

Yarn Bombing: Claiming Rhetorical Citizenship in Public Spaces

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Put simply, rhetorical citizenship is the search for, and practice of, methods of communication capable of guiding public decision and judgment

(Danisch 2011, p. 38)

Robert Danish captures the theoretical thrust of this edited collection when he calls attention to the “importance of communication practices in grounding habits of citizenship.” He fittingly observes that:

Contemporary conceptions of citizenship have been qualified in a number of different ways: social citizenship, multicultural citizenship, citizen-soldiers, or citizen-workers are just a few examples. Although these are useful elaborations of the concept of citizenship, they fail to recognize the importance of communication practices in grounding habits of citizenship. The earliest Ancient Greek model of citizen was so closely tied to speech acts that the word ‘rhetor’ could be used as a place holder for citizen. (2011, pp. 37-38).

Indeed, as Christian Kock and Lisa Villadsen point out in the introduction to this collection, rhetoric has been central to the concept of Western citizenship since the sophists in Ancient Greece. For example, J. H. Freese observes that “The object which Isocrates professedly had in view was to train young men in the art of speaking and writing on political subjects, in order to fit them to fulfil the active duties of life in a manner worthy of the citizens of the Hellenic world” (1973, p. xiv). This important co-constructive connection between rhetoric and citizenship remains with us today, a significant connection Kock and Villadsen have termed “rhetorical citizenship” for the 2008 “Rhetorical Citizenship” conference in Copen-

hagen from which selected papers were published in *Rhetorical Citizenship and Public Deliberation*. There they define “rhetorical citizenship” as “a way of conceptualizing the discursive, processual, participatory aspects of civic life” (2012 “Introduction,” p. 5).

Protesting is but one way to lay claim to rhetorical citizenship in public spaces. This deliberative rhetoric calls for co-active participation from both those creating/circulating protest agendas and those consuming/debating such agendas. Such a view calls on us to examine everyday practice to see how active agents participate in public protests both as contributors and as listeners. In short, rhetorical citizenship recognizes publics as practices not as abstractions, as fluid not as stable, as active in practical judgment not as passive recipients, and as operating in the here and now not in some imagined future (cf. Kock and Villadsen “Rhetorical Citizenship”). While rhetorical citizenship has a long history, how it plays out in the world, the actions it engages, shifts over time and space.

In the twenty-first century, Western feminist activism has taken a radical turn, moving beyond traditional rhetorical strategies of public protest and confrontation among throngs of gatherers. As Stacey Sowards and Valerie Renegar point out, today feminist activism also includes tactics such as “creating grassroots’ models of leadership, using strategic humor, building feminist identity, sharing stories, and resisting stereotypes and labels” (2006, p. 58). I call this political turn “soft power.” This oxymoronic phrase for contemporary feminist activism challenges the connotation of “soft” as flimsy, weak, stereotypical feminine and the connotation of “power” as brute force, strong, stereotypical masculine. Both words are turned inside out in many current activist movements: Soft is strong and power is nonaggressive. Soft is physical and power is cerebral. Soft is durable and power is creative. In this essay, I examine the practice of yarn bombing as one instantiation of contemporary feminist protest tactics. Specifically, I examine protest yarn bombing as an act of rhetorical citizenship across different countries on issues concerning: war, political decisions, economic problems, and environmental sustainability.

Yarn bombing¹ is a relatively new form of outsider street art² that is popping up all over the world in unexpected places, for unexpected reasons,

¹ 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). The term “bombing” comes from graffiti slang meaning

and toward unexpected ends (Greer 2008; Knitshade 2011; Tapper 2011; Werle 2011). Globally, women and men are taking up their knitting needles and crochet hooks to make political, social, cultural, aesthetic, and artistic statements.³ Thus, in describing yarn bombing as a feminist activity, Beth Ann Pentney usefully conceives of feminist knitting practices horizontally along a continuum that recognizes “while they may differ in tactics, scope, and purpose they nevertheless contribute to a feminist ethos” (2008). This continuum moves from “women’s community building and celebration of knitting as a domestic art (located at one end of the continuum), ... into a consideration of outreach and fundraising activities ... (located towards the middle of the continuum) [and ends with] knitting used in public forms of political protest, including rallies, marches, and public displays (located at the other end of the continuum).” More recently the practice has become

to paint a surface. The practice is also known by other names such as yarn storming, yarn graffiti, urban crochet and knitting, and guerilla crochet and knitting. Prior to Prain and Moore’s book, knitting and crocheting had been used for various feminist activist projects but these terms of the art were yet in play. See, for example, Sabrina Shirobayashi (2007); and David Revere McFadden and Jennifer Scanlan (2007). These works include several yarn bombing pieces described as performative, subversive, and activist art.

² On outsider art, see John Maizels (2009); Lucienne Peiry (2001); Lyle Rexer (2005); Colin Rhodes (2000); and Susan Goldman Rubin (2004).

³ The origins of yarn bombing are fuzzy at best. Books, magazine articles, newspaper accounts, and blogs typically report that the first recorded yarn bombing took place in Den Helder in the Netherlands in 2004 and that in the US it was founded in 2005 in Houston, Texas by Magda Sayeg. A yarn store owner who rounded up friends to form a group called “Knitta Please,” Sayeg and the group used leftover yarns and unfinished projects to yarn bomb decorative pieces in unusual places around the city. Their activities were a response to the dehumanizing qualities of the urban environment. However, as early as 1992, contemporary Canadian artist Janet Morton was covering up public spaces with crocheted and knitted pieces. Her first installation was a huge knitted sock that she laid on a memorial in Queen’s Park, Toronto. The following year she covered a bicycle, calling the installation “Sweater Bike.” In 1994 she exhibited a huge mitten she named “Big, Big Mitt” by hanging it off an urban building. Since then she has completed many yarn installations. See the CCCA Canadian Art Database for images of Janet Morton’s knitted work at http://ccca.concordia.ca/artists/work_detail.html?languagePref=en&mkey=55160&title=Big+Big+Mitt&artist=Janet+Morton&link_id=5793).

mainstreamed: commodified and commercialized with some yarn bombers being called upon by Fortune 500 companies to create yarn installations for large sums of money. Ironically, this latter form of yarn bombing has become the very thing that outsider and contemporary artists in general and yarn bombers in particular are calling into question. In this piece, I do not take up this practice but focus instead on yarn installations as public protest that fall toward one end of Pentney's continuum and as concrete manifestations of everyday rhetorical citizenship.

Perspective by incongruity

Yarn bombing takes place in unexpected spaces. A car, tree, street lamp, parking meter, sidewalk, park bench, for example, are adorned to a lesser or greater extent with yarn pieces. (See figure 1 where trees are yarn bombed in a central square in Spain.)

These installations thus disrupt the *genius locus* of the space. In classical Roman times, *genius locus* referred to the resident spirit of a place and was represented in religious iconography by figures dedicated to specific protective or guardian spirits. Today *genius locus* refers to the distinctive character of a location. As Danielle Endres and Samantha Senda-Cook note in "Location matters: The Rhetoric of Place in Protest," "locations, bodies, words, visual symbols, experiences, memories, and dominant meanings all interact to make and remake place" (p. 277). Typically these makings and remakings are part of a schema and as such are expected. Yarn bombing disrupts the schema of the *making* and *remaking* of place to call attention to itself. In a word, the installations are ironic.

Yarn bombing installations offer what Kenneth Burke termed "perspective by incongruity" (1964; 1970) in that they disrupt patterns of expectations and experiences regarding both yarn and the *genius locus* of public space. Clothing outdoor 'things' in yarn disrupts the domestic use of yarn and the public use of space. As Burke explains, "perspective by incongruity" serves as an invention device – a "method of gauging situations by verbal 'atom cracking.' That is, a word belongs by custom to a certain category – and by rational planning you wrench it loose and metaphorically apply it to a different category" (1984 *Attitudes*, p. 308). In *Philosophy of Literary Form* he defines perspective by incongruity as "a rational prodding or coaching of language so as to see around the corner of everyday usage" (1973, p. 400). As Abram Anders points out, perspective by incongruity thus serves as "a tool

FIGURE I



Yarn bombing at Plaça d'Hondures, Valencia, Spain. Wikimedia Commons photograph by JoanBanjo. 27 October 2013. Creative Commons Attribution – Share Alike 2.0 Generic license.

for challenging and reshaping the orientations through which we experience the world” (2011). Perspective by incongruity is not a tool restricted to verbal language. Functioning through both words and images, “perspective by incongruity,” in Ross Wolin’s words, “pushes to the limit our ability to generate meaning and make sense of the world through rational, pragmatic means. Perspective by incongruity is a violation of piety for the sake of more firmly asserting the pious” (2001, p. 76; also see Biesecker 1997). This violation calls attention to itself to assert firmly the issue at stake in the yarn bombing – an issue that might be as crass and mundane as the marketing of a product to as sensitive and extraordinary as raising charitable funds to fight breast cancer.

As Kock and Villadsen explain about rhetorical citizenship as a conceptual frame in their introduction to this collection, the “focus is less on what a particular utterance is like, or how effective it is, but more on how suited it is to contribute to constructive civic interaction.” Perspective by incongruity evokes and induces an interaction.

Yarn graffiti as a materialist epistemology

Grounding my exploration in “thing theory,” I argue that yarn bombing can be understood to constitute a materialist epistemology, what Davis Baird has termed “thing knowledge,” “where the things we *make* bear knowledge of the world, on par with the words we speak” (2002, p. 13, emphasis added; also see Baird 2004 and Latour 2005). Indeed, the term yarn *graffiti* underscores this discursive construct as the word “graffiti” comes from the Greek term γράφειν – *graphein* – meaning “to write.” What is written? When the graffiti artist who is credited with beginning the contemporary graffiti movement in Tehran, Iran, was asked about the meaning of graffiti, the artist self-named *Atone* (a.k.a. *Taḥhā*⁴) said: “A drawing on the street is similar to a letter: It proves that there is a writer. Whether people want to receive this letter or not is a different question” Graffiti confirms the presence and reality of the “maker” in a public space that is typically controlled by and reserved for those in power. Graffiti – whether in yarn or paint – bears knowledge of the world; it expresses dynamically “thing knowledge.” The question of what

⁴ *Taḥhā* is one of the Four Noble Truths of Buddha meaning “thirst” literally but defined as the craving to hold onto pleasurable and neutral experiences and to be separated from unpleasant ones.

audiences think about the graffiti message is open because audiences will vary deeply in their responses.

Without official permission or a permit, yarn bombing like graffiti is illegal which is why many yarn bombers use pseudonyms to conceal their identities. Where yarn bombing differs from graffiti is that yarn bombing doesn't damage property; it is easily removed and leaves no mark. In some spaces it is more tolerated than others; nevertheless, it is seen in 'public spaces' as 'defacing property.' Of course, yoking the phrases 'public spaces' and 'defacing property' blurs public and private worlds. This blurring is a hegemonic reading of graffiti, delimited it to the narrow notion of violation rather than expression.

Yarn bombing may be understood as a form of "girlie feminism," a term coined by Jennifer Baumgardner and Amy Richards in their *Manifesta: Young Women, Feminism, and the Future* to describe the pro-femininity line of young feminists (2000, p. 136). Girlie feminism is a strand of third-wave feminism that seeks to validate traditional female activities by "valuing knitting, cooking and dressing up" while challenging their stereotypical and hegemonic characterizations (2010, 216). As Beth Ann Pentney notes, "If second-wave feminists have been historicized as women who put down their knitting, third-wave feminists may be characterized as those who have picked it back up again" (2008). Jack Z. Bratich and Heidi M. Brush refer to this resurgence of interest especially among young women as "fabriculture," "a whole range of practices usually defined as the 'domestic arts': knitting, crocheting, scrapbooking, quilting, embroidery, sewing, doll-making" (2011, p. 234).

Of course, third-wave feminism, like first and second waves, is comprised of many contradictory strands of feminism; however, what most strands share is a vibrant critique of earlier waves of feminism as impotent and a political stance that is much gentler than the "kick the door" down strands of some first- and second-wave feminists. This softer tactic is evident in what some guerilla yarn bombers say about the act. For instance, Deadly Knitshade (a pseudonym for a guerrilla yarn bomber in London) says:

Change and making the world a better place can be done with a grin instead of a grimace, a whisper instead of a bellow. What we do *can* alter the way people look at their world. How it [yarn storming] alters it is up to them. That's really our point. (2011, p. 124)

Deadly Knitshade coined the term “yarn storming” to deflect the association of the term “bombing” with war and violent tactics. Her point calls attention to the dialogic nature of protest with both rhetor and interlocutors who will vary in their responses to the rhetor’s yarn installation. Further, as Dennis Stevens notes in discussing the Do-it-Yourself (DIY) movement in which many yarn bombers participate:

Rather than bringing revolution to the front door and kicking it open, as their parents may have hoped to do, these independent [DIY] makers are using the disarming and unassuming aesthetic of DIY craft’s remixed domestic creativity to make subversive statements about the world in which they live. (2009)

So how are women and men attempting to alter political and social practices and perspectives? We turn now to protest yarn bombing as acts of civil disobedience – a global practice for making subversive statements about political issues and engaging polypublics. The following sections address activism in yarn against war, political decisions, economic problems, and environmental sustainability.

Protests against war

In April 2006, Danish artist Marianne Jørgensen created a yarn bombing war protest against the US, British, and Danish involvement in the Iraqi war, covering in yarn a World War II tank that she borrowed after much negotiating with Danish government (Sandra 2011). Titled *Pink M.24 Chaffee Tank*, the installation was made up of more than 4,000 15 X 15 cm pink crocheted and knitted squares donated by more than one thousand contributors from the United States and European countries, then assembled together by a group of volunteers and fit over the borrowed WWII combat tank.

These squares of various crochet and knitted patterns, according to Jørgensen, “represent a common acknowledgement of a resistance to the war in Iraq” (n.d.). Catherine Mazza notes that “When pieced together from numerous individual contributions, as many knitted protest projects are, the works become a sort of handcrafted petition” (qtd. in Gohil 2007). As a known artist, Jørgensen did not hide her identity but the thousand or so square makers remain anonymous. The piece was displayed between April 7th and 11th in 2006 in front of the Nikolaj Contemporary Art Center in Copenhagen. As Ele Carpenter points out about this protest,

FIGURE 2



Pink M.24 Chaffee Tank by Marianne Jørgensen. April 2006. Photograph courtesy of Marianne Jørgensen.

This symbolic transformation of military hardware into an object of comic irony seeks to disarm the offensive stance of a machine justified by its defensive capability. Whilst the sinister Trojan undertones of disguising a real weapon as soft and fluffy lead us to review the deaths from ‘friendly’ fire, as well as the women and children who suffer the largest percentage of deaths in most conflicts. Activist craft has many forms of symbolism and disguise. ... [M]ost importantly the *Pink M.24 Chaffee* enables, or should enable, an alternative critical discourse about global militarism. (2010, p. 4)

Carpenter’s point echoes Deadly Knitshade. Public spaces and the authority that typically regulates them are subverted and transformed when filled with color, difference, and domestic work in ways that demand some kind of response (cf. Shepphard 2012). Finally feminist Beth Ann Pentney rightly points out that:

Combining what Jørgensen refers to as the symbolic ‘home, care, closeness’ [and, I would add, ‘the traditionally feminine’] with the violence and trauma caused by war machines forces the viewer to reconsider the perceived ordinariness or inevitability of war. The ideological affiliation of knitting with the feminine is exploited rather than rejected by Jørgensen in this demonstration, to such a degree that the cultural meanings imbued in the colour pink – femininity, a lack of authority, and nostalgic ties to the domestic – are used to destabilize the tank’s symbolic power. (2008)

The inverted sense of “soft power” is clear here. Power is, as Pentney notes, “destabilize[ed]” and soft takes on a new sense of strong. Here the alternative critical discourse about global militarism as Carpenter notes challenges the role of military warfare for peaceful ends by likening the cover to warmth and domesticity that brings to mind the many friendly fire accidents and civilian deaths, especially of women and children, that are the unforgivable fall out of hostile and aggressive fighting.

The incongruity of the yarn pieces against the military machinery function as “perspective by incongruity” that is, as heuristic that wrenches viewers out of their customary habits of perception by disrupting familiar habits of mind so as to move them towards another perspective.

Protest against political decisions

Yarn bombers challenge various political decisions. In April 2011, thousands of German citizens held an anti-nuclear protest, demanding the end of nuclear power. In Essen, Germany (near where the next yarn bombing took place), about 3,000 people participated in the nationwide anti-nuclear demonstration. As part of that protest, two young German university students who call themselves by the pseudonyms Strick and Liesel (named after “Strickliesel” or “Knitting Nancy,” a toy that teaches children how to knit) conducted yarn bombings (C. G. 2011). (See figure 3.) In part, these protests were a response to the German parliament passing a law in fall 2010 to extend the operation time of the country’s 17 nuclear power plants.

Figure 3 shows one of Strick and Liesel’s yarn bombing installation. The piece echoes the yellow and black nuclear power signs scattered near reactors or nuclear facilities with a twist. The center circle is marked by “Xs” for eyes and a stitched mouth both referencing death. At the top right hand corner are two colorful flowers that juxtapose nature to the manmade, life

FIGURE 3



Strick and Liesil Yarn Bomb Protest against Nuclear Power. 4 September 2011. Wikimedia Commons photograph by Fluffy on Tour. Creative Commons Attribution – Share Alike 2.0 Generic license.

against death, powerful beauty against ugliness. The yarn patch stands out against the bleak walls drenched in graffiti. In another installation, Strick and Liesel again draw on the familiar nuclear activity logo at the top in the branded yellow and black and repeated at the bottom in white and black. The middle yellow and black section sports the words “Nein Danke” or “No thanks,” a phrase that is part of the logo of the large international Anti-Nuclear Movement. The two young women hung banners of this design on trees, street lamps, bridge banisters, and the pillars in front of the state parliament building around Dusseldorf, Duisburg, and Essen. This low-key anonymous activism relying on a private domestic practice attached to public spaces offers a powerful example of perspective by incongruity. Although the streets in several cities throughout Germany were filled with protesters, this protest offers no shouting, no crowds, and no force. In doing so, it

FIGURE 4



Tramway to Hell Yarn Bombing, Edinburgh, Scotland. September 2012. Photograph by Mary Gordon.

makes a robust statement quietly but no less powerfully. The piece makes a passerby stop to ponder the “nuclear symbol” and the words “no thanks” together. The ironic twist makes the message serve as an invention device to get some people thinking and perhaps caring about the dangers of nuclear power and maybe even considering future actions.

Northwest of Germany in Scotland in September 2012, an unknown crochet artist yarn bombed a political protest against the underground expansion of the city of Edinburgh’s tram line. The installation was put up on Princes Street in the city. Against a warm, soft, colorful blanket of crocheted squares is the message “Tramway to Hell.” (See figure 4.)

The letters are on plain crocheted squares; the pattern of the other squares is worth noting as it is called Granny square. Embroidering the letters on plain colored crocheted squares surrounded by Granny squares calls

attention to the incongruity of this piece and all it symbolizes – both in terms of granny and language. In reaction to this anonymous installation, Yarnivore Rose (also a yarn bomber and former yarn store owner) is reported to have said, “Actual political speech in yarnbomb form rather than ‘mere’ decoration! BRING IT ON!” (“Mystery” 2012).⁵ Here “decoration” serves as a pun – yarn work as decoration and political speech as decoration. Of course, the contrast of decoration and political protest, softness of material and hardness of message, expectations for a respectable granny and the pseudo-swear “hell” makes this piece a sophisticated pun, meant to draw attention to the incongruity of its presence and message. In short, it is meant to spark a response and a reflection on the issue of the tram extension.

Protests against economic problems

We turn now to yarn bombing protests regarding economic problems. In June 2012, outside the Bank of America on 1715 North Vermont Ave, in Los Feliz, California (an affluent neighborhood in Los Angeles, California, USA), the KnitRiot Collective (a group of US guerrilla knitters and crafters) hung 99 hand-knitted houses among the ficus trees to protest the foreclosure crises (“Los Feliz” 2012). Ironically titled HOMEsweetHOME, this yarn storming was intended to demonstrate solidarity among Americans who have lost or are losing their homes to foreclosures. (See figures 5, 6, and 7.)

Hanging domesticated yarn houses along a clothes line structure with clothes pins – symbols of home – calls attention to the devastation of the home foreclosure problem during the economic collapse of 2009 onward. The clothes pins hold the houses on the line as if they were drying/driving home the point that homes like clothing are necessary shelters and coverings – something the flurry of home foreclosures, short sales, and home abandonments precluded. These problems, largely caused by inappropriate and shady mortgage practices, are all more distressing as they could have been avoided except for power and greed.

On the back of the knitted houses, KnitRiot attached a tag urging

⁵ Rose’s response resonates with the riot grrrl’s perspective of an anti-corporate stance through self-sufficiency and self-reliance. See Sara Marcus’s *Girls to the Front: the True Story of the Riot Grrrl Revolution*. Also see the video of Rose White (Yarnivore Rose’s) talk on “The History of (Guerilla) Knitting,” 24th Chaos Communication Congress, *Yovisto: Academic Video Search* (December 29, 2007). <http://www.yovisto.com/video/9916>.

FIGURE 5



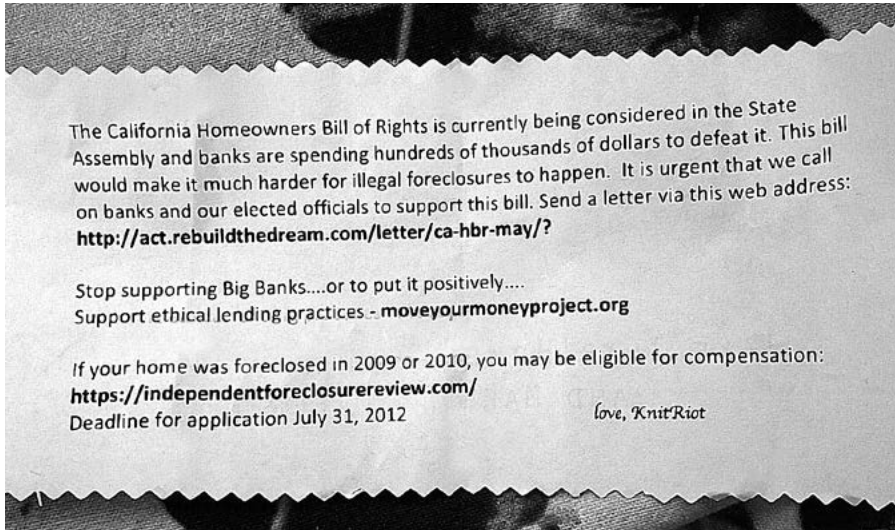
HomesWEETHome Yarn Bombing Protest of Home Foreclosures. Los Angeles, US. June 2012. Courtesy of and photograph by KnitRiot Collective.

FIGURE 6



Close-up of HomesWEETHome Yarn Bombing Protest of Home Foreclosures. Los Angeles, US. June 2012. Courtesy of and photograph by KnitRiot Collective.

FIGURE 7



Tag on backside of knitted home. Yarn Bombing Protest of Home Foreclosures. Los Angeles, US. June 2012. Courtesy of and photograph by KnitRiot Collective.

viewers to call on banks and elected representatives in the State Assembly to vote in favor of the California Homeowners Bill of Rights, a bill to curtail illegal foreclosures. (See figure 6.) Calling on viewers to “stop supporting Big Banks” in favor of “ethical lending practices,” the tag offered information on how to apply for compensation after a foreclosure. Each point was highlighted with a viable web address. The California Homeowners Bill of Rights passed and became law in January 2013.⁶ The leftwing political position of this knitting group is clear in both the visual rhetoric and the written rhetoric on their installation.

Sustainability protests

The last kind of protest I examine concerns environmental sustainability protests specifically against two damaging practices: fracking and logging. On November 28, 2012, a yarn bombing protest against hydraulic fracturing or fracking took place at St. Annes Square in Blackpool, England

⁶ For more information on this bill, see “California Homeowner Bill of Rights,” State of California Department of Justice, Office of the Attorney General at <http://oag.ca.gov/hbor>.

(“Yarnbombing” 2012). Fracking is a process of drilling and injecting fluid of various chemicals into the ground at a high enough pressure to fracture shale rocks to release the natural gas contained inside. The shale gas drilling technique is now common in the US and is being introduced and vehemently protested in Europe. Stanley Reed points out that “Environmentalists, as well as many people living near possible shale gas sites, worry about the huge quantities of water that fracking uses. They also fear that shale gas will prolong the fossil fuel era by reducing the incentive to switch to cleaner but more expensive energy sources like solar and wind” (2012). For this protest, urban guerrilla knitters tied blue triangular crocheted tags to railings and trees to which was attached a blue note. On one side of the note was a diagram of a drilling rig; the other side sported the phrase “Against Water F.O.W.L.E.R.S. Awareness Campaign” with contact details for the group and notification of an upcoming December 1, 2012 planned demonstration.⁷ The acronym F.O.W.L.E.R.S. stands for “Fracking Our Water Leaves Environmental Residential Stress.” The effects of fracking are still being discovered, but so far the chemicals used have been linked to kidney and liver damage. The practice has also “been linked to earthquakes in the US, witnessed in states such as California, Ohio, and Arkansas” (“Environmental” 2012). The blue triangles dangling from railings and trees drew attention to the protest. The color blue is an ironic pun, connoting both clean skies and sadness, signaling both purity and contamination.

On February 16, 2012, a stretch of Highway 774 near Pincher Creek in Alberta, Canada was yarn bombed by a group protesting the practice of logging that was taking place just 4 kilometers south of the highway. (See figure 8.)

Yarn bombers targeted trees so that those who passed by would “pause to reflect on the ‘knitting together’ of people, their communities, and the beauty in the space that surrounds them” (Castle 2012). With its perspective by incongruity – human made afghans in nature on trees – passersby would surely notice the installation and pause. A spokesperson for the group described the installation as “creating a voice for wild spaces” (Castle 2012). The knitted afghan on each tree works as a metaphor supplying warmth, nurturing, and protection against the devastation of logging while at the

⁷ Over 300 protestors held a demonstration in London on December 2, 2012 (“Environmental” 2012).

FIGURE 8



Protest Against Logging, Pincher Creek, Alberta, Canada. February 16, 2012. Courtesy of and photograph by Barbara Amos, Art Works for Wild Spaces.

same time shouting a message of “do not touch me.” The notion that knitting ‘knits’ folks together has a long history and this pun is certainly evoked by the colorful ‘protected’ trees in the ‘wild.’

Ephemeral strength

Feminists Betsey Greer and Debbie Stoller⁸ argue that the resurgence of interest in knitting and crocheting, especially among third-wave feminists, comes from an epistemic perspective that values *making over made* – that values production over consumerism, and process over product (Greer 2008; Stoller 2004). Yarn bombing fits this paradigm because it is an ephemeral, transient art. For example, self-described yarn bombers on Flickr were asked “How long do your yarn bombs last?” Over a dozen answered. All agreed that length of depends on the location and on the design. One reported, “I had one last less than 24 hours;” another said “we’ve got some that stay up until the weather kills them; others disappear much sooner for reasons unknown.” Still another wrote: “Really depends on so many things. The shortest I’ve had was less than half an hour and another I’ve had up for over a year” (“How Long,” 2009). Yarn installations are often taken down by the public who see them as a nuisance, the police who see them as vandalism, or even those who see the whimsy of them and appreciate the art and message often take them precisely because of those very reasons. Not everyone, in other words, is accepting of or enthusiastic and uncritical about the practice of yarn bombing. But we should not expect unified responses. What is important is that there are responses to the act. Given that it is unclear how long a piece will remain, yarn bombers are clearly more invested in the *process of creating* the installation than in the finished product itself. That is, it is the *performance* of yarn bombing that creates the meaning rather than thing itself and that engenders a response – whether good or bad.

Valuing the doing over the done and the self-made over the mass made is to claim slow process practices as a reaction against the staggering rate of technological change today, what Colin Bain calls “hyperculture” (2002). Paradoxically, however, it is this speedy race of communication technology that has facilitated yarn bombing to spread across the globe so quickly. In-

⁸ Debbie Stoller is founder of *BUST* magazine and the writer of the *Stitch and Bitch* series of knitting and crochet books.

deed, the internet has been absolutely vital to circulating and sharing yarn bombing strategies through viral videos, blogs, and social networks. On the first International Yarn Bombing Day, June 11, 2011, founded by Joann Matvichuk of Lethbridge, Alberta, Canada, Matvichuk wrote on her blog:

I had no idea when I came up with the idea for International Yarnbombing Day that it would have gotten this big. I figured a few hundred Canadians and Americans would be participating but I had no idea that I would have people from all over the World including countries like Iceland, Norway, Egypt, Israel, Germany and Australia. (2011)

Virtually every continent has participated. It has been an annual event across the world ever since 2011. This widespread and ongoing activity confirms that yarn bombing is a global community movement. In the words of one reporter, “This global reach is one reason why some yarn-bombers believe their work has the potential to make political statements” (“Yarn-Bombing” 2010). Crossing physical, ideological, and political borders via the internet, yarn bombers can find those who share similar political views even when the politics of their individual countries are very different. As Kock and Villadsen point out, “Globalization and digital media are two major factors creating increased attention to national and global citizenship, and to the opportunities and the need to communicate across space and other barriers” (2012, p. 4). Yarn bombing clearly fits this contemporary paradigm.

Conclusion

Throughout the globe, yarn graffiti activists juxtapose the softness of yarn against the hardness of the issues they protest and the sterility of the spaces on which they install them. Often, they juxtapose the beauty of the colors and design against the ugliness of the issues at hand. As one guerilla knitter puts it, “this style of folk craft renovation is ... integral to altering and beautifying ugly aspects of urban architecture” (van de Velde 2010). Not everyone shares their passion or vision; indeed, some are downright hostile to yarn graffiti. In some ways, it matters little what the exact response is as it is more important that there is a response, for as Simone Chambers, whom Kock and Villadsen also cite in “Rhetorical Citizenship as a Conceptual Frame in Academe,” says: “If rhetoric in general is the study of how speech affects an audience then deliberative rhetoric must be about the way speech induces

deliberation in the sense of inducing *considered* reflection about a future action” (2009, p. 335).

Yarn Bombing (re)presents the convergence of several contemporary political and cultural strands: third-wave feminists, craft activists, Do-It-Yourselfers, and contemporary artists. By engaging in practices that have been gendered in the past, feminist yarn bombers (men and women) seek to reclaim these “traditionally feminized” activities. Greer has termed this political strategy *craftivism*⁹ (craft + activism for activists who use art as a medium). In terms of the Do-it-yourself movement (DIY), Dennis Stevens points out: “If there is anything cohesive about the DIY movement, it’s that its practitioners choose to *reinvent tradition as a remix*, engaging with it through parody, satire and nostalgic irony. ... [T]his work makes its cultural [and I’d add political] statements indirectly and quietly” (2009, emphasis added).

Drawing these strands together, we can understand yarn bombing as a contemporary response to the separation of labor and domestic skills and the split of public and private. Yarn bombing is fully based on creativity rather than destruction, resists the legal restrictions on making and mending anything, and subverts impediments on displaying anything in public. This practice creates a perspective of incongruity; that is, it serves as an invention device, one that attracts attention to the strangely familiar markers of home, nurturing, protecting, and sheltering in an unfamiliar place of the outdoors.

Political activist theorist Randy Shaw offers the following advice to current activists: “Today’s activists must ... recognize that their participation in public life will make a critical difference in their world. By acting proactively and with tactical and strategic wisdom, social change activists can bring a degree of social and economic justice ... that has for too long been deferred”

9 Betsy Greer coined the term “craftivism” in 2003 to explain a third-wave feminist embrace of stitching, crochet, and knitting. *American Craft Magazine* put the term “craftivist” on one of the great moments in crafts to mark their 70th anniversary. See “Interactive Timeline [1940s-2000],” *American Craft Magazine* <http://craftcouncil.org/timeline/2000s.html> and “70 Years of Making: The Timeline,” *American Craft Magazine* (August/September 2011). <http://craftcouncil.org/magazine/article/70-years-making-timeline>. On craftivism, Greer argues that “In promoting the idea that people can use their own creativity to improve the world, craftivism allows those who wish to voice their opinions and support their causes the chance to do just that...but without chanting or banner waving and at their own pace” (2007). Also see her blog at <http://Craftism.com>.

(2001, p. 279). What Shaw neglects in his advice are those who co-participate as interlocutors to take up the work on issues long deferred. As Kock and Villadsen remind us, “Public discourse is concrete, manifest, omnipresent, visible, and accessible for all; anyone can relate to it, and it is the conduit of numerous societal functions and dynamisms” (2012, p. 4). The global reach of the everyday rhetorical citizenship practice of yarn bombing offers the possibility of extending social and economic justice across the world. Bring it on.

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