# Creating Digital Materiality: Third-Wave Feminism, Public Art, and Yarn Bombing

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*Color versions of the images in this article can be found at www.pioneeramerica.org/mccolorimages.html.*

**Abstract** Projects drawing upon Do-It-Yourself (DIY) culture and its relationship to third-wave feminism and post-feminism have received scant scholarly attention so far. Socially-engaged artists that employ DIY strategies, such as yarn bombing, rely on digital communities of like-minded people, mainly women, to bring attention to socially important issues such as gun control or use of contraceptives. Politic and civic actions involving public textile art projects are often considered explicitly feminist and therefore do not require additional examination, attention, and analysis vis-à-vis feminist ideas. My research looks at the intersections between the digital communities created through practice of DIY, such as www.countercraft.org and various versions of feminism that members of the DIY and digital communities adhere to. It looks at how these communities utilize implicitly or explicitly understood feminisms (plural is intentional) and empowerment while practicing craft techniques that are traditionally considered part of patriarchal society and thus presumably contributing to the disenfranchising of women. In addition, I look at how DIY-related websites, blogs, and discussion groups involve women in the political realm through use of seemingly traditional and apolitical techniques of knitting, sewing, crocheting, etc. Using contemporary feminist scholarship, and scholarship on digital communities, I argue that women use fiber-based materials to mitigate what they perceive to be a radical position of the social protesters. Yarn bombing and other public actions that involve needlework became popular in the early millennium due to the nature of third-wave feminism which aims to both empower women and negotiate femininity as an acceptable social standard.

**Key words:** Third-Wave Feminism, Yarn Bombing, Knitting, Online communities, Participatory Culture

## Introduction

In 2005 Magda Sayeg attached a piece of blue and pink hand-knit acrylic fabric to the outside of a door in Houston, Texas. It was a small handle cozy that has since become known as the "alpha piece" because it is believed to be the first sample of yarn graffiti (Moore and Prain 2010). According to Sayeg, this handle cover, along with other small pieces placed on a pole in her Houston neighbourhood, elicited

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**Figure 1.** Jafagirls' yarn bombing projects as featured in *Knitting Graffiti* book. Photograph by author.

so much interest from passersby that she decided to continue with similar projects. That year, Sayeg and several other artists/knitters formed a group called Knitta[1] whose main goal was to place yarn graffiti in various public places (Sayeg 2012). Two years later, an artist duo Jafagirls[2] started their yarn bombing practice. Since 2007, the group has completed projects not only in their native Yellow Springs, Ohio, but also in several other cities in the eastern United States and one project in Taiwan. Their first project, the *Knit Knot Tree,* drew international attention for its playful, colorful, and overtly feminine imagery, which incorporated Barbie

dolls and flowers. Their work often bears tags such as, "Anyone who stands for tolerance and love" or "Everyday heroes" (Figure 1). Jafagirls pride themselves on their ability to recycle yarn, the fact that the trees or poles that they 'dress up' are never damaged, and that their actions are loved and respected by the community to such an extent that even a policeman in Yellow Springs helps to organize yarn bombings (Bayraktaroglu n.d.). Eight years later, in 2013, Visual Arts students from University of Western Ontario in London, Ontario "bombed" their local university art gallery as part of the upcoming exhibition, "The Secret Stash" (Petkovic 2013). Using scrap yarn and donated needles, the students created squares of different sizes to make a gigantic cover for the trees around the gallery.

These public art projects bring yarn and textiles outside of the traditional textile-producing spaces such as small factories or domestic interiors. Most of the yarn-related actions that took place in the last ten years consisted of knitting and crocheting pieces and placing them in public spaces with tags attached. While these actions often have political meaning, others are purely decorative, and some are humorous and playful. All of the projects involve communal creation; they are often organized or inspired by professional artists and supported by those who are interested in contemporary art and craft, although not necessarily educated as professional artists or craftspeople.[3] Most of these yarn bombings happen in urban environments. The wrapped objects are usually located in gentrified middle-class areas. Some of the yarn bombers strive to challenge conventions or express social dissatisfaction through craft. Yarn bombing, knitted graffiti, and radical knitting are only a few names that participants have used to describe their public needlework projects. The three examples discussed earlier (Knitta, Jafagirls, and Visual Arts students) demonstrate that yarn bombing actions straddle private and public realms, existing between inclusive public spaces such as parks and more exclusive spaces such as galleries. These contemporary public projects are usually placed outside to mark particular significance of a space, to attract attention, or to decorate. Yarn bombing belongs to the field of public art, a rapidly burgeoning field that involves participation not only of the artists, but also the audiences; it often, but not always, happens in public spaces such as squares and parks rather than inside museums or galleries. The difference between yarn bombing and other public art projects is its clear connection to the mainly feminine tradition of making useful things from yarn. The clear demarcation between the handmade, often associated with the feminine desire to create useful objects and/or decorate domestic space (Parker 1984), and yarn bombing is marked in the fact that yarn bombing has no interest in producing functional, wearable pieces: most of the yarn squares are ultimately discarded or recycled into other yarn projects. Finally, yarn bombing is often about social involvement, social awareness, and social interactions between like-minded people, mainly women.

The discussion below looks at yarn bombing as a phenomenon that originated in the first decade of the twenty first century and still continues. I examine the usefulness of yarn bombing as a tool for political struggles, raising awareness of social issues, and as a public art that requires participation of both professional

and amateurs. My discussion looks at both weaknesses and strengths of using crafts such as knitting and crocheting by women who often identify themselves as Third -Waive Feminists. Ultimately, I argue that yarn bombing is an important part of the Third-Wave Feminist artistic culture which, because of its ability to attract people's attention and positive connotations associated with domestic crafts, makes for a valuable tool for artistic and social expression. At the same time, this research shows that the use of the handicrafts as public social art could also be read by some as softening of the message. The desire to raise awareness of issues, for example the war in Iraq, discussed below, through humorous, campy, non-threatening techniques and images such as cozies covering the weapons, is symptomatic of the ideologies and behavior of the Third-Wave Feminism as a movement.

Thus, the following discussion will revolve around three main themes. The first one seeks to understand how yarn bombing fosters community engagement both in person and over the Internet. I also uncover how yarn bombing actions and the information available regarding these actions helps to create a sense of community among women via social media such as blogging and larger interest-based sites such as www.ravelry.com. Further, I explore complex relationships between yarn bombings and third-wave feminist struggles for social change and ask how the spread of yarn actions contributes to the continuation of the third-wave feminist agenda.[4]

## What's In A Name?

From the first glance, the term "yarn bombing" seems to be a misnomer as bombing implies forceful, often deadly attack, rather than explosion of yarns and colors in public space. In the case of yarn bombing, bombing should be taken to mean an unexpected spectacle, or having something unexpected open in front of one's eyes. However, even in this context, the normal use in English language is associated with negative emotions, for instance, "she dropped a bomb by announcing her resignation" (Merriam-Webster.com). Yarn bombing thus implies an unexpected and unpleasant surprise while in reality, it very often appeals to the positive, constructive public interest. Similar to painted graffiti, yarn bombing or yarn graffiti are often unsolicited, guerilla projects that decorate and yet also attempt to convey a more serious message criticising the status quo (Gottlieb 2008). Those who created painted graffiti, according to Brod, "are often viewed as deviants or non-conformists" because they "failed to internalize society's condemnation of violence" (Brod 1987, Lombard 2013, 183). Painted graffiti and hip-hop culture associated with this often read as related to certain class and race. Ferrell argues that graffiti is usually associated with the urban poor (Ferrell 1997). Even though many of the graffiti writers in the early twentieth century come from the middle class backgrounds, the association between poverty, blackness, and hegemonic masculinity still exist in North American culture (Lombard 2013). Unlike painted graffiti, yarn graffiti are more playful and easily comprehensible by audiences. Yarn graffiti seems to be disassociated from poverty and masculinity and thus it


**Figure 2.** Yarn bombing as part of the Spring Festival, Kamloops, British Columbia. Photograph by author.

appeals to both working and middle classes. In addition, unlike painted graffiti where the images and words are often edgy, expressive, and distorted, yarn projects rarely feature abject, unattractive imagery. Yarn bombing or yarn graffiti are thus, a softer, more relatable version of graffiti making.[5]

Further, while some public actions of putting handmade work on public monuments and property are not sanctioned by authorities, others are. For instance, in Kamloops, BC, yarn bombing became part of the Spring Festival event in 2012 (Figure 2). How do we understand guerilla works sanctioned by authorities? What do we take from renegade knitting that happens in contemporary art historical institutions? These ambiguities indicate the uneasy relationship between artistic social actions that include yarn and an overt desire for social confrontation with authorities.

## But Is It Art?

Yarn bombing is located at the junction of various practices including craftmaking as an amateur practice, craftmaking as a charitable work, artistic interventional art, public art, and politically-engaged actions. Most of the academic and non-academic research (Bratich and Brush 2011; Amato 2011; Orton-Johnson 2012) treat yarn bombing as an interdisciplinary practice straddling hobbyist activities, communal activism, and artistic intervention. Bearing in mind that the practice involves mainly women, and considering the long-standing association of craft with woman's work, it is important to at least tentatively situate the practice within the discourse of cultural production. The need for classification becomes evident once one realizes that although people who are involved in yarn bombing, for example,

*Jafagirls, Incognito, Knit Girl, Knitsea*, identify themselves as artists when they talk about their work not related to yarn bombing, the yarn bombing itself is rarely referred to as an artistic practice.[6] It is variously called graffiti, bombing, yarning, action, projects, but almost never is it classified within one of the flourishing subcategories of art such as public, intervention, or community-based art.

Wolfgang Zinggl, a founding member of German artistic collective *Wochenklausur*, claims that while public interventionist techniques often address social work and politics, they are based on the discourse of art (Kester 2004). Art, as a discipline, allows for thinking creatively across disciplinary boundaries. Art is unique in its ability to combine practical, creative, healing, and inventive resources to create the interventions that are meaningful on communal and individual levels. The creative aspect of yarn bombing resides in its ability to change the role of the artist from "prophet or priest" to democratic subject. Along with other public art projects, yarn bombing promotes "participation in inter-subjective communication and reflection on the possibilities of taking part in a changing world" (Zinggl 1998). Thus, the democratic creative impulse that governs most of the yarn bombing actions is rooted in participatory aspects of public art. The relational aesthetics defined by French art critic Nicolas Bourriaud describes quite well what yarn bombing interventions are trying to achieve (Bourriaud 2002). The goal is to create art that is relatable and democratic. Yet, while numerous public interventions, including those based upon Bourriaud's idea of relational aesthetic, are described as public art projects, public art, participatory art, etc., yarn bombing is rarely mentioned alongside the term "art."

At the same time, yarn bombing is definitely part of the participatory public art practice. While some of the actions require more participation than others, most are based on "the dialogic principle." Art historian Grant Kester argues that public art work often embodies the Bakhtinian notion of dialogic formation and function of language (Kester 2004). Mikhail Bakhtin, an early twentieth-century Russian linguist, coined the notion of cultural dialogism, which explains that cultures do not evolve in the vacuum but rather "share, interact with, and appropriate aspects of other cultures" (Todorov 1984, p. x). Cultural movements, including art movements, develop in relation to each other and often borrow modes of production and strategies of engagement from other fields. Although Bakhtin's work explains literature and linguistic evolution, subsequent scholars whom he has influenced believe that language, thought, and culture have important dialogical dimensions that influence and continually shape their meanings, which are never definitively fixed (Hemphill and Leskowitz 2012). Kester applies this idea to public art action and claims that public art is more prone to developing dialogical relations with the viewer mainly due to its location in the public sphere (Kester 2004). Yarn bombing can be seen as a dialogic phenomenon in three ways. First, it creates a multigenerational conversation between communities of knitters that have existed mainly in domestic spaces throughout the last three hundred years. Second, yarn bombing creates dialogue with feminist art emerging from the first and second waves of the feminist movement. Although often not recognized in

their sources or discussions, third-wave feminist yarn bombers are indebted to the first wave of feminist art producers such as Judy Chicago and Joyce Weiland (Groeneveld 2010). Finally, the dialogic relationship is formed by the collaborative nature of yarn bombing projects. For instance, Jafagirls note that they often see other people adding their own knitted pieces to the ones installed. These additions create a dialogue of contributions and prove that people are interested in these works of art.

The importance of the dialogic nature of yarn bombing lies in the fact that it promotes the formation of a community of makers and thus has a potential to raise the profile of handicrafts, especially textile art, to a level of artistic endeavour. Yet the fact that the makers and reviewers are hesitant to term these projects "art," shows that the process of self-regulation is in place. In other words, participants of yarn bombing actions respond to the century-long tradition of treating crafts and other work normally done by women as second-tier art (Barrett 2012).

## Internet Communities

In the past seven years, yarn bombing of various kinds has become a truly international phenomenon. The practitioners now live in cities as varied as Vancouver (Canada), Tampere (Finland), Manchester (United Kingdom), Baltimore (United States) and Hong-Kong (China). Most of the groups that practice yarn bombing are represented online whether in the form of a blog, website, or Facebook page. It would probably be a truism to say that what contributed to the dissemination and notoriety of the movement is the Internet and its growing role in the sharing of knowledge and information. The presentation of information online contributes to the creation of the artists' and knitters' identities. The claim here is that participation in yarn bombing or reading about it provides different outlets for artistic and personal (female) subjectivity. It is important, then, to understand how such a community of like-minded, mainly heterosexual and mainly Caucasian women aged approximately 20 to 50 (Cooke 2005; Adamson 2007), functions and how, and if, yarn bombing allows for feminist subjectivity to be reaffirmed and celebrated.

At the heart of the discussion of the online communities is the idea that, unlike usual physical gathering spaces, the Internet presents an undefined space that does not have concrete temporal or physical demarcations. Here it is important to remember Benedict Anderson's often-quoted and highly-influential notion of imagined communities. This notion emphasizes that, with the advent of print culture and modern inventions such as quick transportation, the feeling of belonging is often caused not by concrete objects, but rather by ephemeral and disembodied ideals of the imagined (Anderson 1991). Based on Anderson's definition, historian Howard Rheingold attempted to understand how virtual communities were being formed online as early as 1996. According to Rheingold, the exchange of messages on bulletin boards and networks opened to a limited number of people provides ample opportunities to create communities (Rheingold 1996). Furthermore, other theorists argue that communities develop around

**Figure 3.** Masquerade yarn bombing 2006. Used with permission.

"cultural text, experience, discourse, and identity" all of which contribute to the sense of belonging, a key element in community formation (Baym 1998, 37). Something more crucial for this discussion is the following hypothesis: "If it is assumed that discourse shapes social reality then particular discursive practise shared by a group may be said to construct a social reality and that reality, it can be argued, would constitute a community" (Lister 2003). In other words, the reality of interest and participation in yarn bombing and similar actions creates the reality that is shared by all members of the community; the reality of the actions contributes to the sense of community, while community makes the actions possible. Or to put it another way, the material results of yarn bombing have often originated as ideas exchanged online.

Handicraft blogs and websites, including those dedicated to yarn bombing, function on two levels. First, they are written for those who follow the blogs and those who constitute a writer's circle of friends on other social media sites. Second, the virtual postings are geared towards others, the unknown audience. Media theorist Jacqueline Ryan Vickery aptly calls such mixed communities "hybrid

public and private spheres" (Vickery 2010). This recognition of the "dual audience" is very important for understanding how bloggers construct their online identity and how they construct their communities based on interests in craft and desires for social activism (Stern 2008). The writing styles and tones of the blogs are very important because they carefully negotiate between those whom the bloggers may not know but would like to join, and those that the bloggers assume are already members of their community.

It seems that yarn bombing began as a relatively small off-shoot of the public art movement and has become a movement in its own right and now functions as a community of like-minded yarn bombers and affiliates thanks to the ability to disseminate photographs and ideas online. To support this point, it is useful to look at how the movement started. Knitta's work (discussed earlier) inspired Knitgirl who claims that "when I saw Knitta group…, I was totally blown away and started thinking outside the box" (Moore and Prain 2010, 21). Artists belonging to the Finnish group Knit Sea note that online they saw the strip made by Norway artist Kaisa Leka. Another yarn cooperative, Art Yarn, was also inspired by Knitta, while Aliza of Baltimore DIY was influenced by a Swedish yarn graffiti artist called Masquerade that she found online[7] (Figure 3). Aliza claims, "I did some research (on Google) and found out about similar groups who were doing the same things, from Paris to China" (AlizaEss 2009), while Esther Poon of Hong-Kong notes "What Magda does inspired me to think outside the box. In a place so starved of space and so urban, knit graffiti creates interesting juxtapositions with the shiny buildings and modern architecture" (Ngo 2014, 4). These yarn bombers started their own blogs and sites to share their actions and thus expanded and established a community of those interested in yarn bombing.

How does creating virtual communities based on shared interests and social views and organizing social actions using the Internet help feminism? Gibson-Graham claims that feminist politics became important not necessarily through political organizations but through the emotional and semiotic level (Gibson-Graham 2006). Although there is a concealed stereotyping here of women being oversensitive and relating to each other on an emotional level, Gibson-Graham's argument justly claims that feminist struggle spread "through 'disarticulated places' — households, communities, ecosystems, workspace, civic organization, bodies, public arenas, urban spaces, diasporas, regions, and government agencies" (Gibson-Graham 2006, XXIV quoted in Bratich and Brush). Art Historian Michelle Moravec argues that in order to understand how feminist ideas travel across groups, it is important to apply diffusion theory. She writes, "The mechanisms of diffusion are best understood by examining the activist networks, organizational brokers, and communication channels that facilitate the spread" of a movement (quoted in Moravec 2012, 34). Diffusion, then, involves not only the ideas that are being circulated, but takes into consideration how these ideas circulate and how they impact social activism. Moravec argues that understanding the importance of relational connections and reliance on personal contacts is the key to analyzing socially-engaged feminist projects. She explains: "Determining

the impact of diffusion involves questions about not only the spread of social movements but also the changes and consequences of that process" (Moravec 2012, 23). Given this assertion, creating online communities of shared interests continues the tradition of relational, communal, multi-centered and disseminated strategies of sharing information. While blogs and discussion groups are different from embodied meeting and participations, they provide an opportunity for acquiring information. For instance, sociologist Kate Orton-Johnson (2012) examines one of the Internet's most popular and multi-faceted knitting sites www.Ravelry.com and concludes that it helps participants to blur the definition between the relational and non-relational diffusion of ideas. Consider, for example, this quote from one of the informants:

> I've lived here for years and knitted for years, with maybe a couple of friends who I know knit, but it's always just been me at home or knitting on the bus and then I discover Ravelry and find out that here there are picknits, yarnbombs, knit in public days and this whole group of people who are knitting together and it has somehow given me and my knitting a new lease on life (Val, quoted in Orton-Johnson 2012, 10).

Although actions such as yarn bombing may not be overtly designated as feminist, they help women to participate and be actively engaged in social and political struggle. These actions also signify that third-wave feminists have become part of 'participatory culture' (Jenkins 2004, 43; Jenkins and Bertozzi 2008). Our culture, according to media theorist Henry Jenkins, has become more inclusive in that it provides "average people the tools to archive, annotate, appropriate and recirculate content." The culture of participation based on Internet information sharing strategies also allows people to create content and then share it. A large number of those using social media are no longer passive consumers of news; they often help to generate content such as news, opinions, and ideas (Deuze 2006). In the social climate of cultural collaboration, third-wave feminists create their own subjects and actions to underline their interest and participation in contemporary culture. Their small actions of yarn bombing and blogging about these actions become the manifestation of new kinds of socially engaged, dispersed, activist actions. These actions are crucial for these small communities of individuals even if the success of social activist action is hard to understand. Participation in the digital culture of knitting along with its material results, such as yarn bombing, permits participation in larger issues on a more comfortable, less radical level. Participatory culture lets women who identify with feminism, and those who do not, become involved in communal projects that often have a socio-political slant.

Perhaps the most pertinent questions that remain to be answered are what is the attraction of a stereotypically feminine activity like knitting to feminists/activists? How do feminine and not necessarily feminist associations complicate the picture of socially-engaged online feminist collaborations? As the remainder of this article will demonstrate, the choice of the activities, as least in part, lies in their reliability and non-threatening nature. It is the combination of craft

**Figure 4.** Marianne Jorgensen, *Tank Cozy*, 2006. Used with permission.

and its associations with non-threatening traditional femininity, and public and political actions, that allow Third-Wave Feminists to negotiate their identities as both politically and civically engaged, yet not radical in their strategies of protest.

## Third-Wave Feminism and Crafting

In 2006, Danish artist Marianne Jorgensen organized an action against Denmark, The United States', and The United Kingdom's participation in the war in Iraq (Figure 4). She engaged volunteers to cover an old tank from World War Two with a pink cozy made of yarn squares created by volunteers. The process of making, sewing pieces together, and covering the tank was documented and then shown in 'Nikolaj, Copenhagen Contemporary Art Center' (Copenhagen, Denmark) as part of the 2006 exhibition 'TIME.' The participation of volunteers from European countries (primarily Northern and Western Europe) and the U.S. was solicited via an online Cast Off club, a knitting club for boys and girls (AMP 2011). Thus the knowledge of the project, the status of the work and recruitment of volunteers, mainly happened via the online community. In addition, the dissemination of the information on the project has been mainly happening through Jorgensen's website (Jorgensen 2006). The striking images of the green tank covered in a bright multi-hued knitted cozy became very popular on the web and in published craft literature. For example, it was reproduced on the cover of Maria Elena Buszek's book *Extra/Ordinary* (Buszek 2011), a book dealing with textile art and crafting.

One of the most striking aspects of Jorgensen's *Tank Cozy* is the combination of the stereotypically masculine tank and stereotypically feminine pink handmade small doily-like objects. On the website Jorgensen writes:

> Unsimilar (sic) to a war, knitting signals home, care, closeness and time for reflection. Ever since Denmark became involved in the war in Iraq I have made different variations of pink tanks, and I intend to keep doing that, until the war ends. For me, the tank is a symbol of stepping over other people's borders. When it is covered in pink, it becomes completely unarmed and it loses its authority. Pink becomes a contrast in both material and color when combined with the tank.

The use of pink as a color and the knitting/crocheting as a technique is symptomatic of many similar yarn-based actions. Pink and other bright stereotypically feminine colors and techniques such as lace often appear on yarn graffiti objects. The reclamation of pink as a feminist and powerful color started in the 1970s. Pink, for example, was the color of Emily Dickinson's plate in Judy Chicago's *The Dinner Party* (1974-79). Pink also figured prominently in works of Canadian artist Joyce Weiland in the 1960s; for instance, her quilt, *Reason Over Passion* (1968), featured pink lettering. Art Historian Joanna Frueh writes about the color pink as "feminism's sexy, ironic, parodic, straight or campy pleasure in the application of a heavenly rose-colored lipstick" (Frueh et al 2002). I propose that connotations of pink as a color of femininity can be extended to explain knitting and crocheting as also firmly associated with femininity, and that they are now being reclaimed as feminist strategies of social engagement. In other words, knitting in the context of yarn bombing is used the same way the color pink is used for women's clothing in an effort to emphasize and bring forth feminine connections. The question that this research asks is how does the reclaiming of traditional feminine symbols, such as the color pink or traditionally feminist craft making, help a feminist agenda? How, if at all, are gender stereotypes being redefined when the traditionally feminist crafts are used in a presumably gender neutral virtual world?

Many scholars (Budgeon 2011; Gillis, Howie and Munford 2004, Henry 2004, Staggenborg and Taylor 2005) agree that the feminist movement has changed significantly in the last fifteen years or so. Beginning in the early 1990s, feminists turned away from the values of absolute equality between men and women and attempted to look closely at the celebratory femininity that was preached in 1970s. Third-wavers questioned their mother's generations' refusal of any pursuits that reminded them of traditional femininity which included the domestic crafts and housekeeping in general. Sexuality, including showing off one's body and participating in voyeuristic activities, which were frowned upon in the 1980s, became appropriate and celebrated in the third-wave feminist movement (Buszek 2006, 311-330). It could be argued that third-wave feminism is based in large part on reclamation and re-articulation of the old feminine values. The new approach claims to give feminine values a new twist and imbue traditional ideas with new meaning (Bratich and Brush 2011). One example of this reinvention of the domestic is the reclaiming of crafts and using them in social actions. These ideas, seen through feminist approaches and articulated online, seem to validate the new turn in the movement. However, seen from outside the tradition of the

feminist movement and against the backdrop of the contemporary understanding of women's role in society, these notions of reclamations and reinterpretations may seem more problematic.

One of the initial goals of feminism was women's ability to participate in a male-dominated society, namely to be able to vote, participate in political and social legislation process, work outside of home, and be respected in the workplace. To some extent, these goals have been reached in the global north and therefore feminism as a movement is often considered not relevant in this part of the world (McRobbie 2007). The idea that we live in the post-feminist society where feminism has already achieved its goals and therefore lost its relevance has become part of the Right's political ideology in United States, Canada, and United Kingdom (McRobbie 2009). The argument is that women are now treated equally due to their economic capacity. In other words, women are now treated as equal (McRobbie 2009) opportunity consumers capable of getting and keeping white-collar work, and who are educated and well versed in social and political issues (McRobbie 2007). Yet, on the other side of this discussion, the media perpetuates the fear that female social subjects' access to social, political and economic capital will make them less desirable as life partners. As early as 1929, Joan Riviere (Riviere 1929/1986) argued that one of the most popular strategies to enable women to have economic and social power yet remain attractive is to masquerade as a vulnerable female: "women who wish for masculinity may put on a mask of womanliness to avert anxiety and the retribution feared from men" (Riviere 1929/1986, quoted in Butler 1999, 65). "The post-feminist masquerade" helps women to straddle the private and the public realm and avoid accusations of being subjugated by patriarchy since wearing high heels and tight jeans are constructed as choices rather than mechanisms of male domination. Women's fashion choices and consumer capacity is structured around female choice and approval by other female subjects rather than by male connoisseurs of tastes as it was in previous generations.

Considering the negotiation between the requirement of patriarchy and freedoms afforded by feminist struggles of previous generations, the pink hand-knitted cozy by Marianne Jorgensen seems to take less of a radical stance against war. Using the notion of post-feminist masquerade, the tank cover can be read as an attempt to negotiate between radical anti-war contemporary art action and the acceptance of the fact that this action was organized and facilitated primarily by women. While Jorgensen claims that the pink cozy disarms the tank, and therefore deprives the weapon of its male, phallic authority, one can suggest that the World War II tank covered by the cozy is no longer relevant and would not participate in the war in Iraq. To put it simply, an old-fashioned cozy covers an old-fashioned tank. Additionally, even if the tank was needed in the battle, the cozy could easily be removed. The cozy does not change the nature of the tank. The cover merely alters the surface of the tank. Similarly, post-feminism or third-wave feminism does not really change the stereotypes that are prevalent in the society from within. Knitting and crocheting that decorate spaces outside is not

changing the nature of gender relations and hardly changes the understanding of craft or its practice to make it more public, radical or feminist.

## Third-Wave Feminism and Online Communities

Interestingly, the negotiation of femininity continues and even intensifies online. According to media scholar Lisa Adkins (2002), traditional gender relations tend to re-emerge in the world of Internet discussion groups. This, according to Adkins, is especially evident in small-scale family-run enterprises and marketplaces such as www.Etsy.com or www.Rivelry.com which do not have a physical counterpart of retail outlet or workshop. These virtual service or retail-based enterprises are integral to the production processes that underlie global consumer culture (Adkins 2002). At the same time, these places are especially keen on keeping gender differences clear and therefore, women turning to traditional handicrafts as means to assert themselves, as yarn bombers do, are forced to negotiate gendered patriarchal society (Herring 2008). Thus, participation in online discussions and blogs serves as a masquerading tool and also allows for active engagement in social life. Or as McRobbie claims, "For young women who continue to seek to insert themselves into the political sphere and to engage in feminism, it becomes necessary to manoeuvre around these biopolitics" (McRobbie 2007, 720). It is little surprising, then, that women often choose actions such as yarn bombing that are positioned in liminal spaces between the public and private spheres (Harris 2008, 483). These new political actions avoid traditional activist strategies of overt confrontation because, given the proliferation of Internet culture, such overt political actions are considered unnecessary (Harris 2008; Mitchell, Rundle, and Karaian 2001, 22). The examples of yarn bombers that I discussed above testify to the fact that women are trying to use handicraft to attract attention to social issues, yet they are careful not to turn these actions into outright political provocations. They show support and interest by tagging (putting knitted or crochets squares on public property) and work to negotiate between public spaces and the privacy of creation. They acquire voices online through blogging and creating communities of like-minded individuals and yet, at the same time, their actions, discussions, and ideas have only limited outreach. Due to their modes and techniques, they perpetuate the stereotype that knitting and crocheting are feminine.

It is also important to recognize that yarn-bombing actions happened during a particular political moment when feminism was rapidly losing ground to conservative forces of post-feminist satisfaction with the status quo (Adkins 2002). Actions such as creating a pink cozy are meant to generate debates about issues of participation in war; practicing craft or art do not create meaningful change on their own accord. But an even more important lesson of understanding the movement and its importance has to come from art historical scholarship itself. In the 1980s and 1990s, feminist art and craft historians tried to evaluate involvement of women in the Arts and Craft Movement in Britain in the second part of the 19th century. It was argued that women played an important role in the movement, but the extent of their contribution was open for debate. Thus,


**Figure 5.** Bissell Bombers, Art Gallery of Ontario yarn bombing action, 2013. Photograph by author.

art historian Anthea Callen argued that women were mainly the anonymous makers who often remained nameless and were subjugated by the designers and the middlemen who bought their production (Callen 1979). Callen's opinion was rooted in the research of various studios of the Arts and Crafts Movement, yet it did not take into consideration the ideas of artistic agency even when artists were creating under difficult conditions like separate work spheres and patriarchal domination. The next generation of art historians including Tanya Harrod, Deborah Cherry, and Janice Helland proved that women in the Arts, while sometimes only executing objects designed by someone else, retained their ideas and often adapted these designs to their liking (Buckley 1990; Harrod 1999; Cherry 2000; Helland 2000 2007; Helland and Elliott 2002). Similarly, perhaps rather than dismissing yarn bombing as a mediative deriviative practice of third-wave feminists' self-regulation, art historians should look at the benefits, albeit modest ones, that the practice brings to women and to the craft practice.

Perhaps when examining contemporary yarn bombing actions, art historians should look back to the methodologies that had been offered by other feminist historians. I argue that rather than asking what these actions offer feminism as a movement, one should ask what they offer to the individual craftswomen. The ease and playfulness of yarn bombing as a public action bridges the gap between professional artists and amateur supporters. It attracts attention to the artists and raises their profiles, while at the same time fostering ideas of communal production and collarboration. To illustrate this last point, I would like to discuss two case studies to demonstrate how yarn bombing helps younger artists gain access to larger

museums. The Bissell bombers, a group of Univeristy of Toronto MFA students, organized a large and very popular action by yarn bombing the Art Gallery of Ontario in Toronto (Figure 5). The students and volunteers knitted and crocheted wraps and garlands for the interior columns and exterior sign of the gallery. This high profile instituion allowed the installation as part of its commitment to being open to public initiative (Rubino 2011). The action was meticulously blogged and documented online (*Ipsy* n.d.). Apolitical in nature, it fit with the new direction of contemporary museums and galleries seeking to become more participatory and reach out to the community. In the summer of 2012, the Yarn Bomb Yukon Collective[8] organized the bombing of the historical World War II plane DC-3 for the joint initiative of the Yukon Transportation Museum and the Yukon Arts Centre Public Art Gallery. Unlike the tank cozy discussed earlier, this project did not have polical protest as its *rasion d'etre*. Instead, it was a community project that brought two rarely-connected types of museums (transportation and art) together. Similar to the yarn bombing at the Art Gallery of Ontario, this project was documented online and and videos were posted to www.vimeo.com and www.youtube.com (Yarn Bomb Yukon Collective n.d.).

## Conclusion

This article analyzed the complex relationship between third-wave feminism, craft practices, and gender identity. It used the contemporary practice of yarn bombing to illustrate the issues surrounding the use of handicrafts traditionally associated with the feminine such as needlework and especially knitting and crocheting. Yarn bombing is a practice that involves placing hand-knitted and crocheted tags on various objects, such as public monuments, poles, and bike racks in primarily urban spaces. Often yarn bombing has an overt political agenda and attempts to raise awareness of a particular social issue. For instance, yarn bombing as a collective past-time and practice was popular during the Occupy movement in 2011-2012. Yarn bombing brings to the forefront several tensions existing in the women's art movement. The fact that yarn bombing is rarely described as public or street art while practitioners often identify themselves as artists demonstrates that crafting, even when it serves social goals and is placed in the public setting, occupies a separate and arguably lower place in the hierarchy of art. Similarly, self-regulation is practiced by practitioners of yarn bombing who use the traditionally feminine crafts to mediate or soften their political struggles or public exposure.

It seems that at this particular juncture, yarn bombing is a strategy that helps women negotiate between the interconnected yet distinct spheres of art and craft. The connection between yarn and domesticity helps third-wave feminists to negotiate between demands of partriarchy and at the same time feel that a difference to their lives and the lives of others is being made. The presence of online blogs, communities, and forums enables the materiality of yarn bombing to occur to a large degree. Although the digital world by itself does not provide for the creation of material projects, the creation of online communities eases access to the projects and increases their popularity. I argue that such projects are indebted

primarily to the ease of connection between those interested in craftmaking. Yarn bombing has a potential for engaging wider audiences and thus making a significant difference to some aspects of third-wave feminism.

## Endnotes

[1] Sayeg and her friends had adopted the names PolyCotN and A Krylik before settling on Knitta.

[2] Jafagirls are comprised of artists and social activists Nancy Mellon and Corrine Bayraktaroglu.

[3] Although the issues of professional versus non-professional or amateur craftspeople or artists are tangentially important to the following discussion, I choose to omit it for reasons of space. This article understands professional artists or craftsperson as those who are educated or have/had professional practice while amateur artists are those who self-identify their craft/art practices as secondary, non-essential part of their careers. In this definition I follow loosely the definition given by funding agencies, at least in Canada and United States, who recognize professional artists as only those who were educated by accredited institution and who are in the process of or have established a practice. (See Huneault and Anderson 2012.)

[4] This article understands feminism as consisting of three interdependent temporal and ideological waves. It mainly refers to the Third-Wave Feminism (TWF) as feminist ideology that becomes prominent starting from the 1990s partly as response to the feminist calls for social equality and acceptance of women both in the workplace and in domestic spaces as equal to men. TWF attempts to re-evaluate the desire of the feminist of the second wave to be equal to men. One of the main critiques of the brand of feminist popular in 1980s is the fact that in many ways women were trying to do things like men and prove that they are as capable as men. TWF feel that it is important to recognise and acknowledge traditional feminine approaches such as needlework as important ways of negotiating female identity. One of the main critiques of the TWF is the fact that they are overemphasizing femininity and perhaps retrench back to the traditional spheres of feminine domesticity and objectification. (See, for example, Baumgardner and Richards 2000.)

[5] Although the inclination here is to claim that yarn bombing appeals mainly to middle classes, the practical experiences of situating yarn bombing projects in the marginalized urban neighbourhoods of New York and Chicago demonstrate the that working and lower middle class people enjoy and relate to yarn bombing projects. People are attracted to the bright colors and techniques and then leave with overall positive or neutral impressions.

[6] For example, see:
http://knittaporfavor.wordpress.com/
http://www.glittyknittykitty.co.uk/
http://yarnbombing.com/
http://www.flickr.com/groups/yarnbombingukdiy/

[7] Masquerade is part of the larger artistic group based in Stockholm called Los Fulanos. They document their work on http://masquerade.se/sample-page/.

[8] The collective consists of Jessica Vellenga, Bree-An Lucas, and Vaness Corkal.

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