he met his sister-in-law, he fell in love with her and seduced or raped her. So that she could not tell what had happened, he cut off her tongue and locked her in a house. Finally, Philomela managed to inform her sister of what had happened by embroidering events on a cloth" (Falcón Martínez, Fernández Galiano y López Melero, 247).

sense and procedures of traditional textile-making. Thus, she proves that the textile can function as a metaphor of sorts for life itself, a method of thinking analytically and strategically and therefore a non-threatening but powerful tool in the hands of those who are most often involved with the medium: women. The male audience looks incredulity and amazed but the nature of the material make them listen to Lysistrata⁴¹. Corbett, as a strong believer in

41 - Lysistrata: "Magistrate - And how, pray, would you propose to restore peace and order in all the countries of Greece? / Lysistrata.- It's the easiest thing in the world! / Magistrate: Come, how is that, eh? I am curious to know / Lysistrata - When we are winding thread, and it is tangled, we pass the spool across and through the skein, now this way, now that way; even so, to finish of the war, we shall send embassies hither and thither and everywhere, to disentangle matters./ Magistrate- And is it with your yarn, and your skeins, and your spools, you think to appease so many bitter enmities, you silly women? / Lysistrata: If only you had common sense, you would always do in politics the same as we do with our yarn. / Magistrate: Come, how is that, eh? Let's see / Lysistrata: First we wash the yarn to separate the grease and filth; do the same with all bad citizens, sort them out and



Figure 14 - Detail, Berlin 2010 by Miss Cross Stitch

the strong potential of soft interventions, plays the roles of the former heroines and explores textile metaphors too⁴²:

drive them forth with rods — they're the refuse of the city... First we wash the yarn to separate the grease and filth; do the same with all bad citizens, sort them out and drive them forth with rods — they're the refuse of the city. Then for all such as come crowding up in search of employments and offices, we must card them thoroughly; then, to bring them all to the same standard, pitch them pell-mell into the same basket, resident aliens or no, allies, debtors to the State, all mixed up together. Then as for our Colonies, you must think of them as so many isolated hanks; find the ends of the separate threads, draw them to a centre here, wind them into one, make one great hank of the lot, out of which the public can weave itself a good, stout tunic (*Aristophanes, The Clouds, Lysistrata, Money De García Novo, E.*) Madrid: Alianza, 1995 (138-139).

42 - We should bear in mind that the speech by Lysistrata is approached by the writer as the peak of his comedy. Yet the case still stands for all the symbolic connections between the feminine and textile crafts, it is important to notice that Aristophanes was mocking what Lysistrata represented. These weavers along with other ancient Greek feminine problem-solvers were in fact re-

“... we can make, thread and weave our values through all that we do. Stitch by stitch we can make a difference. Sometimes we need to unravel an unjust system before we can sew it back together and sometimes we simply need to make do and mend a situation rather than create a revolution. Injustices can be seen as messy and tangled up threads” (Corbett cap 1). A more recent example might be seen in International Women’s Day, the roots of which lie in a strike in a textile factory⁴³. Yarn Bombing Los Angeles decided to appropriate the poster of Rosie the Riveter including a skein.

Although there are many examples of cultures and moments in history in which males dominated textiles

garded as witches hence the relation between witches and craft; craft as synonymous to (hand and metal) manipulation: witchcraft, crafty, etc.

43 - “1909: The first National Woman’s Day was observed in the United States on 28 February. The Socialist Party of America designated this day in honour of the 1908 garment workers’ strike in New York, where women protested against working conditions” United Nation <https://www.un.org/en/events/womens-day/history.shtml>



Figure 15 - Dresden 2013, Miss Cross Stitch

or at least certain textile traditions, knitting and embroidering have been more often than not developed in domestic interior spaces by women. Public space has been a masculine area for centuries and hence the most characteristic urban elements such as street poles, trees, bollards and sculptures are usually key targets of yarn bombing, part of a process of feminization or emasculation,⁴⁴ as well as a breaking of the dividing line between inside and outside, the private and the public. The simple relocation of the medium in public space challenges all the rigid associations of gender and gendered uses of space. The well-worn motto “the personal is political” manifests itself in all the actions that needle-based work in public space imply: “The city becomes an extension of the private as streets are decorated with objects usually found in private spaces” (Kuittinen12-13).

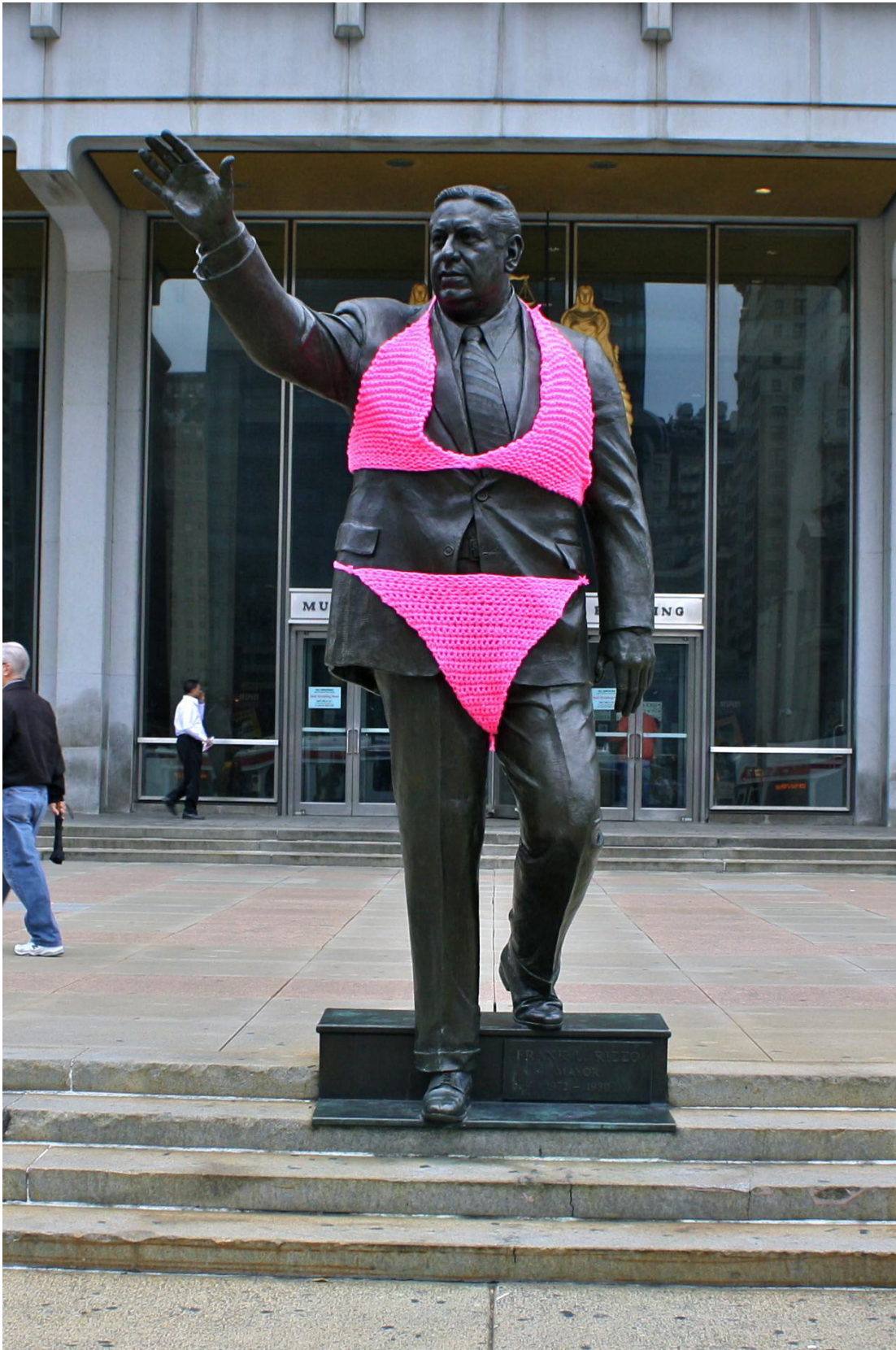
A perfect example of this is when doilies travel from grandmothers’ tables and sofas to street façades like artists NeSpoon (Poland). In ceramics, crochet or in

44 - Referring to The ladies Fancywork Society founded in Denver, Colorado “This group doesn’t say bombing or tagging; they say they are “putting skirts on the world” (Moore and Prain 108)

the form of stencils, NeSpoon brings intricate doily patterns to surfaces and between urban elements imitating a spider net. Another case of ‘homey’ work in public space are the interventions by Miss Cross Stitch (Germany) who brings typical cross-stitch flower patterns to fences and benches.

Incredible as it might seem, the color pink and certain garments traditionally associated with women can still take on a challenging dimension when imposed on men. Ishkits (Jessie Hemmons, USA) deployed a three-minute-long installation consisting of placing a pink crocheted bikini on Frank Rizzo sculpture in Philadelphia. According to the artist, she wanted to spark thought around the politics of Rizzo celebrated in the monument as well as questioning why the color pink or a bikini would look ridiculous or denigrating on a man⁴⁵. She repeated the ac-

45 - Ishkits explains her installation: “Frank Rizzo was a notoriously controversial Police Commissioner and Philadelphia Mayor from the 1970s. He was well known for facilitating a low crime rate in Philadelphia through his abusive tactics like bringing a group of Black Panthers into the street and making them strip naked, rounding up homosexuals on Saturday nights, limiting ac-



[Figure 16] Frank Rizzo, former Mayor of Philadelphia by ISHKITS (Jessie Hemmons)
Photo credit Conrad Benner/Streetsdept.com

tion by putting a pink knitted t-shirt on a statue to Rocky nearby the Art Museum in Philadelphia. The t-shirt had the message “Go see the art” repurposing the image of a muscled strong Sylvester Stallone into an energetic posture to encourage the appreciation for art and museums.

Medium and location have also served the purpose of raising awareness around women’s issues. Knitted boobs, vaginas and uteruses are frequently found in the repertoire of fiber artists and yarn bombing campaigns with visibility or fundraising purposes. A quick search on Google yields information about the many local campaigns under the banner of such slogans as “knit your congressman a vagina” or “knit a uterus for your Prime Minister”⁴⁶. In 2013, Amnesty International published a

cess to resources for African Americans, and using abusive and intolerable language. One hope for this installation is to discourage the celebration of this contemptuous figure, and I have done this by dressing him up in garb that he would find deplorable and offensive. Another hope is to facilitate a conversation about whether this cultural view of a man being emasculated and “disrespected” by simply dressing him in feminine clothing is representative of and in accordance to current beliefs that women are viewed as equal to men. Essentially, I hope this installation will raise questions about our cultural beliefs such as, “Would it be universally ‘disrespectful’ or ‘degrading’ if I were to install pants and a suit jacket onto a statue of a female figure?”, and “Why wouldn’t that installation have the same social impact?” An additional hope with this installation is to act as a kind of retort to Rizzo’s assertions of heterosexual [white] male social and cultural superiority. Figuratively I hope to accomplish this by ridiculing the bigotry he represents through the use of a ‘feminine craft’ to create a ‘feminine’ outfit conceptualized by a woman artist. Literally I hope to accomplish this by being a woman artist who crawled on top of the statue commemorating him without permission and covered it with a bikini because I wanted to and I could” <https://www.ishknits.com/frank-rizzo-installation-photos/> 46 - “Wombs on Washington was a project inspired by the knitted womb pattern created by MK Carroll, which appeared in the free online magazine Knitty in the winter of 2004. In early 2005 a group of knitters organized via LiveJournal, an Internet blog host, by creating a members-only online community called Knit4Choice. The organizers, two young women in the United States, called on other knitters to use MK Carroll’s pattern to create knitted wombs to drop on the Supreme Court steps in Washington, DC, in symbolic protest of attempts to restrict abortion laws in the

newsletter to encourage participation in a campaign for reproductive rights in Canada. Among other recommendations, the campaign also included calls to “Knit or crochet a uterus and send it to your Member of Parliament, with a message encouraging the Canadian government to protect our sexual and reproductive rights”⁴⁷. Many times these campaigns end with women going to marches holding their knitted work as flags. Another similar event took place in October 2011 and was titled “Boob bombing for the Big Breast Even”. The project encouraged women around the world to leave knitted boobs around their city to promote breast cancer awareness⁴⁸.

Conclusion

In the title of this article, yarn bombing is compared to Blitzkrieg⁴⁹, a war strategy that relies on a quick attack intended to cause surprise. Yarn bombing usually acts in the service of a cause, taking speed and location into account as part of its calculations. In addition, the medium in and of itself has great potential to trigger emotion and meaning. Those two considerations are both challenged and amplified when presented out of their usual context(s). This in turn guarantees the surprise effect that helps engage the audience, bringing them into the conversation. Notwithstanding the objective or purpose – whether it be personal branding, aesthetics or political – fiber proves to be an effective medium for several reasons. The woolen Blitzkrieg is thus connected to the aesthetics of the unexpected since it is its particular sense of incongruity, of dislocation – the out-of-place sweater on a tree – that makes it so powerful⁵⁰.

United States and in continued support of the Roe v. Wade decision of 1973. The community received enthusiastic support: it had nearly three hundred members registered a month after its creation” (Pentney par 29).

47 - <https://www.amnesty.ca/blog/my-body-my-rights>

48 - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3Ppht05pxHs>

49 - “Blitzkrieg”, (German: “lightning war”) a military tactic intended to create psychological shock and resultant disorganization in enemy forces through the employment of surprise, speed, and superiority in material and/or firepower. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/blitzkrieg>

50 - “Yarn bombing takes place in unexpected spaces ... These installations thus disrupt the *genius locus* of the space ... Clothing outdoor “things” in yarn disrupts the domestic use of yarn

Moreover, unlike stencil or spray paint, textiles are universal. It is easier to engage with the material regardless of your cultural background or education level. The material is ubiquitous and every culture has its own textile tradition⁵¹. In fact, in some cultures such as Peru or Indigenous American traditions, textiles are considered one of the higher – if not the highest - art forms. Meanwhile, in Europe, in spite of the contributions of post-colonialist and feminist art history to help reduce the existing prejudices between institutional art and textiles, there still remains a gap between it and arts and crafts⁵². Yarn bombing takes that controversy to the street, allowing the problem to be approached from different angles and therefore enriching the perspectives and discourses on the topic. Visiting the haberdashery for graffiti supplies subverts not only the traditional notions of domestic labor, but also those about graffiti, street art and public space.

Textile as a medium conjures and stirs up strong emotions: the reference to daily objects, the affection rendered by the associations with the home and its intimacy or family memory⁵³ makes it unique on the street art scene. Domestic labor roles have changed throughout European and US history. While during the mid-20th century, most women used to reject needlework for what it symbolized, today, in a world influenced by third-wave feminism, domestic labor practices are reclaimed and reappropriated as a tool in the fight for gender equality as they are neutral and the public use of space (Daly 96).

51 - “One of the remarkable things about knitting and handcrafts is their ability to transcend societal differences, as every culture has its own craft history based on its own idiosyncrasies.” (Greer 23).

52 - “But if within contemporary art the art-versus-craft divide has more or less eroded, there persist classed, raced, and gendered distinctions between “high craft” meant for institutional display (works made by Trockel or Louise Bourgeois, for instance) and the “low craft” or hobbyist that is often cited or directly appropriated by such artists but is not meant to, and might not ever, travel beyond a living room and is sometimes stained by “bad taste”” (Bryan- 13-14)

53 - “We can view our current continuance of knitting as something that keeps the creativity of our crafty relatives alive and thriving, because it not only allows us to better understand their lives (and society before machines ruled the earth), but also to honor “woman’s work”(Greer 46).

tralized in the new context of public space. Finally, the appearance of hand-making and craft conjures up post-modern nostalgia for a world in which production did not depend on machines. These are only some of the ways this medium - thanks to its connection to the everyday - impacts, challenges and disrupts the perception, engagement with and use of contemporary cities by making them more humanized and approachable.

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