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Knitting: The Destructive Yarn-Bomb

Abstract

This paper explores the effect of yarn-bombing on the cultural value of knitting. While it has been suggested that such acts of craftivism may help to broaden the public view of knitting, beyond its oft perceived limitations of the domestic and the feminine, I argue the opposite. For yarn-bombing to be the effective tool of political activism it is so often intended to be, it is necessary for knitting to maintain strong associations with women and the home. In such a way, yarn-bombing only serves to further constrain knitting within this firmly established narrative

and such a narrative causes knitting to continually be undervalued as a way of making. Using discourse analysis as a method, this paper will consider two yarn-bombs and how, through their reliance on such associations, they continue to “enable, constrain, and constitute” (Storey 2018, 133) the public perception of knitting today. Exposing this narrative, to begin to challenge it, is key to changing the public’s perception of knitting and encouraging its wider use in innovate manufacturing solutions of the future.

Keywords: Yarn-bombing; knitting; craft; craft narratives; femininity; craft discourse

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Knitting: The Destructive Yarn-Bomb

Introduction

Since the first popularly acknowledged “yarn-bomb” appeared in 2005, taking the form of a knitted door handle “cozy” in Houston USA, its increasing popularity and use as a form of public expression is notable (Turney 2009, 199–215; Hemmings 2010, 66–112). There are two main categories to be considered when referring to yarn-bombing—the spontaneous deployment of knitting, by anyone, in a public space and the pre-planned and pre-organised use of knitting in public spaces in coordination with public and/or private bodies. In this study, I am interpreting a yarn-bomb as either of these: as simply knitting in a public space.

Once a craft understood as entirely domestic, with little to no role in public spaces, the increasing ubiquity of yarn-bombing, particularly within the realms of “craftivism” (McGovern 2019), has brought the act of knitting to the public’s attention. This increased public exposure, however, is not an indication of a change in attitude toward knitting. Despite its frequent use as a form of political commentary on issues such as war, the environment and social justice, yarn-bombing’s success as a form of protest hinges very strongly on its associations with femininity and the home. Therefore, while yarn-bombing may be credited with “bringing knitting out of the home” (Mann 2015) such associations indicate that while physically removed from it, emotionally it remains firmly tethered to the domestic environment. In this way, yarn-bombing’s success in

“challenging dominant ideologies” (Turney 2009, 172), a key objective of craftivism (Greer 2007, 401; Fitzpatrick 2018, 3; McGovern 2019, 12), arguably results in the reaffirmation of the ideology within which knitting itself remains entangled. In such manner, far from recontextualising knitting, yarn-bombing only serves to reinforce the public understanding of it as a craft of specific and limited use.

Knitting is by no means the only craft to suffer stereotyped and constrained definitions (Dorner, 1997; Adamson 2010; Hemmings 2012). However, the reason why it is particularly important to dispel knitting from such limited interpretation is because, as a four-way stretch fabric, it is a strong, versatile, and highly adaptable way of making. Indeed, broader uses of knitting, including the creation of materials for the construction, medical and automotive industries have been highlighted in works such as *Extreme textiles: designing for high performance* (McQuaid and Beesley 2005). However, so entrenched is it, publicly, in ideas of the domestic and the feminine, ideas reinforced by the practice of yarn-bombing, that knitting’s broader use in industry is often overlooked. I am certainly not the first to explore the narratives that exist around knitting (McFadden, Scanlan, and Edwards 2008; Turney 2009; Robins 2014; De Bodt 2018; Hemmings 2018) or the role these narratives play in defining knitting’s role in political activism (Mann 2015; Myzelev 2015; Witkowski 2015; McGovern 2019). What this paper

explores however, is not just the practice of yarn-bombing in the context of femininity and domesticity, but specifically its reliance on such an interpretation for it to act as an effective form of protest, and the consequent damaging influence this has on the discourse around knitting overall as a discipline. Far from broadening the knitting discourse as suggested (Myzelev 2015), through their function as acts of political commentary, these forms of public expression maintain an outdated narrative. This causes an innovative, adaptable, and diverse way of making to continue to be undervalued and looked down upon.

Methodology

In this paper I will employ discourse analysis to consider the impact of two yarn-bombs on the knitting discourse. Firstly, Marianne Jørgensen's *Pink M.24 Chaffee* as an example of a pre-planned and co-ordinated yarn-bomb and secondly, a spontaneous, and anonymous, yarn-bomb that occurred on a street in Dublin in 2018. In both cases, the intended message, or in the case of the latter, presumed message, of the knitter will be considered alongside the likely interpretation of the viewer.

A foundational element of discourse analysis is Ferdinand de Saussure's concept of the signifier and the signified and the idea that objects (or "signs") both denote and connote meanings. Furthermore, discourse analysis allows for the analysis of ideas, concepts and transactions that exist in-between, around, and perhaps within material things themselves. Discourse analysis is, therefore, concerned with meaning-making processes and how and why meaning is formed (Bergström and Boréus

2017, 214). Such interpretation whereby texts, in the broader sense of the term, come to stand for or signify additional social and cultural phenomena is a "circular question and answer process" (Hooper-Greenhill 2000, 117). In such manner, the more a particular reading is suggested or embodied by a text, the more embedded this meaning becomes in the public psyche as it continues to be culturally reinforced.

The theorist Michel Foucault describes discourse as "practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak" (1972, 49) suggesting that objects have no meaning without discourse and in this way, discourses construct social reality. In other words, discourse is power. Furthermore, by highlighting that power is strategic, rather than naturally occurring or spontaneous, Foucault suggests that discourse doesn't simply reveal dominant narratives but rather that the discourse itself is the narrative (1971). In this way it is within the creation of discourse that power lies and therefore it is the discourse itself that must be reclaimed. So, to effectively recontextualise knitting in the public psyche, in order for it to be recognized as a credible way of making, we must take back control of the discourse.

This analysis will focus on how two yarn-bombs, through their materiality, and the meaning of this materiality, rely on associations of femininity and domesticity in order to function as acts of protest and in this way, do not only follow the "social script" of contemporary knitting discourse, but actively constitute it (Storey 2018, 133). In such a way, these yarn-bombs act to maintain and strengthen the discourse.

Study of Two Yarn-Bombs

Taking firstly Jørgensen's *Pink M.24 Chaffee* (Figure 1) displayed in Copenhagen in 2006 as part of the exhibition *TIME* outside the Nikolai Contemporary Art Center Copenhagen which, as an example of a pre-planned yarn-bomb, was intended as a form of political commentary on the Iraq War. The assembly of knitted squares made by knitters based in Europe and the USA, all acting as individual protests to the West's involvement in the conflict, were a way of expressing their contrasting ideals. Relying on knitting's implicit association with the home, and the feelings of safety and closeness that come with it, *Pink M.24 Chaffee* pushes the viewer to question the conflicting, violent act of war (Turney 2009, 205). However, looked at through a lens focused on the cultural value of knitting, this act of public protest against one establishment ideal effectively reinforces another: the interpretation of knitting as a marginal craft, eternally tethered to the domestic, with a limited and superficial role in contemporary society.

Anyone asked to describe the materiality of *Pink M.24 Chaffee* would do so in a similar way: It is a green and grey tank partially covered by a piece of pink knitting made up of individual squares. The tank is solid and hard while the knitting is soft and draping, and the object is displayed in an outdoor space in front of a building. The meaning of this materiality, including contrasts of the domestic and femininity versus war and masculinity would, however, be equally pervasive. Some argue that placing knitting in a public space such as this and using it as a form of political commentary unleashes knitting from its ties to the domestic and



Figure 1

Marianne Jørgensen *Pink M.24 Chaffee*, part of the exhibition "TIME," outside the Nikolai Contemporary Art Center Copenhagen, Denmark (April 27–June 4 2006).

the feminine, and encourages more diverse perspectives of the discipline (Myzelev 2015). But I would argue that the opposite is true: yarn-bombing's reliance on these associations to effectively operate as a form of protest further constrains knitting's role in the public psyche.

Objects such as *Pink M.24 Chaffee* only work as effective forms of political protest by following this "social script" and thus contribute to the discourse that continues to "enable, constrain, and constitute" (Storey 2018, 133) the knitting discipline. Indeed, at the time of its display, the artist herself claimed that by covering the tank in knitting, the former "becomes completely unarmed and loses its authority" (M Jørgensen 2022, personal

communication, 5th April). We associate knitting with the domestic: peaceful, passive, unthreatening. This is the opposite of war, represented by the tank. In this way, knitting becomes entangled with the stereotypical female disposition (Parker [1984] 2019). Such links between knitting and femininity are further reinforced through its juxtaposition with war signified by the tank, the latter embodying strong associations of masculinity. Furthermore, as knitting is used to signify the domestic and the private, the tank signifies public industry. In this manner, through such juxtaposition, the former becomes disassociated with the public sphere. In this way, knitting, along with those who make it, are relegated to a "cultural and

social backwater that reinforces gender stereotypes" (Turney 2009, 174).

I would like to further consider the color, material and location of Jørgensen's *Pink M.24 Chaffee* in order to unpack this concept a little further. These elements also demonstrate that underneath these visual signs our interpretation of the object is firmly rooted in the gendered identities that continue to be present in our conscious and sub-conscious (Tirohl 2016). The stark contrast between the bright pink of the knitting and dark green and grey of the tank beneath is perhaps what first hits the viewer. It serves as an abrupt visual representation of contrasting genders, further leading to associations of the safety of the domestic versus the violence of

war. This is again solidified by the materials themselves: the fluid drape of the knitting over the solid tank structure seems to suggest the former is supported by the latter, or indeed succumbs to it in a way that reflects a traditional social role of men and women in society. Others, however, have suggested the opposite, interpreting the knitting as “almost engulfing the ‘masculine’ dark green of the M.24 Chaffee,” reflecting the struggle of “feminist reclaiming strategies” (Davidson 2020). While I don’t disagree that this is indeed a valid interpretation, it’s a contextualization that requires additional knowledge of the nuances of varying waves of feminism, in particular their contrasting views of craft practices, and for this reason it is unlikely to be the interpretation of the majority.

The knitted fabric is made up of between 3500 and 4000 individually knitted squares which are made obvious by the seams and further highlighted by the variety of color and texture within the piece. This lack of uniformity draws attention to the handmade nature of the piece and the reality that its creation has been a communal effort, feeding into the idea of knitting as an amateur pursuit, completed in the home with whatever material one can find. Such an aesthetic, and its subsequent interpretation, form part of the concept of “craft shame,” discussed by the artist Cat Mazza and others in *The Politics of Craft: A Roundtable* (Bryan-Wilson et al. [2007] 2010, 621). Here Mazza describes the last-minute rejection of her 14-foot-wide knitted blanket of the Nike swoosh for the *Radical Lace and Subversive Knitting* exhibition in 2007. With different sections made by hobbyists in bright orange yarn, the artist describes receiving an email

from the curator, merely days before the opening, stating that the knitted item would look too “funky” next to the other works on display and would therefore not be physically exhibited alongside them (Bryan-Wilson et al. [2007] 2010, 623). The rejection of the knitting on grounds of esthetics and the suggestion that the “funkiness” of this piece might have adverse effects beyond its own interpretation, capable of leaching out on to the other items in the show is interesting to consider. Such is the intensity of the narrative around knitting that it not only has the power to sabotage itself, but also other items in its immediate vicinity, reducing them down to a level of frivolity and trivializing them.

The fabric’s lack of uniformity, created by the patchwork of squares, provides a strong visual reminder that this yarn-bomb is a collective creation. By suggesting that the “physical and personal acknowledgment in all of [the] knitted patches are, when joined together, a powerful visualization of thoughtfulness” (M Jørgensen 2022, personal communication, 5th April), the artist draws upon the power of this collaboration further. In so doing, there is a suggestion that the power created by this collective act could perhaps not have been achieved by one individual, or one knitter, or indeed perhaps one woman. Many people are attracted to yarn-bombing precisely because of its association with community (Adamson 2010; Mann 2015). And, in a society that often glorifies individual achievement over the communal, knitting’s association with the latter and its dependence on it in terms of social influence is significant. In such manner, through its celebration of community, knitting is further marginalized

according to the value systems of today. It is interesting to consider further Jørgensen’s comment that this yarn-bomb’s power lies in its collective thoughtfulness. As a silent mode of communication, when such non-discursive means of communicating have historically been attributed to women (Parker [1984] 2019), it adds a further layer to the gendered narrative.

Pink M.24 Chaffee is situated in an outdoor environment, in front of a building which we could reasonably assume is a public building of some importance, due to the size and shape of the windows, as well as the overall complexity of the architectural structure. Against this “public” backdrop, the knitting seems somehow naturally, out of place. This feeling, explained by the Freudian concept of the *unheimlich*, and the discomfort caused by something seeming, naturally, out of place further embeds the view of knitting belonging in the home (Bratich and Brush 2011, 7). If *Pink M.24 Chaffee* were in a different setting—an indoor, domestic one for example—one can easily imagine that the tank, rather than the knitting, would seem out of place. Placing the object in this alternative setting further highlights the covert ideologies tethered to knitting as a discipline, which limit its use and our interpretation of it (Parker and Pollock 1992, 48). In this way, we are encouraged to question our unconscious readings of knitting.

My second example (Figure 2), an anonymous yarn-bomb depicting the term “repeal,” was photographed on a street in Dublin in 2018 during the time of a referendum that sought to repeal the 8th Amendment of the Irish Constitution. The repeal, which was ultimately successful, removed a



Figure 2

Anonymous, repeal textile banner, O'Connell Street Dublin, 15 April 2018, Ashmore, R (photographer).

constitutional ban on abortions (Bardon 2018). The adoption of yarn-bombing in the context of issues directly associated with women, such as this, adds an additional, subversive, slant on its use. The role of such yarn-bombs in the overturning of the 8th amendment is difficult to quantify and, given the narrative around knitting, its deployment in such a context involves a complex layering of cultural interpretations that could be seen to both help and hinder the debate. In either instance however, the desired message of such a yarn-bomb continually relies on the interpretation of knitting as a marginal craft and in so doing, through this reinforcement, contributes to knitting's continued marginalization.

In the context of this particular yarn-bomb, knitting's physical unpredictability and "shape-shifting" qualities that result in a

desire to control it within traditional art institutions, (Day, Gluckman and Robins 2018, 313) is interesting to consider. As such, the parallels that exist between controlling knitted fabrics and exerting control over women's bodies cannot be ignored (ibid). This concept of power and control is central to the interpretation of this yarn-bomb, whether deemed a successful act of protest, or not. The intentional use of knitting here, a fabric historically bound up with the powerlessness of women, would be a subversion adding power to the act of protest. In this way, the yarn-bomb is heavily reliant on knitting's assumed interpretation as a feminine pursuit. As such, through the use of knitting to protest against the state's power over the female body, the enduring powerlessness of crafts such as knitting (Parker [1984] 2019, 10),

through their contextualization as feminine, is called upon and reinforced once more.

In Jo Turney's *The Culture of Knitting* (2009), the author suggests that the softness and fluidity of knitted fabric, and the resultant material instability that engulfs the body, effectively weakens a wearer's physical stature. This results, Turney suggests, in the wearer fading into the background and ultimately becoming "passive". If we consider items of yarn-bombing in the same way, the suggestion that knitting renders the message, and by extension the messenger, passive, suppresses the influence of such an act. Indeed, Turney goes on to write that, due to this softness and fluidity, knitted fabric becomes the material of choice "for more relaxed and less serious pursuits such as those undertaken within leisure time" (2009, 35). Perhaps

these concepts of passivity, relaxation and “less serious pursuits” are not only reserved for knitted clothing but leach into the public perception of knitting as a discipline overall. If knitted items are not seen as applicable for “serious pursuits,” this in turn perhaps contributes to the view that knitters, and their knitting, are equally misplaced in the context of “serious” issues, such as women’s rights as explored in [Figure 2](#), or indeed broader areas or industries.

The interpretation of a yarn-bomb as a means to “decorate the landscape with fibre” ([Mann 2015](#)) serves to cement knitting as an accessible, domestic, leisure activity with no greater significance than a visual aesthetic. This in turn can encourage similar assumptions about knitters themselves, thus preventing knitting, and knitters, from being taken seriously in public debates such as this. In addition, knitting’s interpretation as “a middle-class, mature, and white pursuit” rendering it incapable “of causing distress” ([Tirohl 2016, 699](#)) highlights the timid approach knitting could be seen as embodying when employed to comment on political issues such as women’s reproductive rights. Furthermore the “security of social approval” ([Parker \[1984\] 2019](#)) instinctively accorded to domestic crafts, as well as their perception as “unthreatening” ([Myzelev 2015](#)) only furthers this concept of passivity.

As a medium of making with which it is difficult to associate anything “really bad” ([Turney 2009, 206](#)), the use of knitting in this case could both help and hinder the protest. Seen as an unthreatening form of communication, such yarn-bombs could contribute to a peaceful, respectful act of protest. In the same vein however, one could argue that

such a mild protest, characterized by the powerlessness of the medium, is mildly frustrating when deployed in a context that seeks a reclamation of power. In both cases, a view of knitting as passive is key to its interpretation and in such a manner, any success in subverting the power of knitting to act as a form of protest, does little to subvert the existing power hierarchy within which knitting, itself, is situated.

In *Stitched Up: Representations of Contemporary Vintage Style Mania and the Dark Side of the Popular Knitting Revival* ([2014](#)) [Dirix](#) links the resurgence of knitting as a popular pastime to a disturbing promotion of out-dated gender roles in contemporary society, by highlighting knitting as a key visual tool in the representation of nostalgia ([2014, 92](#)). An element [Sandy Black](#) also refers to as part of the “mass of metaphorical cultural baggage attached to knitting” which continues to “cling to its image” ([Black 2010, 124](#)). If, as [Foucault](#) suggests, the context within which something is represented and discussed results in the formation of knowledge about that thing ([1981, 11](#)) then this nostalgic sensation, and the ensuing perception of a bygone era, further renegotiates knitting’s meaning in a political context such as in the case of the “repeal” yarn-bomb. By conjuring up ideas of the past, knitting could be dismissed as the antithesis to social and cultural development. In this way, while such yarn-bombs seek to support social improvement, their nostalgic connotations could at best render them inconsequential and at worst, taint the movement as a whole. Furthermore, [Dirix](#) suggests that such is the strength of knitting’s association with nostalgia that the process of knitting need not be referenced to

evoke a sense of the archaic, highlighting that a knitted object alone, such as [Figure 2](#), will suffice ([2014, 93](#)). In this way, as the “funkiness” of [Mazza’s Nike swoosh](#) was deemed so powerful it might impact the esthetic interpretation of surrounding works, the wistful associations of the yarn-bomb, embodied by its knitted materiality, might adversely impact the power of political movements within which it is utilized.

Finally, in an age characterized by superficial browsing, the placement of yarn-bombs in such a place as this, a street crossroads, only further causes such acts to be taken at surface value. In such a place, while positioned for maximum exposure, the passing public are unlikely to consider them for long enough to question the significance of the use of knitting in such a debate. In this way, yarn-bombs such as this are not only unlikely to change the public perception of knitting, but passively reinforce it.

Conclusion

Some have suggested that the rise in popularity of knitting in recent years, and its increasing presence in public places, has encouraged a broader understanding and appreciation of the discipline in contemporary culture ([Turney 2009; Myzelev 2015](#)). I disagree and think that the points raised in this paper demonstrate an alternative reading. For yarn-bombing to be the effective tool of political activism it is so often intended to be, it is necessary for the medium of knitting to maintain strong associations with women and the home. The viewer must naturally bring these concepts into their reading of the object for it to function as intended and, in so doing, yarn-bombing only serves to

further constrain knitting within a firmly established narrative.

The concept of a “revival” of a craft practice such as knitting is slightly paradoxical. Rather than simply meaning that something has regained popularity, to me the term also suggests a sense of improvement, change or new applicability. The revival of knitting through the increasing presence of yarn-bombing simply continues to promote knitting’s place as an outdated, domestic skill, further preventing it from being recontextualised as the modern industrial process it is in the twenty-first century.

Built around the simple construction of a loop, knitting is a process that can be applied broadly, using many materials and across multiple industries, to help solve design challenges we face today. The maintenance of such a limited and pervasive narrative preventing it from being contextualized more broadly is, therefore, short-sighted. If we are to move knitting on, and profit from its material capabilities, then the “tranquillity” with which the narrative explored above is accepted “must be disturbed” (Foucault 1972, 25) and in this way, the discourse redirected. A change in the way knitting is perceived by the next generation of designers is key to shifting the narrative more effectively. An increased visible acknowledgement of knitting’s broader uses, such as those in exhibitions including *Extreme Textiles* (McQuaid and Beesley 2005) is a good starting point. Introducing knitting as a way of making in a broader context than simply apparel design, such as that of industrial design, aids this recontextualization. In so doing, knitting’s association with the past

and the passive may be exchanged for positive associations of future design solutions. Furthermore, by presenting knitting in a context where its value does not hinge on the associations of the domestic and the female, but rather on its material capabilities, we can recontextualise and establish knitting as an ungendered material of change in wider society.

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