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Yarn Bombing: Knitted Street Activism

Within the last decade, a new guerrilla street art movement has arisen where the urban environment is being used both as a canvas and as a site for social and political action. Here the traditional graffiti and street artists' tools, spray cans and markers, have been replaced with knitting needles and yarn. This new movement has been dubbed yarnbombing, yarn storming, guerrilla knitting, grandma graffiti, and knit graffiti. The variety of names for this activity showcases the multitude of practices, histories and discourses from which it has arisen.

Yarnbombing is defined by Mandy Moore and Leanne Prain in their 2009 book *Yarn Bombing: The Art of Crochet and Knit Graffiti* as the "act of attaching a handmade item to a street fixture or leaving it in the landscape."[1] Yarnbombing can be as tiny as attaching a small square of knitting or crochet to a lampost, or as big as covering entire public monuments, statues, trees, or vehicles such as bicycles, cars or even an airplane.

Yarnbombing has been spotted since the early 2000s and has since grown into an international guerrilla knitting phenomenon. There is an international day dedicated to yarnbombing founded by a Canadian woman named Joann Matvichuk, from Lethbridge Alberta. The first international yarn bombing day, advertised through facebook and spread through the internet, occurred on June 11, 2011.

[1] Moore and Prain.

[2] International Yarnbombing Day's facebook page declares "Fiber artists of the world uniting on one day to bring color and beauty to our urban landscape."[3]

Yarnbombing can be found around the world. The website Knitting Iceland[4] offers yarnbombing and Knitting-themed Tours through the country's capital, Reykjavik. In Saltburn by the Sea, England, an anonymous knitter has covered a seaside railing with knitted creations showcasing various sporting events from the summer and winter Olympics. Yarnbombing has also been spotted in the subway cars in Japan where yarnbombing collectives have paired up with local bands to create multimedia experiences.

Part of yarnbombing's appeal is that is can be done by anyone, of any age, gender and location. That being said, the discourse surrounding yarnbombing and the majority of its participants are predominantly female, acknowledged by yarnbombers Mandy Moore and Leanne Prain who describe yarnbombing as the female equivalent to the traditionally male-dominated graffiti and street art. Knitting is traditionally set within the history of craft and the female domestic sphere.[5] On the other hand, yarnbombers, like graffiti and street artists, appropriate the cityscape as the canvas for their knitted artistic and political expressions while also borrowing terminology from traditional graffiti art and aligning itself with the ideology of street art. Thus I argue that yarn bombing has resulted from a clash between these two distinct histories, the history of craft & activism, and the history of graffiti and street art.

The reclamation and resurgence of craft in the 1960s and 1970s occured for many reasons. As a reaction feeling alienated by the commercialization and mass production of goods. Craft were reclaimed as a means to reconnect with previous generations' mothers and grandmothers, to find new

[2] InternationalYarnBombingDay
[3] InternationalYarnBombingDay
[4] Knitting Tours via www.knittingiceland.com.
[5] Moore and Prain.

venues for creative expression, and value in activities, previously associated with the female domestic sphere, inside and outside of the home.[6]

Activist and writer of the history of craft, Rozsika Parker, in *The Subversive Stitch,* describes craft as a method of feminist expression and critique of the male dominated art world in the 1970s and 1980s.[7] Joanne Turney, in *The Culture of Knitting* describes women throughout history as having been "socially negated and marginalized as a consequence of patriarchy, a system which privileges and perpetuates male domination, understands women as 'the Other', and thus constructs and maintains their position as submissive."[8] Women, and all things associated with the female domestic sphere were deemed inferior to and juxtaposed with activities associated with men's work in the public sphere. Turney says feminism as having penetrated all spheres and "informed everyday activities"[9] even craft. In response, feminism "aimed to challenge and overturn inequalities between the sexes"[10] and encouraged a regendering of ideas about female domesticity by offering new forms of social and political and artistic engagement from within the crafting community. Clegg asserts "Knitting is arguably the first and most visible craft activity to reappear in this resurgence."[11]

In the 1970s, women artists attempted to unsettle imposed expectations of domesticity and craft using embroidery and knitting as their mediums.[12] American literary critic, feminist and socio-cultural writer, Elaine Showalter, described ''several American women artists such as Judy Chicago and Miriam Schapiro finding new artistic inspiration and self-validation in women's needlework". This reconnection

[6] Clegg. P. 15.
[7] Rozsika Parker. P. 205.
[8] Turney, Joanne. P. 9.
[9] Joanne Turney. P.9.
[10] Joanne Turney. P.9.
[11] Clegg. P. 12.
[12] Robertson, Kirsty.

to traditional women's arts gave contemporary artists a sense of pride in the historical traditions of women and a foundation to build upon with their own work."[13] One female Canadian artist, Joyce Wieland, employed craft and textile arts, such as knitting as the main medium during her 1971 exhibition *True Patriot Love* at the National Gallery of Canada. Referring to her medium of choice and her reconnection to the history of women and craft Wieland said: "I wanted to elevate and honour craft, to join women together and make them proud of what they have accomplished."[14]

Maria Elena Busziek in her book "Extra/Ordinary Craft and contemporary art" writes that the 1970s and 1980s were also a time when women reclaimed craft for political and activist reasons as well as to demonstrate the peaceful nature of certain protests. In 1998, Debbie Stoller, founder of feminist magazine *Bust*, recognized the empowering effects of knitting and created knitting circles called Stitch'n'Bitch groups in New York. The idea behind Stitch'n'Bitch groups was to create a public community where knitters could gather together in public places, such as coffee shops or parks, to share information and stories while knitting.[15] These groups provide a comfortable place for knitters and other textile artists to network with like-minded individuals, learn from each other and perfect their craft. These groups can be found all over the world.

Knitting has also been used in public protests by groups staging public knit-ins, a craft version of the 1960s sit-in, where the non-violent occupation of a space is used in order to protest or promote social, political or economic change. Anthea Black, artist and writer on the curation of craft, describes the act of public knitting not as requesting validation or legitimacy from the fine art world, instead

[13] Elaine Showalter quoted in Ricia A. Chansky. "A Stitch in Time." P. 683.
[14] Joyce Weiland quoted in Gunda Lambton *Stealing the Show: Seven Women Artists in Canadian Public Art.* P.88.
[15] Clegg. P. 12.

knit-ins are described as "productive and politically charged acts".[16] In fact, she continues, "it is the simultaneous unruliness and gentleness of public knitting [...] that creates a constructive dialogue."[17]

Betsy Greer, activist and crafter, coined the term craftivism in 2003, to describe this merging of crafting and activism. She hoped that the negative historical associations with both crafting and activism could, when united, negate each other and the resultant word take on positive connotations. She says "[Craftivism is] about using what you can to express your feelings outward in a visual manner without yelling or placard waving. It is about channelling that anger in a productive and even loving way."[18] Grant Neufeld, social activist and founder of Calgary's Revolutionary Knitting Circle, describes his group as "dedicated to building community independence and bringing diverse people together—using knitting and dialogue."[19] Greer concurs and believes that by being present and captivating without words, the crafted objects "powerfully conveyed our anger and often helpless thoughts on issues like, poverty, welfare, immigration, and racism--without raising a single voice."[20]

Greer says: "Craftivism has allowed contemporary artists to take control of their strong political voices, speaking to the global interest in seeking an alternative to consumerist culture and exploring radical initiatives."[21] Stephanie Levine posits that "the domain of craft appreciation has shifted from gatherings like quilting bees meeting privately in the basement of a church, to being globally accessible on crafting websites, some with more than a million users. Contemporary crafting has emerged from these virtual crafting communities."[22] Knitters may now find textile-based craft patterns and resources,

[16] Burish and Black.
[17] Burish and Black.
[18] Betsy Greer. P. 183.
[19] Grant Neufeld. Calgary Revolutionary Knitting Circle.
[20] Betsy Greer. P. 177.
[21] Greer... p. 177.
[22] Stephanie Levine. P. 22.

connect with local knitting groups, or form their own stitch'n'bitch groups in their own neighbourhoods or cities through websites such as stitchnbitch.org and ravelry.com. Through blogs and social networking sites craftivists are able to ask for contributions and donations to projects from anywhere in the world as well as to share ideas and give suggestions and feedback.[23] According to Mandy Moore and Leanne Prain in their 2009 publication *Yarn Bombing: The Art of Crochet and Knit Graffiti*, the contemporary craft community uses a variety of mediums to reach their audience. Through "word of mouth mouth, knitting clubs, and the Internet" ideas are made accessible to people of every age, gender and cultural background.[24],[25]

The use of the internet was integral to Kirsty Robertson's *Viral Knitting Project*,[26] an ongoing collaborative project relying on the combination of knitting, computer viruses, binary computer code, revolutionary knitting circles and the anti-[Iraq] war movement. The internet has helped modernize the idea of the knitting circle by bringing it into the realm of virtual exchange and collaboration.

Today, Craftivists are redefining their genre as socially active, politically relevant, and globally revolutionary, touching on issues and causes that greatly impact the way people work, think, and interact."[27] The tendency to want to challenge norms and ideologies is also a common trait for graffiti and street artists. Their motivation to appropriate the cityscape as their canvas can be traced back to signature-style graffiti from the 1970s and subsequent subversive street art practices that have emerged.

Signature-style graffiti that was first developed in Philadelphia in the 1960s when names and pseudonyms were written on city walls with spray paint. The art form grew when graffiti writers began

[23] Clegg. P. 3.
[24] Moore and Prain.
[25] Christine E. May. P. 12-13.
[26] Kirsty Robertson. *The Viral Knitting Project*.
[27] Christine E. May. P. 2.

tagging subway cars in New York in the 1970s. Graffiti's basic formal elements include "tags", "pieces" and "throw-ups". These typically involve writing out the alphabet, signing one's name with or without an outline and with up to at most three different colours. "Signature graffiti artists figuratively "bomb" cities with their tag names representing their presence, subcultural status and sometimes crew affiliatiion."[28]

Graffiti researcher and author, Anna Waclawek suggests in her 2011 book *Graffiti and Street Art* that "graffiti exists as a public art outside the control of public officials, an alternative style outside the circle of corporate style and consumption" where "graffiti writers force change on an environment but without recourse or permission."[29] She says "Graffiti propose a type of expression that disrupts the urban grid of visual organization"[30]

The 1990s brought with it an expansion of graffiti art practices where the culture graffiti art culture became more inclusive and expanded to include a wider range of techniques, media and messages.[31] Anna Waclawek, in her book Graffiti and Street Art, talks about street art, or post-graffiti, as "characterized by wide ranging stylistic, technical, and material innovations, which place less emphasis on lettering with spray paint and more weight on fashioning varied interventions into the cultural landscape of a city."[32] Street artists began experimenting with all sorts of mediums including traditional graffiti artwork, sculpture, stencil graffiti, sticker art, wheatpasting and street poster art, video projection, art intervention, guerrilla art, chalk, street installations and yarn. This expansion in style and technique enabled a greater number of participants, especially, says Waclawek, "those who might have

[28] Waclawek thesis. P. 5.
[29] Waclawek thesis. P. 9.
[30] Waclawek thesis.
[31] Waclawek thesis. P. 5.
[32] Waclawek thesis. P. 4

been alienated or excluded from its illegal core."[33] Specifically women began participating in greater numbers.[34] Nicolas Ganz, in his book *Graffiti Women* says: "Street art movement attracts few or none of the male obstacles you associate with graffiti movement.[35]

Graffiti and street art have become very popular forms of art and are practiced around the world. Many street artists have gained international recognition for their work and some have even exhibited their works in galleries and museums while simultaneously continuing to create art on the street. Other Graffiti and street artists have opted to leave the street behind and instead have helped bring street art designs into the commercial world by collaborating with advertising campaigns and through other commercial means.

The motivations and intentions behind the work of street artists are innumerable. There tends to be "a strong current of activism and subversion in urban art. Street art, while often quite political, is a label adopted by street artists whose work is in opposition to graffiti that falls into the category of vandalism. The street and cityscape are usually looked upon as the canvas for street artists' creations not as a place for intentionally destructive behaviour. Street artists rely on the community and cityscape as response to, a reflection of and as a powerful "platform" for interacting with and inspiring change on the level of the street.[36]

Contempt towards laws and institutional conformity is also a main driving force behind many street artists' interventions.[37] Though graffiti and street art art gaining recognition as forms of art, they are still seen negatively and are considered illegal acts of defacement or of vandalism. Waclawek states

[33] Waclawek. p. 9.
[34] Waclawek. P. 9.
[35] Nicolas Ganz. Graffiti Women, p. 11.
[36] Waclawek thesis. P. 224.
[37] Waclawek thesis. P. 4.

"The historical association with graffiti subcultures and the motivation to work illegally are central factors that differentiate street from public art."[38] These, arguably, may even contribute to its appeal.

Usually uncommissioned or unsanctioned, street art is typically created in response or reaction to official public art. Public artworks are those that have been planned and met with approval before having been inserted into the public areas of the city. These public artworks are generally inserted to enrich an area with the "intention of enhancing a specific site's socio-cultural context."[39] without necessarily first speaking with the local residents in which they are placed to gain a better understanding of their needs and preferences.

In *Art and Public space: Questions of Democracy*, Rosalyn Deutsch argues that by virtue of its definition, "the word "public" evokes ideas of democracy, but where in reality, public spaces are embedded with ideas of access, power and privilege."[40] Deutsch also discusses public space as a product of conflict. Anna Waclawek agrees, stating "For street artists public space has been conceived of as a site of struggle, where modern discourses and counter-discourses circulate and are questioned." [41] Landscape designer, performance and installation artist, Vito Acconci has said: "public space is made and not born."[42] It is through conflict and the challenging of spaces and ideologies that enables new ideas, relationships, new sites of meaning, and different ways of engaging with one's environment are born. It is the street artists' aim to raise questions about certain environments, here the street, and the inherent relationships of power located within these spaces. Street artists work with and against these

[38] Waclawek thesis. P 228.
[39] Waclawek thesis. P. 215.
[40] Rosalyn Deutsch. P. 39.
[41] Waclawek thesis.
[42] Vito Acconci in Waclawec thesis.

spaces to create sites of social engagement, to foster dialogue, criticism, and new relationships.[43] Waclawek describes "street art as an unsanctioned art movement penetrates cityscape and occupies this same space displacing the boundary between public and private uses of space."[44] This is done by reacting against the imposed institutions and hierarchies of power inherent in the city and to challenge these in order to create new spaces of meaning within the city.[45] Questions arise when public acts of graffiti and street art are deemed as criminal activity. Does this labelling serve to reinforce the very power structures graffiti and street art are reacting against?[46]

Whether destroyed by time, weather or intentionally removed, the presence of certain street artworks reflect Baudelaire's idea of the the transitory, ephemeral and fleeting nature of modern life. "The experience of [graffiti and street art] as an ephemeral process is inextricably linked to the work's meaning as an element of a city's changing fabric."[47] says Waclawek. As Baudelaire believes "it is the responsibility of art to capture that experience."[48] The fleeting nature of the city is reflected by the disintegration over time of the fragile material which has been taken out of the private sphere and inserted into the public space of the city.[49] Street art thus becomes an ephemeral reminder of the constantly changing fabric of the city.[50]

Noticing a piece of yarn or other item out of the ordinary out of the street makes one take pause and reflect. "The unexpectedness of a piece of street art," says Clegg, "tends to disarm the viewer and

[43] Waclawek thesis. P. 222.
[44] Waclawek thesis. P. 222.
[45] Waclawek thesis. P. 235.
[46] Clegg.
[47] Waclawek thesis. P. 234.
[48] Charles Beaudelaire.
[49] Waclawek thesis. P. 234.
[50] Waclawek thesis. p. 235.

may even inspire a complete reevaluation of the viewer's perception of public space.[51]

To illustrate the fusion of both the history of craft and the history of graffiti and street art I will utilize examples of yarnbombing that took place between February and September 2012 during the Quebec Student Strikes in Montreal where protesters marched through the city to oppose the Liberal Government's proposed plan to significantly raise tuition, which threatened to place limits on the accessibility and affordability of education.

Yarnbombing played a significant role in covering Montreal with red knitting. was a way to be present in the public sphere and to reclaim the streets in a non-violent way while also drawing on the history of craft, feminism and activism. Yarnbombing's roots in graffiti and street art shone through when knitting was taken out on the street and the city was covered with ephemeral reminders bearing the protesters messages.

Maille a Part, a Montreal urban yarnbombing collective made up of knitters who believe in anti-capitalism[,] free education for all, [the] reappropriation of public space by the citizens,"[52] and who believe "education is a right."[53], played a significant role in using yarnbombing during the Quebec student strikes. Maille A Part organized weekly stitch'n'bitch gatherings at various universities around Montreal. Strategically occupying spaces and places of contention for students, faculty and administration, Maille A Part's stitch'n'bitch gatherings were places to exchange ideas and disseminate knowledge about the issues surrounding the student strikes. These tight knit gatherings served as informal, unintimidating and safe places for discussion, debate and, of course, creation.[54]

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[51] Clegg.
[52] Maille A Part. Facebook: Maille A Part le Documentaire.
[53] Maille a Part's blog
[54] Maille A Part's blog

The red square was soon appropriated as the symbol of the student strikes and was worn by many as a way of illustrating one's opinion about the government's proposed tuition increase. Many craft stores in Montreal had soon run out of red felt and momentarily suffered a shortage of the material. Felt was the material of choice because of it being a cheap, sturdy material that can, in the short term, withstand wear as protesters marched through the streets during all kinds of weather.

Others used textile arts to knit or crochet red squares which were used to create banners, signs, squares and some were even used to yarnbomb the city. Placed throughout the city, the pieces acted as ephemeral reminders of the message protesters carried. The knitted red squares were attached to various fixtures and statues around the city, while others, led by Maille A Part, were assembled into an ever-growing quilt symbolizing the union of residents fighting together for a common cause. The quilt was often paraded during marches and used as a massive banner during protests.[55] The quilt also represented the small but significant efforts by the protesters to send their message of opposition to the government. The knitting activists looked at each stitch in the red squares that made up the quilt as a symbol of having come at least one step closer to challenging and changing the socio-political and economic norms within the province.

The impermanence, ephemerality and ease of removal of yarn compared to more permanent forms of street art such as paint or plastering makes yarnbombing seem less destructive. Yarn does not mark the surfaces on which it is attached and though it took time and effort to create, can easily be cut down if it is not wanted.

Another example of yarnbombing during the Quebec student strikes involves the statue of

[55] Montreal Guerrilla Knitting Blog

Margeurite Bourgeoys in the Old Port of Montreal. Margueritte Bourgeoys founded Montreal's first school in 1658. She has become a figure and symbol of accessible education in Quebec and became the first canonized female saint in Canada in 1982. As accessible and affordable education was one of the main arguments during the Quebec student strikes, Maille a Part believed Bourgeoys would likely have been against the tuition increase and would have proudly worn the symbol too. The statue was located on the lawn of the courthouse in the Old Port and consisted of Bourgeoys surrounded by three children. Maille A Part knit each of the four figures a loosely-knit green sweater complete with a red square above the heart. The installation took one month to prepare, and involved multiple collaborations with Maille A Part's friends, supporters and protesters. Participants gathered with the help of social networking sites, specifically via facebook and Maille A Part's own website.

The Marguerite Bourgeoys installation did not last very long and was taken down almost immediately revealing conflicting ideologies about yarnbombing as a silent and peaceful act while simultaneously disrupting the visual, social and political order. Yarnbombing's association with graffiti and street art may place it within the category of defacement of property or even vandalism. Though many arrests were made during the Quebec student strikes, no reports of arrests for yarnbombing have been reported.

Yarnbombing the streets of Montreal added a new layer of reclamation to the student strikes and inspired the question: who do these spaces and streets belongs to? Yarnbombing, like street art, says Anna Waclawek, "unearths political, economic and aesthetic [questions as well as] answers."[56] The removal of the Margeurite Bourgeoys installation revealed the city's displeasure toward the public

[56] Waclawek. Thesis. P. 227.

acts of the yarnbombers who deliberately took to the streets as a way to bring the issues into the public eye.

Due to the association of street art as an illegal act, it is not uncommon for yarnbombing collectives to remain anonymous by donning masks, yarnbombing at night, in hiding, or taking on pseudonyms or aliases. The members of Maille A Part also prefer to remain anonymous by donning masks to hide their identities while yarnbombing. Like graffiti artists, some of group's members have taken on pseudonyms or aliases that incorporate knitting-related wordplay and puns. The names may refer to yarn and knitting related techniques, and may even refer to their roles within the yarnbombing crew. These include Marilene Judith Day as Pixie Knit, Karine Fournier as Tricot Pirate, and Claudia Léger as Tricot pour la paix.

Another Montreal yarbombing collective, active during the 2012 Quebec student strikes is Les Villes-Laines whose name is another featuring double entendres and knitting-related word play. The word "villain" refers to the unsanctioned or illegal side of yarnbombing, while also directly referring to the group's medium of choice "laine", (yarn), which is used to decorate the "ville", (city).

In June 2012 Les Ville-Laines hosted an afternoon of public knitting and installed yarnbombed "casseroles", a french word meaning pots and pans, in a downtown park to make a statement and show their solidarity with the student strikes. Casseroles is a french term for pots and pans, which were taken out of the home and into the streets and banged with with wooden spoons and other utensils every evening at eight o'clock. The casseroles became another symbol of the 2012 Quebec Student Strikes. They were appropriated from South American cultures as an alternative way protesting and of being heard. Tensions arose within the city between residents who held opposing views of the government's

plan to raise tuition. Those in opposition to the marches and "casseroles" in the streets saw these actions as disruptive. Hanging and yarnbombing the "casseroles" has the effect of showcasing and elevating the symbol while simultaneously muting the noise produced by them

The use of the internet and social networking sites, have enabled Maille A Part and Les Villes-Laines to communicate with others supporters via social networking where they have shared photos of their knitting, events and yarnbombing installations. Social networking sites were also frequently used during the time of the Quebec Student Strikes to coordinate various events such as interventions, stitch'n'bitch gatherings and to mobilize large groups of people for marches around the city. Montreal has its own yarn bombing blog montrelguerrillaknitting.com where local yarnbombers and fans of yarnbombing communicate, share photos and learn from each other. This is where much news of yarnbombing activities were recorded during the 2012 Quebec Student Strikes.

For some, wrapping a cold, urban structure in something warm and handmade is a playful and humorous activity meant to surprise or be an outlet for creativity outside the private sphere. Yarnbombing also subverts expectations about craft and its associations to the female domestic sphere. Lauren O'Farrell, of london-based yarn bombing crew Knit the City, expresses what other traditional knitters feel when she says "yarnbombing, has inspired knitters to go beyond the functional. We're changing the face of craft!"[57] For others, yarnbombing is a way to convey a variety of social, political, local and global issues and as a means of social and political protest. The display of yarnbombing in the street s, as graffiti or street art, is a powerful and intentional means of intervening in the fabric of the city. By adding something handmade to the grey, concrete and impersonal public space, the viewer is drawn

[57] Lauren O'Farrell quoted in Maddy Costa "The Graffiti Knitting Epidemic."

in by a powerful reminder of the fleeting presence of modern life. A piece of yarnbombing emphasizes the importance of leaving your mark around the city, as was especially the case during the 2012 Quebec Student Strikes. A red knitted square around a parking meter bears the trace of a handmade slogan without words and especially without violence.

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