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URBAN TEXTILES: FROM YARN BOMBING TO CROCHET IVY CHAINS

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Introduction:

Recently small hand-knitted bands in bright colours, and sculptures made from braided and woven weeds have appeared in my urban neighborhood; they also exist on the Internet on blogs, websites or flickr sites, created by these artists. This new work challenges many assumption about crafts and textiles and I will look at the work of two young Vancouver artists: Knitgirl (who also goes by kntgrl) and Sharon Kallis. These two artists use quite different approaches, philosophies and aesthetics, and explore relationships with process, materials, and ideas about handmade objects. They question the use of galleries as exhibition spaces, curators and juries as judges and also comment on commerce/consumerism. They use streets and parks as exhibition spaces and blogs or flickr sites as venues and create local and global communities. Both make things by hand and also use technology in their work; and both work in a fairly gritty urban area of Vancouver.

At the end I will try to draw some conclusions of how these ideas have evolved from, or relate to, earlier movements in Arts, Textiles and Crafts and how they represent some of the activist aspects of the DIY movement.

Knitgirl:

Knitgirl's knitted graffiti can be seen on her flickr site¹ and her blogs². She calls them 'Strathcozies' (an adaptation of the neighborhood 'Strathcona'). Although an experienced knitter, she is active in the graffiti community and identifies more as an activist than an artist in a traditional sense. Knitgirl uses quite synthetic materials, which, as she points out, 'hardly ever decompose' even in Vancouver's rain. Like many other yarn bombers, she has a preference for fluorescent pink and lime green. Most of her materials are recycled and/or leftovers bits of yarn. (Figs. 1+2)



*Figure 1+2. From knitting follies left: form the overpass March 30, 2006 right a screen capture of the Flickr site:
<http://www.flickr.com/photos/71547977@N00/sets/72157594423444276/>*

¹ <http://www.flickr.com/photos/71547977@N00/sets/72157594423444276/>

² <http://strathcozies.blogspot.com/>

Compared to ‘normal’ graffiti on a wall, which alters the surface permanently, knitted graffiti is easy to remove. And where most graffiti is ‘in your face’, yarnbombs are often ‘pretty’ and ‘nice’, not something any artist would usually want associated with their work. As a political statements, they do not speak loudly and I am interested in how the ‘decorative’ can become subversive. They give pleasure and mostly people smile, when they come upon a yarn tag, although some are puzzled and some people react strongly saying: "Why don't you do something USEFUL, like knit socks for the homeless",³ is one of the reactions Knitgirl has received.

Knitgirl’s flickr site can also be explored via Google earth and viewers from far and near can see the work without venturing onto not very safe streets.(Fig. 3) The knitting clearly relates to traditional knitting, even though knit-bombing is often referred to as ‘not your grandmother’s hand-knit sweaters’. These innocent looking pieces raise many interesting issues. Questions about what is useful or not, and the need to experiment with complicated processes versus a simple straightforward approach as a strategy to gain ‘art-status’ for knitting.

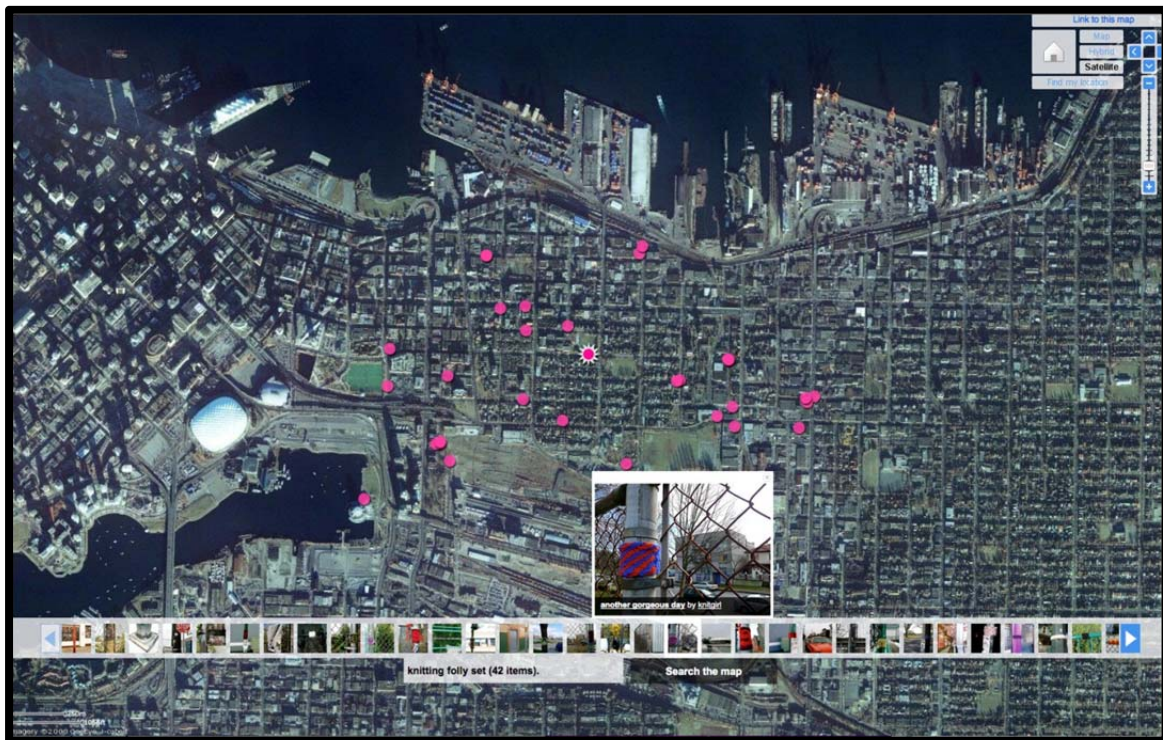


Figure 3. Knitting Folly set by Knitgirl, from Google Earth on Flickr
<http://www.flickr.com/photos/71547977@N00/sets/72157594423444276/map/>

Magda Sayeg who started Knitta, is usually credited with starting yarnbombing in Texas in the 2005⁴. Since then yarnbombs or knitted tags have appeared in Europe and all over the world. Some tagging happens more on trees and some, like Knitgirl’s, are attached to ‘man-made structures’, telephone poles, parking meters, fences, car antennas etc. The knitted pieces are a twist on a woman’s touch to the urban landscape. Knitgirl’s work was included with others in a recent book ‘**Yarnbombing**’⁵, published by a

³ Personal comments

⁴ http://www.magdasayeg.com/about_knitta_please_magda_sayeg.html

⁵ Mandy Moore and Leanne Prain, Yarnbombing: The Art of Crochet and Knit Graffiti (Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp, 2009)

knitter and a student in University publishing program and it has been such a big success that the authors are now doing a book on sewing. Crafts or textiles in the past have expanded much energy to be taken seriously as art objects, by making the work appear less functional and more 'creative' and thus more exclusive. By flipping those ideas upside down, the work becomes more current and reveals our biases and also does not take itself too seriously.

Most pieces tend to be brightly coloured, using patterns, designs, an image or a text. Everyone will generally consider a knitted tag as 'work'. And in a world of instant communication, we value time and labour associated with handmade objects. We are also aware that Knitgirl is 'giving away' her labour. Many pieces disappear quickly and while she does not sell these works, she often trades with artists or gives them away, as in a recent Free Art Giveaway at Science World: **'It's Yours, Take It! Trash to Treasures Edition'**. In this case she recycled/reused the word/idea 'repent'. (Figs. 4+5) These **Repent Sinner** tags have an extensive urban myth as graffiti in Western Canada. There even exists a Wikipedia entry⁶. Rumours have circulated in Vancouver since the early 90's on their true origins, and if they were started by a religious person or invented by graffiti artists. Knitgirl has made several copies of 'repent sinner', mimicking the stenciling press of the original.



Figure 4+5. Repent Sinner left: 'It's Yours, Take It! Trash to Treasures Edition', Free Art Giveaway at Science World; Wed. Feb17th, 2010. (photo by S. Vegas) right: 'Repent Sinner', hand-knit tag

Knitgirl sometimes uses 'knitPro', a free online knitting design program. "knitPro is a free web application that translates digital images into knit, crochet, needlepoint and cross-stitch patterns. Simply upload jpeg, gif or png images and knitPro will generate a graph sizable for any fiber project. knitPro digitally mimics the tradition of pre-industrial craft circles that freely shared patterns and passed them down from generation to generation⁷". knitPro also has an ambitious mission: "microRevolt" projects investigate the dawn of sweatshops in early industrial capitalism to inform the current crisis of global expansion and the feminization of labor."⁸ Knitgirl reveals her tools and processes on the Internet in this knitted adapted Olympic 'logo'. It had been made clear by the VANOC, the organizers of the Vancouver Olympics that any protest signs would be removed and all artists that participated at any official Olympic events had to sign wavers that they would not make any negative comments about the event. (Figs. 6+7)

⁶ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Repent_Sinner

⁷ <http://www.microrevolt.org/knitPro.htm>

⁸ <http://www.microrevolt.org/knitPro.htm>

Knitgirl discusses these political issues and also created a link to a knitting story that created quite a few ripples in the media: Cowichan look-alike sweaters had been commissioned initially by big department stores from overseas, but after protest and media coverage, First Nations knitters managed to get their own work placed prominently in the official stores instead⁹.



Figure 6+ 7. Hand-knit tags from Knitgirl flickr photo stream: left: knobby action, right; altered Olympic logo Feb 2010 <http://strathcozies.blogspot.com/>

A more ambitious recent work is a lovely skeleton lace that I found on her blog: “It perfectly rides the line between little old ladyish and cool. It is detailed, and fine, and oh so darn frustrating”. It shows the connection with the DIY (Do-IT-Yourself) movement, which promotes sharing information freely and learning things from each other. The crossbones are one of the signifiers of the DIY movement, which is evident in **Handmade Nations**, the book that documents the movie and discusses a wide range of works. This new approach to making, selling and promoting works, made by hand, repositions crafts with a new emphasis on the handmade and a certain level of irreverence towards the canons of ‘Fine Crafts’ as Deb Dormody’s quote illustrates: “my books wouldn’t sell that well next to batik silk scarves, but if that scarf had a skull on it, I’d do much better”¹⁰. In the traditional context of crafts, a nicely made skull pattern creates effective shock value for an unsuspecting viewer.

The DIY movement is an idea that is not easy to pin down. Some works look quite traditional, while others have imagery and content that challenges traditional Crafts. They are meant to present an alternative to both commercially mass-produced consumer goods and the established craft venues that have been instrumental for creating a more exclusive or ‘fine-art’ emphasis. The work can often look cute and pretty, not really what we think of as ‘protest art’. But these crafters, as many of them call themselves, have grown up to be very savvy in this age of advertising, so their political comments are inserted quite differently from previous generations, where political art was generally more obvious.

⁹ <http://www.cbc.ca/canada/british-columbia/story/2009/10/28/bc-cowichan-tribes-olympic-sweater.html>

¹⁰ Fay Levine and Courtney Heimerl, *Handmade Nations*, Princeton Architectural Press 2008, p. 10

Sharon Kallis

Sharon Kallis is one of three members of **Means of Production Artists' Raw Resource Collective**. In 2007 Sharon Kallis, Lois Klassen and Lori Weidenhammer were volunteering in the garden and decided to form a collective (MOPARRC) and work with the community to grow artists materials. The garden was started in 2002 by Oliver Kellhammer, an artist who worked with the Vancouver Parks Board, the Community Arts Council of Vancouver and Environmental Youth Alliance as partners. Kellhammer had created a wild bird habitat in 1993, **Healing the Cut**,¹¹ as an art project, in an area that was going to be used as a rapid transit corridor and he was successful in keeping that land in its natural state. Now the garden is used as a teaching model for youth, and to teach horticulture, agriculture and old fiber process, such as basketry, weaving and making live willow fences. Artists are encouraged to grow their materials as an alternative to “home depot art shopping”. The process of acquiring materials from MOP is primarily a labour exchange, rather than a monetary. In addition site-specific sculptures are created on the grounds so it is evolving into a “living gallery”, or an “Artist Run Forest”, similar to an Artist Run Centre. Instead of openings, they generally host tea parties, workshops and not to be missed: work sessions and clean up parties... (Figs. 8+9)



Figure 8+9. Left: view of Means of Production Garden with Hazel and Willow gate; <http://www.flickr.com/photos/sharonkallis/sets/72157615814673953/with/3386059458/> Right: Morning Glory Vines looped, using a pitchfork.

The willow and hazel gate shows how Sharon explores traditional willow weaving, influenced by basket weaver and sculpture Alastair Heseltine¹², who had taught some workshops at the gardens. Although not overtly political, her work is effective and inserts itself in a very organic manner into various contexts and group activities. All her current work made from plants and designed to disappear back into the landscape, exists mainly in public spaces. And where Knitgirl works in secret and alone, Sharon works with groups, often teaching or working with people who are not artists. Also most of her projects go through official channels and are supported by various community groups and funding agencies and sometimes take a long time to be realized. Many of her works are functional or useful, as fences, to create boundaries or help with erosion control. Other works explore sculptural approaches as symbolic baskets,

¹¹ <http://www.oliverk.org/page/Healing+Cut>

¹² <http://www.alastairheseltine.com/>

boats and figures and many combine these approaches in pieces that are both sculptural and useful and site specific. Here from her blog:

“More and more I find my idea of site specific not just being about place, but also the people who populate it. My community/socially engaged practice has been defined by my ongoing interest in connecting with people, fascination at how everyone brings something new or different in problem solving and unique experiences of place: stories shared and hand techniques for working with materials discovered.”¹³

“Working with community has increased my knowledge base as well, so many people know methods from elders or other countries in how to do things manually, no tech- a lot of this knowledge is undervalued and being lost, but seems a very important way of knowing the place we live in. Working/experimenting with materials also continues to be one of the best ways I have come across to connect with new people.”¹⁴



Figure 10+11. Left Blackberry Vines made into Blackberry leather; right Sharon Ellis Corking Ivy Vines for the Ivy project in Stanley Park

Sharon sometimes discovers old approaches for using and processing plant materials, such as Blackberry vines that are stripped to make “vegetable leather” by first rubbing the vines against a wooden post. This removes the thorns and the outer skin and breaks the solid wooden core, leaving a fibrous flexible bast fiber that can be used in many weaving and other textile processes as a strong material. She also uses the flexible vines of morning glory or Ivy with looping processes on a pitchfork or a large handmade spool knitter. Sharon also twists grasses and other fibers to make a strong rope. (Figs. 10+11) A metal fence is used in a very efficient way to create a large piece of bio netting, which was then used as the main structure for the Ivy project and anti erosion control experiment, “when it is good and dead”. Sometimes she stitches flat Iris leaves together on a sewing machine or crochets vines with large hooks. Here from the blog:

¹³ <http://sharonkallis.com/community-engaged-practice/>

¹⁴ <http://sharonkallis.com/material-process-enquiry/>

“By working with unwanted, discarded and shed materials, the acts of cleaning; from sweeping a floor to raking leaves or grooming a dog become the methodical process of gleaning and harvesting for materials, relating back to old fairytales and the heroine’s intentional “mythodical” process. The farmer’s daughter from Rumpelstiltskin attempting to spin gold out of flax and Psyche’s search for Eros through her tasks of sorting and organizing seeds to make them again useful are all domestic intentional tasks which lead to a form of enlightenment- a feminine alchemy... By binding together leaves as with needle and thread, I draw upon a women’s cultural work history and social structure; as with quilting bees, the by-product of busy work is the creation of a protective layer from the obsessive work of stitching together discarded and useless fragments.”¹⁵

Using English Ivy (*Hedra helix*) as an Art Material for Mimicking Natural Habitat Structures of South Coast Temperate Forests in British Columbia is an environmental project with quite specific research objectives. It was chosen as one of several art projects for revitalizing Stanley Park, after a major storm destroyed a big part of it. Sharon used dried and dead Ivy, braiding them using corking or spool knitting, to make a waddle that functioned as a nurse log for fragile new plants to propagate. (Fig. 12)



Figure 12. *The Ivy Project in Stanley Park, bionetting installed September 2009*
<http://www.flickr.com/photos/sharonkallis/3942202132/in/set-72157622426946292/>
and view the video: <http://vimeo.com/13477011>

Sharon often learns and adapts new techniques from websites and will sometimes teach a new process, that she just discovered; at other times, she learns old traditional techniques from people, including elders that get involved with her projects. Increasingly she searches out old forgotten techniques that she adapts to various new projects. During a recent artist residency she discovered traditional approaches, which are still practiced in Spain today. People everywhere used the things available in their surroundings to make shelters, fences and other useful structures and Sharon explore these structures in her own work.

Currently Sharon is also working on a business proposals to employ people from the neighborhood to create marketable products from abundant and ‘hard to recycle’ weeds. Although time consuming to turn into products, the materials are cheap and available. Normally Ivy plants have to be taken off site and burnt, as they cannot be composted and are problems for other plants with whom they compete. It is interesting to see an artist move from conceptual environmental art and site specific installation work to a

¹⁵ <http://sharonkallis.com/artist-statement/>

green business model in the spirit of the DIY entrepreneurship reflected here. Crafts people sometimes downplay any commercial aspirations, but here they function as an integral part of the art making.

Nest located in Crab Park, is the final body of work I want to talk about: I came across this work by accident when Sharon and her husband were doing some maintenance and when a park official drove by to inquire about their activities, which she did quite patiently – this is likely a well patrolled area and talking to everyone is all part of the project. In this case her sculptures exist as actual sculptures and as recipients of unwanted plant debris, Ivy and other plants. The sculptures become functional as perches for birds and protection for small animals from predators in this very urban park, where a new ‘natural’ environment is now evolving for plants and animals, able to adapt to this urban natural environment. "Our own urban gardens both belong to nature and keeping it at bay."¹⁶



Figure 13. NEST: Crab Park April 21, 2010, locally harvested plant waste materials;
Flickr site: <http://www.flickr.com/photos/sharonkallis/4603838993/in/set-72157623929460111/>

These orbs were begun on Earth Day, April 22 as part of a workshop by Sharon Kallis, in Crab Park. (Fig 13) Crab Park is also the location of the semi-official monument to the disappeared women of the downtown eastside. Sharon helped to create a protective fence and enclosure for it. The monument itself is used by many, particularly the local aboriginal community and is maintained by them. Now it is also used for ceremonies for the women, as the bodies of many of them have not been found; it speaks of very difficult issues. When we were working on the fence a few weeks ago, several people came by and helped a bit and interacted with us.

Conclusions

After a period of exuberant growth of fiber art in the 70' and 80's via experimentation, and influenced by modernist philosophies about formal art worked very hard to lose its association with traditional crafts in order to simply speak via its colours, texture and abstract pattern. Bruce Metcalf in '**Replacing the Myth of Modernism**', pointed out some of problems crafts people faced at that time: "Assimilation into art is deadly to craft and should be avoided"¹⁷. Metcalf stressed the importance of processes and the hand in the making of crafts, the functionality of the objects and discussions around quality and excellence.

¹⁶ Kate Soper, What is Nature? Culture, Politics and the non-Human (Oxford UK & Cambridge, Mass: Blackwell, 1995), 2.

¹⁷ Bruce Metcalf, Replacing the Myth of Modernism. American Craft, February/March 1993.

When I went through art school in 80's, feminism affected how we saw textiles as a way to make art that reflected cultural, social and gender awareness; business suits, pink doilies, the sweaters knitted with love by mothers for kids who would rather have store bought goods. So this art started to look more like functional 'real' textiles, rather than something that 'just' hangs on the wall, with its function removed. **'Material matters: the art and culture of contemporary textiles'**¹⁸ focused on this aspect of textiles and its connotation as myth, as carriers of gender and cultural identity and also its complex relationship with technology, representing both the desire for the handmade, but also textiles at the forefront of many technological innovations. The work of that period often came with a hefty dose of theory, as Dennis Stevens points out in the downloadable I-tunes lecture **'Redefining Crafts'**¹⁹. He presents some clearly articulated ideas about this work done from a DIY perspective, work that in its own term is most professional, but that is shaped more by concepts, than a desire to conform to some absolute standards.

Today studio craft is recognized as valuing skill, connoisseurship and tradition, and its social structure seems to generate the need for educational and professional hierarchies. In contrast, DIY craft emerges from a culture that does not seek professional validation within traditional art methodology but rather is motivated by joining with others socially in shared, creative activity. Further, DIY often relies upon an ironic or satirical approach to forms of domestic creativity that the feminists of the 1970s (otherwise termed second-wave feminists) strictly sought to reject. These differences, combined with the fact that DIY craft places little value upon hierarchical structure and tradition, often set the two forms of craft at odds with one another. In recognition of this tension, I aim here to place the DIY craft movement within the larger cultural context of generational movements, as these craft practitioners comprise groups whose values and aims need to be acknowledged and understood²⁰.

I don't want to present Knitgirl or Sharon Kallis as representatives of the DIY movement, but rather want to show that they explore specific characteristics of these new approaches and use media to create their own presence. They don't rely on structures set up by others, but instead actively pursue and create opportunities that are appropriate to their work. Sharon collaborates with many organizations and Knitgirl participated in a recent graffiti exhibition in Vancouver at W2, together with many other street artists. My interest with this essay, is to create a link between many diverse communities that have different approaches to textiles, but also share many values. The contemporary context creates an environment where new ideas about what is possible in this complex field, where art meets crafts and textiles, and where political content is often camouflaged with layers of pink tulle. Mostly I am interested in how activist work it is re-emerging and evolving to capture new audiences and break new ground in today's savvy Internet age. Not surprisingly, we see a renewed interest in things made by hand and computers are not tool for creating art with these artists, but use of computers to promote work is simply taken for granted.

It has been a great pleasure to work with both artists and I am grateful for meeting with them, their feedback and access to their images.

All images by the artists.

¹⁸ Ingrid Bachman and Ruth Scheuing, eds. Material Matters: The Art and Culture of Contemporary Textiles (Toronto: YYZ, 1999)

¹⁹ Dennis Stevens, DIY Revolution 3.0-beta
<http://itunes.apple.com/us/podcast/museum-of-contemporary-craft/id291127599>

²⁰ Dennis Stevens, DIY Revolution 3.0-Beta, American Craft, Oct /Nov 2009
<http://www.americancraftmag.org/article.php?id=8837>