Introduction

The new alternative craft movements have moved traditional craft techniques from the home environment to public Internet blogs, to art worlds and to street art. The ties of tradition have given way to free creativity in amateur crafts, which allows the expression of thoughts and feelings, and can be political or critical as well.

Yarn bombing is one form of craft-based artistic expression. It is a field where amateurs and professionals, traditions and the contemporary culture cross. Yarn bombing is based on handicraft skills, but it operates using strategies familiar in street art. Like traditional graffiti, knitting graffiti can be playful creation or considered as a political and subversive medium of communication. The concept of urban knitting is far more complex than the innocent appearance of these street knits might at first suggest.

Re-crafting the past

The new alternative craft scene has been flourishing in the past decade. Many artists and craftspeople are using traditional craft techniques, like knitting and crocheting, but in a contemporary and unconventional way (Levine, 2010). According to Orton-Johnson (2014), knitting in particular has enjoyed revived popularity and this popularity has been associated by a growing presence of knitters on the web.

The Internet is brimming with knit blogs, and young people are gathering to knit in public or at special knit cafes. Crafts are not a trend, because trends are related to the sense of transience. Handicrafts are something permanent with a long history. Without the slightest doubt, crafts will also be made in the future.

Crafts are strongly related to traditions, and techniques carry a long history. Crafts are something that connects different generations. Figuratively speaking crafts are loaded with tacit knowledge that speaks to us through our hands and touches us. They have a special ability to reach our personal thoughts, our emotional memory.

In Western culture, males have traditionally dominated art history. By contrast, craft culture is markedly feminine. It is associated with women so self-evidently that it is often left
unquestioned (Parker and Pollock, 1987; Parker, 2011). Women have traditionally been responsible for the household and clothing. Female textile crafts became an extension of that everyday work. Handicrafts have always been associated with care and maintenance. Craft products come close, even on the skin, like domestic textiles, such as bedding, towels and clothes. The handicraft products, like sweaters and woollen socks, have been used and touched, but not necessarily paid particular attention to (Ihatsu, 2005). A distinction between ‘craft products’ or ‘applied arts’ and ‘works of art’ still persists in the Western world. Handicrafts are considered to be the results of skilful work, whereas art is seen to be an expression of individual creativity. When handicrafts are historically made for use, fine art is mainly made to be seen.

Despite the long tradition, crafts and especially knitting are being renewed and converted all the time (Strawn, 2007). Nowadays crafts have a new role in our society. Greer (2008) says that before the year 2000, the term knitting evoked many thoughts about grandmothers, the home district and all pastoral and definitely non-radical things but thanks to the recent resurgence of crafts, the new generation of knitters have redefined crafts and the homemade in a way that better reflects the current view of feminism and domesticity.

In the contemporary knitting circles, the ties of tradition and utility have loosened and given way to artistic expression and free creativity (Haveri, 2013). These new articulations have brought handicrafts from private homes to the public areas of city spaces and the Internet.

Even in a new environment, crafts are still a medium with a meaning. According to Searle (2008) the versatility of knitting appeals to artists who may use the craft to honour the history and tradition of women’s work or to raise questions about gender and domesticity. Knitting can evoke associations with adornment and the body, and memories of comfort, warmth and caring. It can also raise questions about time and productivity and how these are valued in our society.

**Knit graffiti revolution**

Our urban landscapes are filled with government and corporate sponsored public sculptures and monumental architecture, the embodiments of power and cultural memory. By contrast, street art has come to populate certain cities. For many people street art seems to be almost a synonym for graffiti. The graffiti culture is a very complex subculture. Graffiti is an urban and artistic way of influencing the visual surroundings, but on the other hand it could be seen as vandalism. Nowadays some art museum exhibitions consider graffiti as ‘real art’, but at the same time the mainstream news inform us that cities have paid enormous sums to clean sprayed paintings from public spaces.

Contrary to traditional graffiti and street art, newer kinds of street art can increase the attractiveness of the city space without leaving permanent marks on property. In recent years these kinds of urban art forms, for example guerrilla gardening, reverse graffiti and yarn bombing, have gained favourable attention. The main idea of this alternative graffiti genre, raised in the 2000s, is to make a statement with positive activism, not with disobedience and anarchism.

Knitting, with a traditionally feminine material and technique, is presented as a much-needed antidote to traditionally masculine street art, especially graffiti art (Macdonald, 2001), and its rebellious and destructive undertones. Yarn bombing is still quite a new phenomenon, but it has already become an impressive part of the street art genre. Graffiti knitting, as we now know it, began in 2005 with Austin-based self-taught knitter, Magda Sayeg. She didn’t have a strong background in knitting, but in 2005, she decided to knit a door pull to warm up the storefront of her women’s clothing boutique in Houston (Harper, 2010).
According to Moore and Prain (2009) this first knitted graffiti was just a tiny rectangular strip out of blue and pink acrylic yarn, but from the very beginning the response was surprisingly strong. People came inside the shop to ask what it was and were stopping their cars to take photos. So, Sayeg invited her friend to join her and they started to tag the city with knitted items. Together they, using pseudonyms PolyCotN and A Krylik, formed the first yarn graffiti crew called Knitta. In the following years, the knitting crew grew and also other groups started to emerge.

As a crew they were able to realise large projects and gain more attention with their knitted pieces. Photographs of this new form of street art spread online around the world and also other knitters got excited and started to follow their lead. By 2008, yarn bombing, also known as the textile graffiti revolution, became an international phenomenon, mostly because of the Internet. Besides individual knitters, many knitting crews and collectives were founded, for example Masquerade in Stockholm, Ladies Fancywork Society in Denver and Knit the City in London.

In recent years, many books have introduced the works of the international yarn bombing movement. The publication Yarn Bombing: The Art of Crochet and Knit Graffiti by Mandy Moore and Leanne Prain in 2009 has been a kind of manifesto for the movement. The book is partly a reference book about creative yarn bombs from all over the world and partly tutorial with tips and patterns for knit bombing.

The very first knitting crew founded by Sayeg has already dwindled, but for Sayeg knitting became her full-time profession. Thanks to yarn bombing, she is a well-known textile artist with assistants knitting, running her websites and coordinating project logistics (Wollan, 2011). She has said that by her knitting she has questioned the assumptions of knitting as well as those of graffiti (Harper, 2010).

Over her knitting career, Sayeg has covered all kinds of objects from signposts to cars (most of them on commercial purposes) and to an entire bus, which she did in Mexico City in 2008. These tremendous yarn installations consist of hundreds of knitted pieces. In her works she prefers hand-knitted pieces, but also uses loom to make the process quicker (Harper 2010; Wollan, 2011). On her webpage, Sayeg (2014) tells that she continues to lead community-based projects and works on commission around the world with many international companies. She is seeking ways to expand her boundaries by experimenting new mediums and techniques, such as the usage of lighting with knitted material.

**Softer side of street art**

Knitted street art has been called by many names, for example, guerrilla knitting, urban knitting and graffiti knitting, but the terms *yarn storming* in the UK and *yarn bombing* in the US seem to have established themselves as the standard terms for visual expressions in the urban space that involve textile. According to Björk (2012), yarn bombing is an allusion on the graffiti term *bombing*, originating in the 1980s New York graffiti scene, where it meant writing one’s *tag* all over a subway train car. Tagging, which in the graffiti tradition is about a crew name written with a felt pen, is also widely used as a term in knitting graffiti.

When the London based movement Knit the City was established in April 2009 by Lauren O’Farrell, she renamed her group’s activities *yarn storming*, because it ‘sounds more creative than bombing, which is destructive’ (Costa, 2010). The FAQs on the Knit the City webpage (2014) tell the story:
Being of a gentler disposition the Yarn Corps feel a bit sheepish about being labelled as astardly yarn terrorists. We live in a city where “bomb” is possibly not the best word to bandy about, even if it is woolly. We’re not blowing things up. We’re creating a bit of handmade chaos.

Besides many names, yarn bombing also takes on many forms, such as tree wears or arigurumi creatures, but it generally involves a gesture of wrapping a hand-knitted or crocheted item around everyday objects, such as signs, poles and streetlights and in city spaces. Warmly wrapped poles, fences and traffic signs, called *cosies*, are thought to make the streetscape, dominated by steel and concrete, softer and more pleasurable. These yarn installations can be large-scale pieces covering cars or public monuments or just very small and simple knitted strips (Moore and Prain, 2009; Werle, 2011).

Like all forms of street art, yarn bombing is related to social action, being creative and daring and getting in touch with environmental experiences (Malinen, 2008). Yarn bombing is illegal if it has been done without the permission of the property owner, and it could be considered vandalism or littering. However, knitters rarely run into trouble with the law. Like Sayeg said in an interview: ‘You’d have to be the most bored police officer to want to arrest me’ (Costa, 2010).

The concrete reason why the police and security guards tolerate the woollen version of graffiti better than painted graffiti is that yarn graffiti is gentler than its hard counterpart. The removal of painted graffiti is expensive and fraught with obstacles, whereas knitted graffiti is easily removed: A pair of scissors or even a firm tug is enough to detach yarn bombs without a trace. Its impermanent nature allows the practitioner to produce impressive street art without damaging public property (Moore and Prain, 2009).

Knitted graffiti is considered to make the environment feel inviting and cosy. This might explain the increasing interest of art institutions and different communities to organise yarn-bombing happenings. During the early years of yarn bombing, Sayeg was identified with underground graffiti artists, but nowadays the authorities she feared to get in trouble with are inviting her to work for them (Wollan, 2011).

Although the yarn sculpted personal statements do not cause a great risk to be arrested, they still evoke excitement – not because of breaking the law, but breaking invisible and non-verbal norms. McGovern (2014a), who has interviewed yarn bombers, describes:

Yarn bombers get a kick from participating in something a little bit rebellious; and this subversion occurs on a number of levels. They may be subverting norms about knitting and how it should be employed and enjoyed. Equally, yarn bombers may be about subverting ideals of the feminine and women as homemakers. They may even be seeking to subvert ideas about the space in which yarn bombing installations occur.

Street art is outside the institutional art world, and in many cases graffiti art has been made without permission. From that perspective we cannot be sure that everything that looks like yarn bombing really is part of the graffiti culture. Nowadays many established artists do huge yarn installations with permission from property owners or on their request. These artists are not necessarily considering themselves as knit bombers. For example, Agata Oleksiak aka Olek, who is one of the best-known yarn installation artists at the moment, sees the city space as an extension of the gallery and announces: ‘I don’t yarn bomb, I make art’ (Wollan, 2011).
Towards a softer world

Crafts are traditionally made in the middle of daily routines. They are engaged with everyday life. Even when they move to the world street art, they still have that humble nature. Soft art offers a contrast to the masculine and massive public art. The impermanence of crocheted and knitted artworks set against the infinity of these art monuments.

The popularity of knitting is changing the face of the craft, but some crafters go further and also see knitting as a way to change the world. Because of the softness, it may be difficult to see a connection between knitting and anarchy, but yarn craft and activism have a long history. For example, yarn craft played an important role in numerous 1970s and 1980s political actions (Parker and Pollock, 1987; Robertson, 2011).

Betsy Greer (2008) has created the term craftivism for the point where crafts and activism meet. According to her, craftivism is a way for knitters to voice their opinions through creativity. Yarn bombing can be seen as one of the many forms of craftivism (Greer, 2014). It is anonymous, non-commercial and unauthorised. It is something that is born to communicate with the living and changing environment. Nowadays many crafters regard the act of creating something with their hands as a stance against mass-production, the consumer culture and corporate values (Greer, 2008; Tapper, 2011). They are making something themselves rather than just consuming what has been given by the big suppliers. And when they do something, they usually choose something to recycle, renew and reuse.

With the knitted graffiti the medium is the message. Yarn bombing brings soft human values and an ecological approach to replace the hard technologies of our time. The hectic rhythm of everyday life has given rise to cultural phenomena that emphasise slowness. There are concepts, such as slow food, slow design, slow cities and, of course, the super-ordinate term slow life. The growing popularity of crafts is related to this phenomenon. It challenges us to ask what good life is and what is valuable, real and enduring. Yarn bombs in are telling this message.

Many yarn bombing crews have been known to base their activities on activist ideas. They use their needles to do good by collecting money and knit woollen socks and warm blankets for charity. In many cases craftivism has been used as a way to a peaceful protest that could centre on a political statement, feminist ideas or anti-consumerist sentiments (McGovern, 2014b).

It seems that for many yarn bombers it is very important to include a message in their actions. The main reason for yarn bombing, however, is probably the opportunity to beautify the surrounding environment, to give the sterile urban space a personal and cosy touch (McGovern, 2014a).

Creating a connection

The important learning environment for traditional handicraft skills has been the home, where skills have been passed on from the mother to the daughter and from the father to the son – from the older generation to the younger ones. This home learning has ensured the continuity of tradition and the constancy of folk aesthetics. The Internet, however, has revolutionised informal learning (Bal et al., 2014).

The Internet is a place where everyday do-it-yourself (DIY) creativity has been flourishing in recent years (Gauntlett, 2011; Ratto and Bolter, 2014). It has opened up a world of imagination and participation where users create content and messages. The Internet is a platform where crafts have had the opportunity to renew their nature and attitudes towards them. Knitting instructions and patterns can be found on the Internet, and cultural influences are no longer confined to national borders.
Partly caused by the new communication strategies of social media on the Internet, the status of hobbyist handicrafts has changed. Instead of being associated with diligence and utility, knitting has become an instrument of self-expression and activism. ‘For guerrilla knitting communities and activist groups, blogging, vlogging and representing material practices in online spaces to a global audience is a vital part of the acts of citizenship and resistance that they are engaged in’ says Orton-Johnson (2014: p. 143). She argues that online spheres have made the often private and domestic knitting visible, and social networking and the related activities have enriched the experience of knitting and provided new ways of constructing the maker’s self.

It is not surprising that crafters have been so keen to communicate and share their knowledge and creations via new social networks. For centuries ordinary people, especially women, have been denied the ability to share their craft-based creations with the audience (Parker, 2010). Previous research on self-taught art (Haveri, 2010) shows that even outside of the art world people are rarely satisfied doing their art just for themselves. Sharing is the basic nature of all kinds of artistic actions, regardless of education, techniques or art world connections. Artistic creativity cannot be a monopoly of those who are the educated insiders of art.

Making handicrafts creates social interaction when crafters are developing skills by co-operating with others. We could say that also the heart of the new wave of crafts is the community. In the contemporary craft culture and the global Internet networks, sharing the same interests have replaced locality, which was typical for earlier folk crafts. In these new collaborations local and global participants are able to share a sense of community and connectivity (Orton-Johnson, 2014). Despite the distances, the Internet has made the existence of craft communities possible. Crafters have set up online galleries to present their works to the public. In web blogs crafters can discuss the meanings of handicrafts, their experiences and share ideas and encouragement, as well as work instructions and patterns (Vartiainen, 2010; Levine and Heimerl 2008). Like Greer (2008) says, knitting is a common language. For craft makers the community and the whole international phenomenon of the new craft movement are inspiring and empowering (Waterhouse, 2010).

The Internet has also played a key role also in craft communities’ off-line real-world activities (Levine and Heimerl, 2008). For the knitters it has provided a tool for communication and opportunities to create networks and organise happenings. Using Internet connections, knitters are able to find other people sharing the same passion and interests. Many local, national, and international knitting events have been organised through the Internet. These craft meetings can be regarded as the contemporary counterpart of sewing clubs.

One of the biggest events for knitters and crocheters is the annual International Yarn Bombing Day, which is organised every year in June, all around the world. The day ‘calls crafters to unite in the goal of covering the world in yarn’ (Faces, 2014). The originator of the first Yarn Bombing Day in 2011 was Joann Matvichuk, from the Canadian province of Alberta. For that purpose she set up a Facebook group that in 2014 had more than 5,800 followers from all over the world.

**Act locally to be seen globally**

An important channel of expression for today’s crafters is web blogs, where they can share images and stories about their own aesthetic activities with the public in a large online community. In addition to self-expression, the aim of craft blogging is the social status. It is a way to make one’s life and oneself more ‘visible’. That recognition is shown as the number of visitors and comments.

Craft blogs are part of the DIY culture, which seeks to resurrect traditional handicrafts and are spreading through the Internet as a global phenomenon and have increased the appreciation
and popularity of handicrafts (Oakes, 2009). These blogs combine a sense of community and individualistic aesthetic experiences, with all meanings.

Blog keeping is an essential part of yarn bombing. Knitters encourage visitors to read their blogs by attaching the blog address to the graffiti. From the blogs those interested can find more information about the piece, maybe a map telling how to find more works, or an opportunity to discuss and comment on knitted art.

The blog culture gives folk aesthetics a channel to mutate and regenerate. On the other hand it eliminates the local influence typical of knitting and harmonises the style. Though yarn bombing blogs the pictures, new ideas and patterns spread all over the world have been fast adopted by other knit bombers. This has made it as an expression of handwork truly international, so that the bloggers' nationality shows rather in the location of the knit graffiti than in the knitted piece itself.

In graffiti knitting it is almost impossible to recognise the knitter's individual needlework. The cosies (i.e. covers for teapots) made by different knitters may look the same which can be explained by the fact that they are possibly made according to same knit patterns. For bombers, however, blogs offer a possibility to distinguish themselves from others as artists and at the same to keep a log of their knitted works.

Lauren O'Farrell (2014) aka Deadly Knitshade, argues on her webpage called Whodunnknit that there are mainly two kinds of graffiti knitting: Cosies that are basically handmade covers for street items and stitched stories. According to her: “The Stitched Stories style of graffiti knitting moved on from ‘cosies’ to artists using amigurumi (knitted toys) and other styles to add a theme or story to their installation. It gave the woolly street art a bit of a voice.” Yarn bombing blogs, however, reveal that even tiny ‘cosies’ can have stories to tell. Stories can be related to the location and remind of some life experience that happened there, or they can be expressed through material (Prain 2014) with, for example, recycled meaningful textiles as parts of the graffiti. These hidden stories only become relevant for the audience through blogs.

**Reasons for graffiti knitting**

Isn’t it a bit of a waste of yarn? I mean shouldn’t you be knitting for homeless pre-mature penguin babies with TB? I always find this question oddly narrow minded. Would you tell a painter or sculptor to use their materials for something more practical? “Hey, Michelangelo! What do you think you’re doing carving a giant naked chap when you could be making a nice functional bathroom set for your local hospice?”

(O’Farrell, 2014)

The common attitude towards crafting and especially knitting is slowly changing, but it is still surprisingly usual to consider yarn bombing as a waste of materials and time. Because textiles have traditionally been only seen as functional, it can be difficult to accept other uses for one’s skills, time and expensive yarns. There are great examples of charity knitting, but it cannot totally explain why the waste of resources is not criticized in art generally, only if art pieces are made of yarn. It seems that the strong utilitarian background still speaks to us through knitted pieces. For knitting and crocheting, the long tradition is not only a strength but also a weakness.

Dissanayake (1995) argues that people have a biological need to make something with their hands. This explains why there is such enjoyment in making and creating something new.
Creative activities increase mental and even physical well-being, and crafting can be a tool for a better life and greater self-appreciation (Pöllänen and Kröger, 2000). Many yarn bombers say that they are knitting graffiti because it is fun (Moore and Prain, 2009). This does not mean, however, that yarn bombing is merely meaningless entertainment.

Crafting could be seen as a way to belong to a tradition and community. It is as a lifestyle and an active form of existence. Gauntlett (2011) suggests that the rise of the craft culture could be one step from the ‘sit back and be told’ culture towards a more active ‘making and doing’ culture. According to him, in our institutionalised schooling system, learning has been a process directed by the teacher and our media and consumer culture has also supported passive receiving. It is a pity that so many people have learnt to spend their leisure time lodged on the sofa instead of going out and doing things. A growing engagement with making crafts rejects the passivity and seeks outlets for creativity, social connections and personal growth.

According to Eija Vähälä (2003), who has studied the health effects of knitting, the process of crafting combines skills, meditation and emotions. The colours, materials and knitting motion give the feeling of pleasure. Vähälä investigated the connection between well-being and making things with one’s hands by doing physiological tests during the crafting work. She argues that the creative craft process can be used to achieve a relaxed and meditative state that slows the heart rate and provides an intense feeling of happiness. This, however, only relates to the knitting part of yarn bombing. When the knitted piece is ready, it needs to be exhibited somewhere in the city environment. The bombing is the part that many knitters find exciting and a little bit rebellious (McGovern, 2014a).

Knitters also have more practical reasons to relish yarn bombing (Moore and Prain, 2009). Yarn bombs are usually rather small, or even large installations comprised of many pieces, so that the works are portable and easy to do whenever and wherever. Small projects are not expensive or time consuming. Moreover, yarn bombs offer knitters a good way to test and practise new techniques and patterns.

For hobbist knitters bored with only making socks and sweaters, yarn bombing seems to be an alternative reason to use handicraft skills. It is appealing to knitters because it allows them to use their skills to do something beyond the functional. For some knitters the thrilling part of urban knitting is to show and place their makings in the city sphere. Besides yarn bombing, there is also guerrilla kindness, which in this context means that the crafter has left something handmade, like socks or maybe a crocheted flower, in a public place for strangers to find and take away. Lothian (2014: p. 15) describes that ‘guerrilla kindness work is about extending your community. It’s about reaching out your hand to a stranger and using your skills to make someone’s day brighter. It’s a handcrafted, joyous experience for the maker and the finder’.

Urban knitters are using their time and money to do something they do not get any profit for. They are not after fame either because in many cases they stay anonymous. They do their art entirely on their own good will or because they have an acute need to express themselves. Traffic signs do not necessarily need legwarmers, but the knitted piece of art could warm the heart of someone passing by.

**Calm after the yarn storm**

Yarn bombing is a relatively new phenomenon, less than a decade old. In short time it has become a significant form of street art in the United States, Canada, Australia and many European countries. However, it seems that the hype around urban knitting is slightly fading. The feedback
from the public at large has been so positive that many museum pedagogues and art teachers have taken yarn bombing to be part of their educational programmes. It is considered a great creative activity and an excellent way to improve environmental awareness and handicraft skills. On the other side, yarn bombing is already so well-known that the element of surprise is no longer effective. It can be a challenge for the street credibility of yarn bombing that even grannies are knitting graffiti.

Note

1 The chapter is an extension of the seminar paper presented at the Cumulus Northern World Mandate Conference, in Helsinki 2012. It is based on the author’s current research, in which she examines the use of traditional craft techniques in artistic expression, and on qualitative interview data from Finnish yarn bombers involved in local and international knitting networks.

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