

Joie de Fabriquer: The Rhetoricity of Yarn Bombing

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Materiality in its many forms, and an intense devotion to the making of things, has renovated and reenergized the world of handcraft . . . While this change has given prominence to craft materials and techniques, the transformation has been most dramatic in the area of fiber, and quite possibly the most diverse in its manifestation.

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Since the end of the twentieth century and the turn into the new millennium, hand crafting has experienced a steep resurgence globally among both women and men, both young and old, both urban and rural. For many crafters, hand work is a dynamic response against the separation of labor and domestic skills, the split between public and private, the disconnection between mass made and handmade, the division between producers and consumers, and the other binaries rendered by modernity and the industrial age. As the Museum of Arts and Design mission statement for the exhibition *Pricked: Extreme Embroidery* points out in the epigraph; of all the art crafts revamped, fiber art crafts, what Jack Bratich and Heidi Brush call “fabriculture,” are among the most prominent. Why? No doubt part of the answer lies in the fact that “fiber is the oldest material manipulated by human beings for practical and aesthetic purposes and at the same time, the most ordinary and ubiquitous in daily life” (McFadden 1).

In this piece, I examine the rhetoricity—the material practices and rhetorical functions—of a specific kind of contemporary knitting and crocheting, namely, yarn bombing. Yarn bombing is a transnational street art that is popping up all over the world in unexpected places, for unexpected reasons, and toward unexpected ends.¹ Globally, women and men are taking up their knitting needles and crochet hooks to make political, social, cultural, aesthetic, artistic, and activist statements and arguments in urban, suburban, and rural public places. Throughout this essay, I have incorporated images—some as illustrations of yarn bombing and others as sources for a brief rhetorical analysis of one kind of yarn bombing—activist crafting.

As Figure 1 shows, some yarn bombing sites offer an aesthetic statement; covering the pillars and railing in knitted and crocheted pieces adds a fun decorative sparkle to an ancient bridge. This project was devised by the



Figure. 1: *The ancient Lana Bridge Yarn Bombed in Cesenatico, Italy by the Cesenatico Knitting Group, March 2014. Wikimedia Commons photograph by Sleppa. Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 2.0 Generic license.*

Cesenatico Knitting Group in Italy and reveals planning of the color arrangement across the pillars moving from green in the middle in equal arrangement of colors to yellow at the end—a sign that this installation was undertaken with some thought, and that the yarn bombers had the time to arrange it equally, spreading the colors across with a particular design in mind.

The practice of covering “things” with hand knitted or crocheted yarn in outdoor urban, suburb, and rural places raises many questions: How is yarn bombing created? Why do people engage in yarn bombing? How does yarn bombing function rhetorically? What purposes does yarn bombing serve? Whom does yarn bombing serve? Why should we pay attention to yarn bombing as a material and rhetorical practice?

These rhetorical questions resonate with, but vary from, those Carole Blair suggests we ask in order to interrogate material rhetoric: “(1) What is the significance of the text’s material existence? (2) What are the apparatuses and degrees of durability displayed by the text? (3) What are the text’s modes or possibilities of reproduction or preservation? (4) What does the text do to (or with, or against) other texts? (5) How does the text act on people?” (33). Blair’s discussion of material rhetoric offers an important window onto the rhetoricity of yarn bombing. She defines rhetoric as “any partisan, meaningful,

consequential text, with ‘text’ understood broadly as a legible or readable event or object” (18). For Blair, the materiality of rhetoric serves as a counterpoint to the way rhetoric has been traditionally defined “according to its most ephemeral quality: its symbolicity” (18) as well as its purposefulness. Yet, as she points out, “rhetoric has material force beyond the goals, intentions, and motivations of its producers, and it is our responsibility as rhetoricians not just to acknowledge that, but to try to understand it” (22). To understand rhetoric’s materiality, Blair writes we ask “not just what a text means but, more generally, what it does; and we must not understand what it does as adhering strictly to what it was supposed to do” (23).² Given, as we will see, the nature of yarn bombing, some questions are easier to answer than others. But the answers to the questions I pose above should make clear how yarn bombing as a feminist material rhetoric can be understood in the way Blair recommends—“how the material, symbolic, and purposeful dimensions of rhetoric may interact, interfere, or intersect with one another” (50).

In this paper, I argue that yarn bombing is worth paying attention to because it is a postmodern, posthuman, postindustrial third-wave feminist rhetorical practice steeped in new roles for rhetors and interlocutors.



Figure 2: Yarn bombing in the Arnold Arboretum, Jamaica Plain, Boston, Massachusetts. May 27, 2013. Wikimedia Commons photograph by Daderot. Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 2.0 Generic license.

What is Yarn Bombing?

Yarn bombing is a form of graffiti. In fact, the term “bombing” in “yarn bombing” comes from graffiti slang, where “to bomb” is to spray paint one or more surfaces in free style or with a stencil (Cooper and Chalfant 27; Whitford 1).³ Graffiti is, of course, an illegal practice—and so is yarn bombing. Also called yarn graffiti and yarn storming among other terms, the connection with *graffiti* underscores the rhetoricity of the practice of yarn bombing. The word “graffiti” comes from the Greek term γράφειν—*graphein*—meaning “to write.” In fact, “Writer” is a term of art for a graffiti artist, especially because early on and for many still, the main interest has been in creating attention-grabbing forms of alphabets. When the Iranian graffiti artist—the one credited with beginning the contemporary graffiti movement in Tehran—was asked about the meaning of graffiti, the artist named A1one (a.k.a. Tanha—a Hindi word meaning “a lonely heart”) 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” (Uleshka). In other words, graffiti expresses meaning and confirms the presence and reality of a “maker” in a public space that is typically controlled by and reserved for those in power. Yarn bombers then are subalterns in relation to the spaces they bomb, grabbing the spaces to express all sorts of subversive meanings. Yarn bombing is a rhetorical act of material, symbolism, and purpose that requires a particular *techné*—an understanding of how to work with yarn and needles. Jennifer Edbauer notes of graffiti more generally: “Graffiti’s rhetoricity thus becomes saturated in/as discursive practices that respond to a particular context” (139).

Figures 2-4 reveal yarn bombings across different contexts and



Figure 3: Trees on Holy Isabel Street next to the Queen Sofia Museum in Madrid, Spain were yarn bombed. February 2012. Wikimedia photograph by Alvaro Leon. Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 2.0 Generic license.

countries—a decorative, playful knitted piece covered in flowers stretched across a bench in the Arnold Arboretum in Boston, Massachusetts, a series of brightly covered trees along a major street in Madrid, Spain, and a clock tower covered in knitted squares with one adorned with a heart, another with the year 2013, and still another with the coat of arms for Hörde, Germany. The clock tower, *Schlanke Mathilde* (Lean Matilda), was rebuilt from historic images in 1983. Originally meant to represent a former mayor’s wife who was far from slim, it allegedly was installed to annoy the mayor. “Dressing” the Lean Matilda can thus be read as a somewhat ironic patriotic act. These pieces from different cultural contexts resonate with one another—a feature of yarn bombing around the world—and offer a glimpse of what yarn bombing typically looks like.

Knitting and crocheting by choice and for one’s own personal, if not political, reasons sums up yarn bombing well. Crafters hand knit or crochet pieces in various patterns and styles to cover anything from a parking meter to a motorcycle to a tree to an entire building. Thus, a yarn bombing can be as simple as a crocheted chain on a fence to something as complicated as different knitting stitches fitted together to cover something huge such as a vintage Whitehorse DC-3 plane—something the Yukon Yarn Bomb club accomplished in August 2012 (“Yukon”).⁴

Drawing on “thing theory,” I argue that yarn bombing such as those in Figures 2-4 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 [emphasis added]” (13).⁵ Baird, a philosopher of science, argues



Figure 4: *Guerilla Knitting on Lean Mathilde in Hörde, Germany. March 2013. Wikimedia Commons photograph by Erich Ferdinand. Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 2.0 Generic license.*

that we need to augment text-based theoretical knowledge with thing knowledge; that is, we need

an epistemology opposed to the notion that things we make are only instrumental to the articulation and justification of knowledge expressed in words or equations. Our things do this, but they do more. They bear knowledge themselves, and frequently enough the words we speak serve instrumentally in the articulation and justification of knowledge borne by things. (Baird 13).

Hence, materialist epistemology challenges the accepted notion that the things we make are only instrumental to the articulation and justification of theoretical knowledge expressed through discourse—whether words or numbers. Although Baird focuses on scientific things crafted by humans his point is equally valid for artistic things crafted by humans. Graffiti—whether yarn or paint—bears knowledge of the world and its maker(s); it expresses “thing knowledge” dynamically as yarn bombers craft installations, and audiences co-construct meaning from them. However, the “thing knowledge” is of a special kind since yarn bombing takes place in unexpected places that disrupt the *genius loci* of the place. In a word, yarn bombing is ironic.

In classical Roman times, *genius loci* referred to the resident spirit of a place and were represented in religious iconography by figures dedicated to specific protective or guardian spirits. Today *genius loci* refer to the distinctive character of a location. As Ivo Stecker, drawing on Norwegian architectural theorist Christian Norberg-Scholtz’s discussion of *genius loci*, states, “all places have character, that is, distinct features, for example, ‘festive,’ ‘solemn,’ or ‘protective’ for buildings. . . . [P]eople perceive the characteristics of their environment as a kind of ‘environmental image’ that provides them with orientation and a sense of security” (86). Even when a passerby does not “notice” a place (usually because it is *always* there to her), it nevertheless exerts an influence, for places are not static. 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” (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.

Carole Blair, Greg Dickinson, and Brian Ott point out that “Place making, as a *techné* (or more accurately, a coordination of various *techné*) of public memory, thus becomes vital to any understanding of the means by which that memory is formed and by which it may be embraced” (25). They go on to argue that a memory place is an object of both attention and desire:

It is an object of attention because of its status as a place, recognizable and set apart from the undifferentiated space. But it is an object of *special* attention because of its self-nomination as a site of significant memory of and for a collective. The signifier commands attention, because it announces itself as a marker of collective identity. It is an object of desire because of its claim to represent, inspire, instruct, remind, admonish, exemplify, and/or offer the opportunity for affiliation and public identification. (25-26)

Yarn bombing draws special attention to the place, and depending on the purpose of the installation can inspire, instruct, admonish, exemplify or protest among other functions. Yet it departs from many kinds of memory places—war memorials (Bodnar; Calder; Blair, Balthrop, and Michel), grave stones (Sterckx; Wright), particular buildings (Bowman), and museums (Aoki, Dickinson, and Ott), to name a few—because it is unexpected, ephemeral, and disruptive. It is, like graffiti, most often done undercover anonymously. Thus, people do not typically go to see a yarn bombing (unless they have been tipped off about it) so much as stumble across it.

What does this rhetoric—yarn bombing—do? Yarn bombing installations offer what Kenneth Burke termed “perspective by incongruity” in that they disrupt patterns of expectations and experiences regarding both the use of yarn and the *genius loci* 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 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” (*Attitudes* 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” (400). As Abram Anders points out, perspective by incongruity thus serves as “a tool for challenging and reshaping the orientations through which we experience the world.” 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”⁶ (76). 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,⁷ to as sensitive and extraordinary as raising charitable funds to fight breast cancer, to as partisan and vigorous as protesting nuclear power.

How is Yarn Bombing Created?

In this section, I focus on the *making* of yarn graffiti installations, from conception to installation and all the labor in between. Understanding yarn bombing as an act of rhetoric asks us to consider its full *officia*—invention, arrangement, style, memory, and delivery. Although the ancients who introduced the canon never meant for it to be understood as separate linear acts, it is difficult to write about these as intricately interdependent as they are in practice. Thus, Blair, Dickson, and Ott remind us to take seriously “the relationships of invention and memory as they operate in conjunction” (32), and I’d add the relations of these two to those of arrangement, style and delivery as they all work in concert together. But here I begin with invention with the caveat that it is a function of analytical convenience to isolate it. What prompts one or a group to undertake the labor of yarn bombing? As Edbauer observes, “Before you are ‘called’ to write as a reaction or act of participation, you are ‘culled’ by writing into the (bodily) sensation of involvement. You are first *involved* in the writing, which allows for the ‘call’ to get heard in the first place” (139). What prompts yarn bombing—what calls it into being—varies tremendously according to different exigencies. For example, Magda Sayeg, founder of the guerrilla group Knitta, Please!, began by covering door handles, lamp posts, car antennae, and trees with yarn graffiti tags as a way to brighten up the drab dehumanizing urban streets of Houston. Knitta, Please! is a gang of young mothers and their name is an allusion to an O’ Dirty Bastard song that “uses a pejorative term against black people—each member adopts a moniker such as AKrylik, PolyCotN, P-Knitty, LoopDog, or WoolFool” (Wills 63). Other groups such as the KnitRiot Collective (a group of guerrilla knitters from Los Angeles) are usually motivated by economic and political 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 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. On the back of the knitted houses, KnitRiot attached a tag urging 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. 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.⁸ The leftwing political position of this knitting group is clear in both the visual rhetoric and the written rhetoric on their installation. Finally, a yarn bomber who participated with a group in the October 2012 Breast Cancer Awareness Campaign by yarn bombing a park with pink breasts was asked by an interviewer why yarn bombing; she replied: “Breast cancer doesn’t



Figure 5: *Knit the Bridge Installation on the Warhol Bridge, Pittsburgh, PA. 14 August 2013-10 September 2013.*

ask for permission, so neither did we" (Hayes). As Edbauer argues of graffiti as writing scenes, they "are overwhelmingly populated by bodies shocked, angry, delighted, and feeling-full bodies" (133).

The social dimension of yarn bombing—and other kinds of "making"—is crucial. Most yarn bombing is done in groups—both small and large—who work on the knitting and crocheting of pieces, put them up in public places, and de-install, if that is what is called for. In short, yarn bombing connects people, both those who do it and those who witness it. As David Gauntlett argues, "making is connecting" in at least three ways because:

- you have to connect things together (materials, ideas, or both) to make something;
- acts of creativity usually involve, at some point, a social dimension and connect us with other people;
- through making and sharing them in the world, we increase our engagement and connection with our social and physical environment (2).

Certainly there is a social meaning to creativity in making anything—whether you make something in or with a group or alone you when you work with a memory of a pattern shared with or made by another and then you pass it on to someone else. In other words, making connects throughout the five rhetorical canons, from inception through circulation of “materials, ideas, or both.”

The practice of knitting and crocheting today looks very similar and yet is very different from yarn work done ages ago. Yarn bombing calls attention to the radical paradigm shift in the *practice* of crocheting and knitting. In the words of one yarn bomber, in the past, “the expectation is that knitting has to be linked to something useful;” by contrast, yarn bombing is usually purely aesthetic with little or no tangible function. “So although a new group of young women [are] now engaging in the same type of activity that their great-grandmothers had engaged in some hundred years earlier [and that second-wave feminists by and large vehemently rejected], there [is] one very major difference: now, they [are] doing it by choice and for their own personal reasons” (Bot 36).

Most yarn bombing is crafted with left over yarns from other projects, or with yarn from UFOs (unfinished objects), or from recycled pieces bought from second hand stores or found in the attic. In some cases, when the installation is taken down, the pieces are donated to needy causes such as the homeless in Yukon installation. Yarn bombing, then, is typically a repurposing, recycling, and remixing process. It can take hours, days, weeks or months to plan and prepare for a yarn bombing. Once up, an installation may last a year, several months, weeks, days, hours, or even minutes.⁹ For example, on August 10th and 11th, 2013, the Andy Warhol Bridge in Pittsburgh was yarn bombed. Amanda Gross, a local fiber artist, headed up the record-breaking “Knit the Bridge” public art installation on the 87-year-old, steel suspension bridge spanning the Allegheny River. Gross gathered 1,847 participants from around the city to spend fourteen months planning, fundraising, knitting and crocheting 580 hand-made 3” by 6” panels to cover the walkway of the bridge and 3,000 linear feet of knitting to cover the bridge towers. 337 volunteers installed the panels over two days in August for what is to date the largest recorded yarn bombing.

Just one month later on September 10, 2013, several hundred volunteers de-installed the yarn over two 15-hour days. Why do crafters engage in such an ephemeral practice?

Why do Yarn Bombers Engage in the Ephemeral?

Yarn bombing is a temporal art. Before artists can de-install pieces, installations are often taken down by the public who see them as a nuisance, by the police who see them as vandalism, or even by those who see the whimsy of them and appreciate the art as well as the message but take them precisely because of those reasons. Given that it is unclear how long a piece will remain,

yarn bombers, like artists everywhere, are plainly more invested in the *process of creating* and *performing* an installation than in the finished product itself. Thus, it is both the *creative process* and the *performance* of yarn bombing that holds much of the meaning rather than the object itself. That is, those parts that involve the body—embodied making and putting up—are what hold the most reward. As anyone who creates art or crafts knows, the entire *process* of planning, preparing, and creating is as important, if not more so, than the finished project. Sociologist David Gauntlett points out that “the process [of making] provides space for thought and reflection, and helps to cultivate a sense of the self as an active creative agent” (222). Feminists Betsey Greer and Debbie Stoller¹⁰ argue that the resurgence of interest in knitting and crocheting comes from an epistemic and an ontological perspective that values *making over made*, production over consumerism, and process over product. This renewed interest opens up new roles for rhetors and interlocutors.

Valuing the doing over the done and the self-made over the mass made is to claim the slow, laboring practice of crafting as a reaction to the staggering rate of technological change of today, what Colin Bain, Dennis Des Rivieres, and Sean Dolan call “hyperculture.” Paradoxically, however, it is this speedy race of communication technology that has permitted yarn bombing to spread across the globe so quickly.¹¹ Indeed, the internet has been absolutely



Figure 6: *Pink M.24 Chaffee Tank*. Marianne Jorgensen. April 2006. Courtesy of Marianne Jorgensen.



Figure 7: *Strick and Liesel 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.*

vital to circulating and sharing yarn bombing strategies through viral videos, blogs, and social networks. 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). Thus, this cultural paradigm shift in hand crafting is part of a much larger one that is interdependent with the emergence of the internet.

Of course, the internet has radically changed how we participate in all sorts of activities across the globe. Political activist and Harvard Law professor Lawrence Lessig notes, “One of the most important byproducts of digital technologies, not yet really recognized, or if recognized, not quite enough, is the capacity to enable a wider range of artists to create” (ix). This byproduct is part of a larger paradigm shift created through the internet, what Lessig calls a shift from a read-only culture to a “read/write culture.” In the read only, and I would add listen-only culture, many participants are passive consumers of information generated by a few, usually an elite few. The read/write, listen/create culture of today permits anyone to create art, products, and artifacts as readily as they consume them. In discussing this paradigm shift, Australian



Figure 8: *Post Yarn Bombed in Marysville, Ohio on Memorial Day, 28 May 2012. Wikimedia Commons photograph by Vtimman. Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 2.0 Generic license.*

media scholar Axel Bruns introduced the term “produsage” to describe the collapse of the boundary between producers and consumers in a variety of online environments.¹² These environments are characterized by voluntary open collaboration, fluid heterarchies of governance through stigmergic participation, palimpsestic artifacts, and disavowal of conventional intellectual property rights. In other words, the internet provides the technological framework for a marked “shift from static to dynamic content, from hierarchically managed to collaboratively and continuously developed material, and from user-as-consumer to user-as-contributor” (Bruns “FCJ-066”). The contributions are proliferating at a dizzying rate. Cultural critic Sophy Bot says, “The upshot of all this new content we’re adding is an explosion of productivity, innovation and self-expression” (27). This dizzying rate happens, however, both on the web and outside the web. Who is served by this explosion? And specifically, who is served by yarn bombing and for what purpose is it taken up?

Whom Does Yarn Bombing Serve? What Purpose Does it Serve?

Clearly, yarn bombers experience *joie de fabriquer*, the joy of making, when they work to prepare and plan to construct yarn pieces, work their needles on

yarn pieces, and put up an installation. But is that all there is? If it were just that, it would be a rather self-serving activity.¹³ But yarn bombing is done for all sorts of reasons and serves all sorts of people beyond the crafters themselves. One salient purpose is that of activism.¹⁴ Feminist Greer argues that “each time you participate in crafting you are making a difference, whether it’s fighting against useless materialism or making items for charity or something betwixt and between” (“What?”). Even stronger, in her book *Knitting for Good* she proclaims: “I think every act of *making* is an act of revolution” (144). She coined the term “craftivists” for activist handcrafters; however, Greer explains that

Craftivism is about more than ‘craft’ and ‘activism’—it’s about making your own creativity a force to be reckoned with. The moment you start thinking about your creative production as more than just a hobby or ‘women’s work,’ and instead as something that has cultural, historical and social value, craft becomes something stronger than a fad or trend (“Craftivism” 402).¹⁵

Still elsewhere on her website Greer defines craftivism “as a way of looking at life *where voicing opinions through creativity* makes your voice stronger, your compassion deeper and your quest for justice more infinite.” (“Definition”). For third-wave feminists like Greer, craftwork is reconceived as formidable, compelling, and subversive feminist activism. In this way, the term calls



Figure 9: *Ground Cover* by Ann Morton installed 6 December 2013 in Phoenix, Arizona. Photograph by Todd Photographic. Courtesy of Ann Morton.

attention to the word “craft” in German—*kraft* with a K—which means “power.” Power here does not signal hierarchy, domination, or hegemony rather it is more like a force, strength, energy, and ability what I have termed “soft power”— an oxymoron for contemporary activism such as yarn bombing that challenges and explodes the connotation of “soft” as flimsy, weak, stereotypically feminine and the connotation of “power” as brute force, strong, stereotypically 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.

Whom beyond the yarn bombers are served by the rhetorical act? Those who pass by and are startled to find this odd domestic arrangement on a public place. Those who have not seen but benefit from the activism of the act. Below I offer several examples of activist yarn bombing cases. Let me point out that as Edbauer notes reading about graffiti, reading yarn bombing “primarily in terms of discourse risks missing something that exists beside(s) its function as/in the symbolic. Tags [we might add yarn bombings] themselves become a material force that encounters a whole array of other bodies and forces. It is not only a material effect of certain literate and discursive practices, but it also creates visceral effects” (150). The visceral effects are what many activist yarn bombers are counting on.

Here are just a few examples. In April 2006, Danish artist Marianne Joergensen created a war protest against the US and British involvement in the Iraqi war when she yarn bombed a World War II tank (borrowed after much negotiating with Danish government) (Joergensen). Titled *Pink M.24 Chaffee Tank*, the installation was made up of 3,500 pink crocheted squares donated by more than one thousand contributors from the US and Europe that were assembled together and fit over the borrowed combat tank. (See Figure 6). The piece was displayed in front of the Nikolaj Contemporary Art Center in Copenhagen from April 7-11, 2006. As Ele Carpenter points out about this protest:

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. (Carpenter 4)

Here we see the measures of perspective by incongruity where “comic irony” enables “an alternative critical discourse” to the war in Iraq. This discourse carries a visceral reaction as it interacts with other bodies and forces.

In fall 2010, the German parliament passed a law to extend the operation time of the country’s seventeen nuclear power plants. In response, many protests were held against nuclear power in general and this law in particular. Among them was the protest work of two young German university students who call themselves by the pseudonyms Strick and Liesel (named after ‘Strickliesel’ or “Knitting Nancy,” a children’s toy used to learn how to knit). (See Figure 7.) The yellow knitted square presents the familiar nuclear activity logo used on warning signs, especially near reactors or nuclear facilities in the branded yellow and black but with two flowers at the top right-hand corner. The round black circle in the middle sports white cross-stitches as an allusion to a dead figure. The two young women hung banners of this and other similar designs on trees, street lamps, bridge banisters and pillars in front of the state parliament building and elsewhere. In another square, the middle yellow and black logo sports the words “Nein Danke” “No thanks,” echoing part of the logo of the large international Anti-Nuclear Movement. This low-key anonymous activism relying on a private domestic practice attached to a public space offers a powerful example of perspective by incongruity. Here against crowded graffiti covered walls, the yellow knitted square stands out. No shouting, no crowds, no force, it nevertheless makes a robust statement against nuclear power through its irony and it promises to generate a rising affective reaction from those who pass by it.

On May 28, 2012—Memorial Day—in Marysville Ohio, tekkbabe859 surreptitiously yarn bombed a pole in red, white, and blue for the remembrance of veterans on Memorial Day. (See Figure 8.) She worked in icons of a heart, a peace sign, and a star, and attached a QR tag with a quote from Oliver Wendell Holmes: “Lord, bid war’s trumpet cease; Fold the whole earth in peace.” The juxtaposition of this quotation from Holmes against the red, white, and blue icons make clear the protest is against war and conflict of any sort, and especially US involvement. An artist of another yarn bombed site noted 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”). The same might be said of this yarn bombing. The knitted piece on the post works as a metaphor, supplying warmth, nurturing, and protection. Here the domestic combines with the outdoor to craft a powerful perspective by incongruity and a quiet reflection on peace.

In 2013, artist and activist Ann Morton designed and created the “Ground Cover” Public Art Project that pulled together 300 handmade blankets crafted

by 600 volunteers from the US and Canada, most of whom Morton never met (Ann Morton) to form a drawing of brightly colored flowers. (See Figure 9.) Each blanket consists of 28 10-inch squares that have been knitted, crocheted, or quilted. Morton sent each blanketeer—as she called the volunteers—detailed color charts for their blanket with “yarn and fabric samples of the exact reds, oranges, browns and greens needed to create the overall effect she envisioned” (Hwang). Laid out together side by side, these blankets formed a giant desert flower in a vacant lot in downtown Phoenix, Arizona. Of the title, Morton observed that “‘Ground Cover’ is a play on words because you think of plants and flowers but you also think of people on the ground, the homeless” (Hwang). The installation was put up on December 6, 2013. When the installation was taken down just two days later, the 300 blankets were delivered to homeless agencies across Phoenix so they could be distributed to the homeless throughout the city (Pamela Burke). As Kellie Hwang reported, “To [Morton], the project is much more than art for a good cause. ‘Ground Cover’ nurtured a deep sense of community across generations and social strata, she said; it fortified her faith in the kindness and caring of strangers, and it brought attention to the plight of the homeless.”

Morton’s project offers a great example of bringing attention to the homeless in a unique way. In her words, “The installation is not really the piece. The piece is the people that are getting involved, their experience in it, being a part of it. I tried engaging the makers along the way and, as an artist, the whole process has been the piece. I hope people will have a broader understanding of homelessness, and maybe volunteer again at a shelter, and just understand the need” (Hwang). This testimony calls attention to the social dimensions of making as connecting and to the visceral response along the way.

Conclusion

Yarn bombing, as I have shown here, is a postmodern, posthuman, postindustrial third-wave feminist rhetorical practice that has carved out new roles for rhetors and interlocutors. Cultural Studies scholar Ann Gray defines feminism as “a *practice* as well as a politics and a strong intellectual movement” (90). Feminists throughout time have engaged in a variety of different practices that distinguish different ages even though they have never been unified as a group. Whereas some first-wave feminists chained themselves to fences, broke windows, and did other kinds of violent acts of civil disobedience in the quest for suffrage, and some second-wave feminists marched, held consciousness-raising sessions, and burned bras for a whole host of women’s issues, third-wave feminists have adopted other kinds of strategies for still other agendas, most notably issues pertaining to women of color, of varying classes, and alternative sexualities, but also those of political, economic, and

social problems beyond gender. That is, third-wave feminists have taken on more complex intersecting issues and tend to use much more pliable strategies than earlier feminist groups.¹⁶ As feminists Stacey Sowards and Valerie Renegar point out, today feminist activism includes tactics such as “creating grassroots’ models of leadership, using strategic humor, building feminist identity, sharing stories, and resisting stereotypes and labels” (58). These strategies are in line with the issues at the heart of even discordant third-wave feminists. Yarn bombing fits within this new postindustrial, postmodern, post-human paradigm of feminism as, among other things, it confronts modernist constructions of art and craft.

Contemporary artists challenge the vertical hierarchy of art versus craft to dismantle it. They question the use of galleries as exhibition spaces, curators and juries as judges, and commerce and consumerism using art. These new artists, such as yarn bombers, have turned to the streets, parks, and other outdoor spaces as exhibition sites for a variety of media. Artist Kate Themel speaks for many when she says, “Art is not a separate ‘world’ from Craft. These two things are not entities themselves but rather they are specific aspects of all creative work.” The artificial distinction of art from craft by the *product*—art is painting, craft is embroidery; art is sculpture, craft is pottery—is the source of the problem. Themel points out, “ART is not a physical object. ART is an expression of thought, emotion and/or intent. ART is communication. When we create a work of art, we are reaching out to the world because we have something to say.” Craft as a praxis is art and is rhetorical. As artist Julie Teeple argues, “Being an artist is a craft. You must have the ability to craft something to be an artist.” Psychologist Ellen J. Langer, pushes this idea further, in her book *On Becoming an Artist*, by reviewing dozens of experiments—her own and those of her colleagues—that are designed to study mindfulness and its relation to human creativity; this research shows that creativity is not a rare gift that only some special few are born with but rather an integral part of everyone’s makeup.

This contemporary perspective on art and craft resonates well with Aristotle’s horizontal concept of art and artist whereby artists are not distinguished by their products—what they make—but by being “wiser *not* in virtue of being able to act, but of having the theory for themselves and knowing the causes” (1.1).¹⁷ In other words, artists are those who have come to know their knowing. As Aristotle continues, “it is a sign of the man [and woman] who knows and of the man [and woman] who does not know, that the former can teach, and therefore we think art more truly knowledge than experience is” (1.1). John Dewey also promoted a horizontal notion of art by defining art as any form of work that is “unusually conscious of its own meaning” and the artist as distinguished by the extent of her awareness of what she is *doing*

(260-61). Both Aristotle and Dewey refocus our attention on praxis rather than object or a thing, something contemporary artists have also been doing for some time now.

In conclusion, yarn bombing can best be understood as a contemporary third-wave feminist rhetorical response to and a postmodern explosion of the separation of labor and domestic skills, the split between public and private, the movement of remixing and repurposing rather than always consuming new, and reactions against the limitations of legal restrictions on making and mending anything as well as on displaying something in public. Through its *perspective by incongruity*, yarn bombing challenges many other assumptions concerning high and low arts, male and female practices, handmade and mass made, hand wrought and machine wrought, official and unofficial, public and private spaces, personal and political, hierarchical arrangements of governing and open collaborative fluid heterarchies, and, user-as-consumer and user-as-creator.

By engaging in practices that have been gendered in the past, yarn bombers—both men and women—seek to reclaim and repurpose these “traditionally feminized” activities through subverting both knitting and graffiti in order to dismantle the status quo of all sorts of issues and commonplaces.

Acknowledgments

I wish to express my gratitude to Clancy Ratliff and Amy Ferdinandt Stolley for their very helpful suggestions on an earlier draft of this essay.

Notes

- 1 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. 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. See the Center for Contemporary Canadian Art Canadian Art Database (ccc.a.concordia.ca) for images of Janet Morton's knitted work. Since Morton's first work, a number of fiber artists have taken up knitting and crocheting in outdoor spaces. Among the more famous is Agata Oleksiak (or Olek as she is known), a Polish-born artist who now lives in New York. She has been

enshrining humans, bicycles, buildings, statues, and swimming pools in neon-colored crochet since 2003.

- 2 Also see Deborah Brandt who argues that “the trick for writers and readers is not how to make a text make sense but how to make what they are *doing* make sense. The essence of literate orientation is knowing what to do now” (emphasis added, 192).
- 3 The specific term “yarn bombing” was coined by Leanne Prain, a graphic artist, writer, knitter, and crafter. See Moore and Prain.
- 4 The Yukon project took 100 volunteers, 368,800 yards of yarn, and 6,000 square feet of knitting to cover the DC-3 plane. When the installation was taken down, the knitted blankets were washed and given to the homeless.
- 5 Also see Davis Baird’s book *Thing Knowledge*. The question of whether things and humans have equal capacity for active agency, life, and biography is beyond the scope of this essay. On *things* as active social agents, see Bruno Latour as well as Dennis Weiss, Amy Proppen, and Colbey Reid. In light of these posthuman arguments, yarn bombing installation can be argued to have social agency.
- 6 Also see Barbara A Biesecker.
- 7 For instance, Fortune 500 companies now pay Magda Sayeg upwards of \$70,000 to wrap their wares in yarn for print ads.
- 8 The California Homeowners Bill of Rights passed and became law in January 2013. 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>.
- 9 On Flickr, self-described yarn bombers 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 hour;” another “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”).
- 10 Debbie Stoller is founder of *BUST* magazine and the writer of the *Stitch* and *Bitch* series of knitting and crochet books.
- 11 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.

It has been an annual event across the world ever since.

- 12 Bruns coined the term in his paper “Prodsusage” for the *Creativity & Cognition* conference in Washington, DC, 2007. Also see his book *Wikipedia, Second Life and Beyond: From Production to Prodsusage*.
- 13 Emily Matchar in *Homeward Bound: Why Women are Embracing the New Domesticity* worries that some of the DIY folks, where many of the yarn bombers come from, attend to their own individual needs at the expense of the social. She points out that the DIY movement is motivated by the “idea—that it’s disempowering to be disconnected from the preindustrial skills of our great- or great-great-grandparents” (194). But she cautions that while DIY-mania is to be applauded for its creativity, community, and sustainability, “this same DIY-mania can lead to a troubling hyperindividualism” (248). She quotes gender scholar Chris Bobel who asks “Why is it we don’t intervene in the bureaucracy” to fix social problems that are motivating the DIYers? She says DIYers respond by saying “We don’t want to be in bed with the enemy. That’s not where change happens. That’s old-school activism. We’re all about DIY.” Not only does she find this response inadequate, but she sighs as she says “A lot of these activists weren’t even registered voters” (qtd. p. 248). This leads to the question of how many yarn bombers are actually voters?
- 14 On yarn bombing as activism, see Bot; Carpenter; Knitshade; Greer, *Knitting*; Greer, *Craftivism*; Matchar; McFadden and Scanlan; Moore and Prain; Petney; Sheppard; Shirobayashi; Stoller *Happy Hooker*; Stoller, *Knitter’s Handbook*; Tapper; Werle; and Wills.
- 15 *American Craft Magazine* put the term “craftivist” on one of the great moments in crafts to mark their 70th Anniversary (“70 years”).
- 16 For a discussion of tactical differences between second- and third-wave feminists, see R. Claire Snyder. While contemporary feminists such as Nancy Hewitt rightly challenge the metaphor of waves for analyzing feminism across time, arguing that feminism has never receded, the metaphor nevertheless provides a useful construct for understanding differences diachronically.

17 In Middle English, “art” typically meant a “skill in scholarship and learning” (c.1300), especially in the seven sciences and liberal arts. This meaning remains in the term *Bachelor of Arts* that denotes “human workmanship” as opposed to *nature*. In other words, the *making* of things by human hands is an epistemic endeavor whether scholarship, art, or something else.

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