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# Women's Textile Graffiti: An Aesthetic Staging of Public/Private Dichotomies

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WOMEN'S TEXTILE GRAFFITI: AN AESTHETIC STAGING OF  
PUBLIC/PRIVATE DICHOTOMIES

by

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A Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the  
Doctor of Philosophy

Department of Communication Studies  
in the Graduate School  
Southern Illinois University Carbondale  
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DISSERTATION APPROVAL

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PUBLIC/PRIVATE DICHOTOMIES

By

Diana Woodhouse

A Dissertation Submitted in Partial

Fulfillment of the Requirements

for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in the field of Communication Studies

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AN ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION OF

DIANA WOODHOUSE, for the Doctor of Philosophy degree in COMMUNICATION STUDIES presented on December 16, 2015, at Southern Illinois University Carbondale.

TITLE: WOMEN'S TEXTILE GRAFFITI: AN AESTHETIC STAGING OF PUBLIC/PRIVATE DICHOTOMIES

MAJOR PROFESSOR: Dr. Nathan Stucky

The cultural performance of textile graffiti dramatizes women's contested relationship to the public/privates dichotomies that constitute neoliberal capitalism as well as liberal democracies. Across both of these institutions, privatized matters are problematically excluded from political consideration, and private sphere values—such are nurturance, interdependence, and communalism—are denied their necessity and legitimacy as public goods. Textile graffiti artists furnish an association between public and private life by placing signifiers of domesticity and caregiving onto the public streets, and adorning those nurturant signifiers with political and/or feminist messages. In so doing, textile graffiti functions to politicize caregiving, to highlight its gendered dimensions, and to remind city-goers of caregiving as a public issue and a public good that is necessary to the overall health of a functioning liberal democracy. This study explores textile graffiti from various political, aesthetic, and historical angles in order to situate it within an enduring feminist struggle to re-imagine public/private binaries through valorization of the artifacts, values, and communicative practices that are associated with the private sphere of the home.

## DEDICATION

I dedicate this work to the caregivers in this world. Paid or un(der)paid, valued or devalued, you do important, necessary, and life-enhancing work.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I want to thank my kind and excellent advisor, Dr. Nathan Stucky, for believing in this project, for encouraging me, and for offering his emotional and practical support at every step of the way. Thank you to my committee member, Dr. Craig Gingrich-Philbrook, for his help in opening my mind to performance—that is, the many of ways of thinking about it and enjoying it. Thank you to my committee members Dr. Satoshi Toyosaki, Dr. Rebecca Walker, and Dr. Barbara Bickel for their thoughtful insights and their generosity of time—both of which helped bring this document together. Also, thank you to Dr. Ronald J. Pelias for his gentle, yet earnest encouragement over the past five years.

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## CHAPTER 1

### TEXTILE GRAFFITI: A DRAMATIZATION AND RECONFIGURATION OF WOMEN'S DOMESTIC AND TEXTILE CRAFT

In the summer of 2010, I took a day trip to San Francisco with a girlfriend. At that time, we both lived about forty-five minutes away in the larger city of San Jose. Best known as the capital city of northern California's "Silicon Valley," San Jose is home to a concentrated sector of high-tech corporate bases like Google, Hitachi, eBay, and Apple. Preferring San Francisco's Summer of Love hippie legacy over San Jose's sleek and impersonal feel, my friend and I made these day trips often, and frequently exchanged fantasy narratives about moving there together one day. This particular summer day, however, was a special one—serving as more than our usual escape from the technorational ethos of our hometown, it was also a leave-taking and a celebration of my upcoming move to attend graduate school in Southern Illinois. To honor the event, we had planned on our usual course of thrifting in the historic Haight-Ashbury district, followed by a special picnic lunch in Duboce Park.

After parking atop a cement hill, we traversed down it toward the main street. Suddenly, my friend stopped me, pointing enthusiastically at the lamppost ahead us. Circumscribing the post was a roughly two-foot length of periwinkle fabrics, separated into contrasting panels of varied knitted weaves. With a top layer of lattice-pattered yarn and a bottom layer of rouched lavender tulle, the textile's middle panels were woven in opposite directions, and whimsically adorned with multicolor wooly poms. My friend and I circled the light post, "oohing" and "aahing" at the installation from all angles, even snapping a few souvenir photos with our phones. Back in San Jose that evening, I showed the images to my mother and text messaged them to my two older sisters. "How cute!" they each said, along with, "That's neat!" Years later,

I still store the photos in my phone, looking at them from time to time, to re-experience the magic of that summer San Francisco day. I can still recall the deep longing I had felt to reach out and touch this knitted work; I still wonder who had put it there, and where the impulse to do such a thing had come from in the first place; still, I think about how long the installation took to make, and how long it stayed there, and still the memory makes me smile.



**Figure 1.1: First yarnbomb viewed by the author. San Francisco.  
Photo: Diana Woodhouse.**

### **What is Yarnbombing?**

A few months after moving to Southern Illinois and browsing through various online social network photo streams, I would learn that fabric installations like the one I had encountered in San Francisco had been popping up in major cities all over America and Europe. Referred to as yarnbombing, the practice was a form of street art that has been advancing steadily over the past few years. Also called yarnstorming, textile graffiti, and guerilla knitting,

yarnbombing is generally—but certainly not exclusively—practiced by collectives of women and involves “the act of attaching a handmade [textile] item to a street fixture, or leaving it in the landscape” (Moore and Prain 17-8). Led by Magda Sayeg of Houston, Texas, yarnbombing began in 2005 after Sayeg and her girlfriends covered a stop sign with a knit cozy and subsequently formed the art collective known as Knitta—a “street crew” that covers outdoor public spaces with knit, crochet, and embroidered installations. Yarnbombs, or “tags” as they are so referred, may range anywhere from a simple, single-stitch construction wrapped around a lamppost or car antenna, to an elaborate work of complex stitch patterns that is large enough to cover a public monument (Knitshade).

The rising cultural popularity of yarnbombing is marked by the formation and operation of distinct street crews in the United States, the United Kingdom, Canada, Sweden, Netherlands, Amsterdam, Sydney, and South Africa (Creagh). Street crews, as well as individual artists, have placed tags at both the local and global level; local yarn tags here in Carbondale, Illinois join the company of those placed on international monuments like the Great Wall of China, the Golden Gate Bridge, the Lourve Museum, and the Notre Dame Cathedral. Large citizen groups in the port city of Genova, Italy, as well as Pittsburg, Pennsylvania have engineered citywide installations of knit graffiti (“Intrecci Urbani”; “Knit the Bridge”). An independent documentary film on textile graffiti is currently in production (Gonzales), while publishing companies in both the United States and Europe have released coffee table books detailing the artistic works of various yarnstorm collectives (see Moore and Prain; see Knitshade). As an ephemeral art form, photographic documentation and promotion of yarnbombing has played a key role in its rapid and expansive adoption. Online crafting communities like Etsy and Ravelry, various knit and crochet blogs, along with online photo sharing, and social networking sites such as Facebook,

Tumblr, Flickr, Instagram, and Pinterest continue to remain key sources for both practitioner inspiration as well as audience discovery.

Encountering my first yarnbomb in San Francisco, I was struck on an immediate level by the varied textures of the knitted construction—its collaged fabrics and contrasting weave techniques, its supple fabric superimposed onto the city’s unyielding cement. The textile tag revealed a surprising tension for me—between the hard and impersonal elements of the anonymous city, and the softer affective elements of the home. It was through this knitted construction, and on this particular summer day, that I began to undo my previous understandings of knitting as merely an amateur art—spoiled through its connection to women’s domestic oppression and historic servitude. In my own sentimental estimation, reaching out to touch that knitted piece was my first vulnerable step in an ongoing journey to expand my own feminisms, by re-conceptualizing public/private binaries and revaluing the historic and contemporary potentials of “women’s work.”

This project explores textile graffiti as an aesthetic act that weaves together the seemingly disparate public and private divisions of culture. More specifically, this study approaches yarnbombing as one that aesthetically stages public/private divisions as both discursive and gendered phenomenon. Feminists help to underscore discursive nature of public/private divisions, highlighting the various spatial, economic, technological, and reproductive factors that account for women’s association with the private sphere. Recognizing the association as constructed through social forces, rather than “natural” or inevitable, feminists work to complicate and re-imagine public/private divisions and their gendered correlations (Pateman). Ronald J. Pelias and James Van Oosting offer aesthetic performance as one potential strategy for interrupting discursive forms. They argue that by staging or interpreting discursive phenomenon

as aesthetic texts, we offer opportunities for performers and audience members to recognize, resist, and rethink that system's bounds (221, 223). By interpreting yarnbombing as an aesthetic staging of public/private dichotomies—that is, their gendered, political, and economic effects—this study contributes to critical discourses that work to discern and re-imagine the discursive structures that shape our communication, as well as artistic discourses that work to unpack aesthetic performances *as* communication.

Positioning yarnbombing as an aesthetic performance, in this study, I ask generally: How does yarnbombing draw on the aesthetic genres of craft generally and fiber craft specifically, so as to reflect, dramatize, and critique public/private divisions as a discursive phenomenon? How is yarnbombing a feminist response to the historically gendered concepts of fine art, labor/capitalism, caregiving, community, and the public/private divisions of culture? In order to address these questions, in my larger study I historicize the contemporary practice of yarnbombing within the contested and interrelated traditions of women's art history, craft, and fiber arts. I also explore how the act and audiencing of yarnbombing functions as a) a feminist means for resisting the competitive and individualizing ethos which characterizes neoliberal capitalism, and b) a symbolic re-imagining of dominant economies of exchange.

Having briefly outlined yarnbombing as a contemporary cultural phenomenon, the following chapter proceeds in four sections. Sections one and two further nuance a complex discursive relationship occurring between craft, technology, economics, and gender. In section one, I position both the historical transformation of commodity production processes and the public/private divisions of culture as interrelated effects of the Industrial Revolution. Tracking the historical trajectory of commodity production as moving from hand made to machine made, from familial craft guilds to isolated factory laborers, and from a unified home place to a

stratified public polis, I articulate these historical transformations onto the intertwined trajectories of capitalism, patriarchy, and technology. After discussing the historical transmutation of craft practice and its gendered effects in section one, in section two I discuss contemporary craft culture. More specifically, I situate women's contemporary reclamations of fiber craft within a broad-based cultural revival of craft practice, and position yarnbombing within the feminist and anti-capitalist commitments of these interrelated twenty-first century phenomenon. In section three, I identify yarnbombing as a cultural performance, and introduce my research questions and method of study. Finally, in section four, I map out how I plan to proceed through this project, by previewing each of the upcoming chapters.

### **Craft Transmutation and the Gendered Spatialization of Cultural Production**

#### *Familial Craft in Pre-Industrial Society*

Predating industrialization, the feudal societies of the Middle Ages were centered on local systems of familial production and communal barter. Large markets with extensive commercial trade routes were not yet established, and so all crops and commodities were locally produced and traded. Generally, families survived through collective labor, either working the land or producing useful crafts for local trade with nearby farmers. Outside of the noble class, wives worked alongside their husbands and contributed directly to the production of familial subsistence. While city living was less common than feudal farming, communal craft guilds prospered within the local commercial polis. As familial patriarchs and overseer of pre-industrial craft guilds, craftsmen maintained a public stronghold over the historical production and sale of textile crafts; however, behind the screen of official record, women cultivated a private and relatively non-commercial relationship to the art of textile craft.

Offering a historical overview of the production and sale of textile crafts in local market cities during the latter end of the Middle Ages, Robert Ferrell highlights how craft guilds were publicly controlled by male patriarchs, but privately buttressed by women's behind-the-scenes labor and expertise. Positioning women as crucial agents in systems of craft production generally and the textile industry specifically, Ferrell explains how the combing, carding, and spinning of linens and wools in preparation for textile weaving was carried out almost exclusively by women (par. 19), and how women played key roles in the textile crafts of embroidery, draping, and dying. Also according to Ferrell, "Women played important roles as tailors, but the vast majority of them took commissions from the male master tailors, and thus remained in perpetual obscurity themselves" (par. 18). At this point in history, patriarchal laws of coverture reduced women to property and required her to relinquish all wages and accomplishments to her husband-as-owner; so while women contributed greatly to the structure, functioning, and skill-sets of communal and familial craft guilds, these skills were excluded from public practice and screened out of official public records.

While craftsmen cultivated the craft knowledge and skills pursuant to their specialized role within society, *all* women and girls—despite their social position within society—were educated in the craft of fiber arts (Parker). Prior to industrialization, young girls from affluent families would learn to finely embroider on silks and wools. Societal norms, however, deemed it improper and unfeminine for a wealthy woman to publicly display any artistic skill outside of the home (Nochlin 25). For noble women then, this skill remained a private one, functioning as a marker of femininity and as a gender-appropriate leisure activity that could be carried out indoors (Scalessa 3). For poor women too, the needle arts were generationally passed from mother to daughter out of financial survival, more so than leisure pursuit. Unable to afford the purchase

of garments and linens from market craftsmen, at-home cloth weaving took up considerable amounts of time and skill for the frugal woman, as did the sewing and mending carried out by these women in order to extend the life of her family's garments (ibid.). Despite the social or financial motivations undergirding their impressive craft skills, and despite their husbands' role in society, women's cultivated craft knowledges were historically restricted to private/domestic arenas, and were generally removed from producing direct profit (Bratich and Brush 235).

### *The Industrial Revolution*

The transmutation of textile craft was a result of the Industrial Revolution. With the invention and implementation of manufacturing machines, like wool and cotton spinners as well as the cotton gin, textiles were one of the first major craft areas to undergo mechanization (Bratich 309). Beginning around the eighteenth century, both feudal farmers and highly skilled craftsmen were forced into factory jobs as the result of industrialization, as well as a massive privatization of once public lands. At this historical juncture, feudal farmers had been pushed out of their agricultural labor through a series of legislative Enclosure Acts, which privatized the communal land essential to their crop production. With industrialized processes paving the way for factory systems and the rise of the modern city, displaced farmers flocked to the industrial city at the offer of job opportunities for men in textile factories. Given the efficiency and precision of industrial textile machines, coupled with a massive influx of these cheap and unskilled laborers, textile artisans found themselves unable to compete.

Effected through the Industrial Revolution both family farms and familial craft guilds were displaced by privatization and the advent of efficient machines. As a result, the home place as a unified site of social relationships and cultural economies was fissured and dispersed, leaving men to occupy the factory and women to manage the home (Federici "Federici on the



Policies”). Through this division of the public/private spheres of culture, women’s role shifted from direct participant in the monetary livelihood of a family to a more removed participant, whose job was to manage the domestic household and cultivate relations of care among children and husband.

### *Capitalism and Public/Private Divisions of Culture*

Capitalism’s transmutation of commodity production from the familial craft guild to male and privatized labor functioned to exacerbate the patriarchal divisions of public and private culture set forth in antiquity. With the rise of the industrial city—its mechanized, efficient, and lucrative factory processes—the public sphere became associated with productivity, objectivity, and reason, and moreover, affiliated with men. Alternately, the private sphere was conferred on to women; as place to nurture their children and tend to their husbands, it became associated with sentiment, emotion, affection, and compassion.

Through this spatialization of culture, Margaret Marsh argues, a particular ideology of domesticity was born, wherein, “the model woman was a wife and devoted mother whose principle responsibility was to create a domestic environment that offered an alternative to the conflict and competition of the marketplace economy” (8). In other words, this public and private division of culture functions to split apart a unified, fluid, and complex tapestry of human emotions, motivations, and performances. Through this division, men are socialized to develop competitive-individualistic values and autonomous communicative/emotional patterns, which corresponded to their prescribed legal, political, and commercial roles in public life. Women are narrowly socialized to develop nurturing-communal values and communicative/emotional patterns that correspond to their intimate, affective, and familial role in private or domestic quarters (Spitzack and Carter 407-14; Chodorow “Mothering”; Chodorow “Toward”)

The public/private division of culture remains a longstanding feminist concern (Pateman; Fraser “Rethinking”). In addition to bifurcating values and communicative styles along gendered lines, the negative social effects of public/private divisions are exacerbated through capitalist and patriarchal culture. More specifically, these twin forces scaffold the public and private as false binaries—elevating the public sphere of culture and communication over the private. With consideration for household maintenance as domestic labor, childbirth and childrearing as reproductive labor, and the emotional nurturance of husband and children as affective labor (Bartky), “women’s work” in the private sphere has evidenced itself as *immaterial* or affective labor, which neither generates a tangible product-as-commodity, nor produces a monetary profit. Within capitalist economies that value commodity and monetary production, it follows logically that women are doubly exploited and doubly alienated because of their associations with and socialization toward the devalued private sphere (Ferguson and Hennessy, par. 15). Effected through this public/private binary, women’s historical and domestic accomplishments, labor, and legitimate political concerns are elided, ignored, and devalued within extant legal and economic systems (Dow and Tonn 292).

Feminist scholarship highlights the interconnectedness and equal necessity of public *and* private spheres of culture (Fraser “Rethinking”). Capitalist logics, however, continually exploit women’s historically cultivated affective labor, while simultaneously devaluing this private labor as a legitimate form of cultural production. As a public stronghold, capitalist economic systems value monetary profit above all else; as a result, women’s various forms of private affective labor are frequently naturalized, undervalued, and overlooked.

*Women's Enduring and Devalued Command of Domestic Craft*

While the craftsman's public stronghold over the sale of commodity textile craft was historically fissured in the wake of the Industrial Revolution, women have consistently maintained a private and noncommercial relationship to textile craft, despite changes in economic systems (Parker). Unlike the craftsman, however, who enjoyed a position of social prestige during his craft reign, women's enduring relationship to fiber and needlecraft has been repeatedly devalued and ridiculed as mere "hobby art." Feminist art critic Lucy Lippard details this devaluation of women's textile crafts, pointing to entrenched gender stereotypes and biases as likely culprits for the amateur status of women's textile art, as well as its historical exclusion from the proper world of the gallery system. Lippard reasons:

When Navajo rugs and old quilts were first exhibited in New York fine arts museums of the early 1970s, they were eulogized as neutral, ungendered sources for big bold geometric abstractions by male artists like Frank Stella and Kenneth Noland. Had they been presented as exhibitions of women's art, they would have been seen quite differently and probably would not have been seen at all in a fine art context at that time.

When feminists pointed out that these much-admired and "strong" works were in fact women's "crafts," one might have expected traditional women's art to be taken more seriously, yet such borrowing from "below" must still be validated from "above." . . . It took a man, Claes Oldenburg, to make fabric sculpture acceptable, though his wife Patty did the actual sewing (*Pink* 135).

Outside of blatant gender biases surrounding artistic mediums and content, Linda Nochlin's famous "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?" highlights public/private divisions of

culture as a formidable barrier to women's access to the public art world (24). Lippard touches similarly on this issue, arguing that "The less privileged she is, the more likely she is to keep her interests inside the home with the focus of her art remaining the same as her work. . . . Since most [women's crafts] are geared toward home improvement [or gifts], they inspire less fear in their makers of being 'selfish' or 'self-indulgent'" (*Pink* 130). Simultaneously blessed and stifled by their socially inscribed role as relational caretakers and protectors of the private realm, women have and continue to experience considerable barriers toward the cultivation of self-confidence, worldly knowledge, and the dominant gaze required of so-called "great" artists (Nochlin).

With public/private gender scripts still deeply imprinted on and enforced by women and men today, women's internalized association with the private sphere of culture restricts her access and willingness to participate within the public sphere of high culture, commerce, and politics. Yarnbombing is an important site of artistic, cultural, and political study then, because its women participants shirk their historically internalized restriction to the private sphere, take boldly to the streets and install their unsanctioned and devalued textile art onto public spaces that have historically excluded them. Engaging crochet, needlework, and knitting as an emotional conduit to women of the past, yarnbombers proudly revive the domestic crafts that have been shunned by the art world. Simultaneously, they tactically subvert the commercial sphere that has absorbed and mechanized their historical craft knowledges, by returning to, and gifting, that which is handmade.

Having discussed the historical transmutation of craft practice and its gendered effects in section one, I now move on to discuss contemporary craft culture. More specifically, I situate women's contemporary reclamations of fiber craft within a broad-based cultural revival of craft

practice, and position yarnbombing within the feminist and anti-capitalist commitments of these interrelated twenty-first century phenomenon.

### **Contemporary Craft Revival as Feminist and Anti-Capitalist Activism**

Unlike craftsmen—whose public control of commodity craft was breached by the Industrial Revolution—for centuries, women have maintained a private, non-commercial, and generational relationship to needle and fiber crafts. From antiquity on through the latter half of the twentieth century, women have cultivated their domestic craft skills as a creative and emotional outlet, as a marker of femininity, and out of patriarchal servitude. Following the civil rights movements of the 1950s and 60s, however, this complex list of historical motivations undergirding women’s domestic craft was simplified, and the issue of women’s oppression took center stage.

Inspired through consciousness raising sessions, women started public discussions on the devalued status of their domestic labor, and began to understand how the trivializing of women’s cultivated skills and knowledges was propagated through a dominant masculine society. Simultaneously, women were recognizing how their fulfillment of these domestic arts was more out of obligation and servitude than enjoyment or autonomous choice. Through consciousness raising activities, as well as artistic, political, and everyday activism, the courageous efforts of second-wave feminists resulted in perceptual, medical, and legislative changes surrounding rights and roles of women in modern society.

Two of these legislative changes were the 1972 passage of Title IX in the United States and the 1975 passage of the Sex Discrimination Act in the United Kingdom. Prior to this historical juncture, many schools allowed training to women and girls, only in skills and careers that were deemed socially appropriate for their scripted roles in society. In secondary education,

for example, girls were excluded from shop classes and required to take home economics. There, needlecrafts and domestic arts were taught to women as skills useful for employment, leisure, and the purposes of entertaining. By the 1980s, however, home economics courses had become co-educational and more often than not, optional. With educational norms and expectations moving toward the preparation and training of women for careers outside the home, the teaching of domestic arts seemed increasingly out of phase with progressive gender roles.

Joanne Turney points to combined accelerations of capitalism and feminism when outlining a late twentieth century shift in the valuation and practice of women's craft and fiber arts. According to Turney, as more and more women were empowered to take on full and part time jobs, they were left with little time or energy for domestic crafts. Concurrently, the acceleration of outsourcing and free trade agreements provided women with access to stylish, inexpensive, and ready-made clothing and home décor (15-6).

During this tumultuous civil rights era of American history, a combination of shifting gender scripts, decreased leisure time, and increased affordability of domestic commodities worked to frame women's ancestral knowledge as a location of servitude more so than strength. Attempting to shed a collective sense of shame and inhibition—an association crystallized in the bow-headed image of the dutiful embroider—women shunned the art, education, and cultivation of the domestic in hopes of more public and economic forms of power and cultural influence.

#### *“Craftivism” as Feminist Activism*

Despite this thirty-year gap in the cultivation of women's domestic craft, contemporary Western society is currently experiencing a revival of knitting, as many young feminists are returning to the needle arts that previous generations left behind. Indebted to the efforts of their second-wave mothers, third-wave feminists today have grown up with some semblance of power

and gender equality. Freed from their mothers' burdens to downplay potential differences between the sexes, many young feminists today are reviving the needle arts as a proud reclamation of women's historical knowledge.

Data from the Craft Yarn Council of America helps to corroborate a fiber arts resurgence among women, noting that between the years of 1997 and 2002, the proportion of women under the age of forty-five who know how to knit, doubled from nine to eighteen percent (cited in Minahan and Cox 7). The increased sale of knitting wool also marks this cultural resurgence. For example, in 2009, arts and crafts chain Hobby-Craft said its yearly sales of wool were at a twenty-eight percent annual increase, having sold well over a million units (Levy). Online search statistics yield further evidence of an increased popularity in knitting as cultural practice. According to Peter Fitzgerald, a retail director at Google UK, not only has the prevalence of knitting related search terms grown steadily since 2004, but in the year 2011 alone there was a hundred and fifty percent increase for such terms, with the search term "knitting for beginners" increasing by two-hundred and fifty percent (Lewis).

Taken in conjunction with the cultural popularity of yarnbombing over the past decade, the increased knowledge, sales, and curiosity surrounding knitting provides empirical data to support the claim that the fiber arts are currently experiencing a steady rise in popularity. Attempting to balance both pride for their gender and anger over their oppression, the needle now functions as apt signifier of the third-wave feminist's double bind. The needle stabs violently and performatively, creating a new image of powerful and prideful femininity, threaded upon a historical landscape rife with oppression and servitude. This needled portrait of contemporary women, Ricia Chansky argues, is a hopeful and refreshing mixture of pre- and post-feminist imagery (682).

In the *Encyclopedia of Activism and Social Justice*, under the entry titled “craftivism,” Betsey Greer formally links this return to domestic and female-centered traditions as a distinct form of political and economic activism. A portmanteau of the terms “craft” and “activism,” craftivism takes up traditionally domestic and gendered pastimes—for example crochet, knitting, weaving, embroidery, cross-stitch, rug-hooking, and quilting—and moves them into the public sphere as a political act. Sketching the cultural and historical conditions that gave rise to this unique form of gendered activism, Greer argues:

Feminism was still heavily rooted in theory and strength, but enough time had spanned between the economic and social disparities between women and men in the 1970s that women began to look again at domesticity as something to be valued instead of ignored. Wanting to conquer both a drill and a knitting needle, there was a return to home economics tinged with a hint of irony as well as a fond embracement (“Craftivism” 402).

Craftivism functions as the political ethos undergirding the revival of fiber and needle arts as a material performance practice. Dwight Conquergood underscores the political potentiality of creative forms born in and through historical struggle, arguing that, “performance flourishes within zones of contest and struggle” (“Of Caravans” 137). With consideration for the gendered and contested history of the fiber arts, this study explores the political potential for yarnbombing as craftivist enactment, to blur constructed boundaries between the public and private spheres of culture.

Craftivist enactments span a variety of political forms. Craftivist efforts frequently engage women’s issues. Take for example, Afghans For Afghans, a non-profit organization and relief effort that collects and delivers handmade blankets and knit clothing to Afghanistan’s



citizens and children in need. Or, the craftivist efforts of New York's Activist Knitting Troupe, who sat peacefully knitting amidst the tear gas and protestors outside the Summit of the Americas in Quebec City in 2001. In her essay, "The Revolution Will Wear a Sweater: Knitting and Global Justice Activism," Kristy Robertson describes the latter's knit-in as enjoying "a symbolic potency in its sheer out-of-placeness at recent protests" (210), and links craftivism to historic enactments of women's nonviolent occupation and resistance. The Yarn Mission similarly engages knitting as a peaceful and unconventional protest strategy. Following highly publicized instances of police brutality—specifically, the 2014 murder of Mike Brown by Officer Darren Wilson—the in Ferguson, Missouri-based Yarn Mission "uses yarn to promote action and change to eradicate racism, sexism, and other systems of oppression" and "sparks conversation about race and police brutality by engaging with curious passersby as they knit, all while providing a comforting activity for beleaguered activists" (Kendzior, par. 3)

From contemporary enactments of women's historic peace and charity efforts to knit-ins as the new non-violent and anti-war protest, craftivism represents varied enactments of women's political protest concerns. As a political ethos, craftivism recognizes feminist articulations of capitalism and patriarchy as twin structures that exacerbate public/private hierarchies of cultural production, and returns to the needle as a form of handmade and gendered esteem. Frequently drawing on humor, irreverence, and surprising juxtapositions, craftivism functions to critique patriarchal ethics and stake moral arguments regarding the state of contemporary society (Greer "Craftivism in Three Parts"). As both a term and a practice, this project looks to yarnbombing as a craftivist enactment making similarly poetic and plays— weaving together the incongruous associations of privacy, knitting, and nurturance, with the public, graffiti, and self-assertion.

### *Craft Revival as Anti-Capitalist Activism*

While craftivism focuses specifically on fiber and needle arts as women-centered craft traditions, Kristen Williams argues that Northern America is currently experiencing an even broader resurgence of general craft culture. Williams reasons that the flooded market of commodity-based culture has drowned out and covered over the craft skills that previous generations cultivated and preserved as mechanisms of self-sufficiency (304). Marked by the recovery of human-based mechanisms of production over store-bought and factory-made products, Williams situates this general craft revival as a grassroots response to late capitalism (305).

The slow food movement and urban homesteading movement are two examples of a craft ethos that is currently taking hold. Conceived of as a response to fast food and the related “McDonaldization” of society, the slow food movement urges a return to local livestock and farming as a means of resisting commercial agribusiness, pesticides, and factory farms. Similarly, the urban homesteading movement encourages a more intimate or local connection to the environment in (sub)urban areas. Focused on environmentalism and communal sufficiency through home food production and storage techniques, the urban homestead movement promotes the adoption of extensive recycling, gardening, and small-scale livestock ventures by families and small communities (Kaplan and Bloom).

Dennis Stevens links the contemporary craft movement to a Do-It-Yourself (DIY) ethos that is popular with today’s young adult populations. Stevens argues that both craft revival and DIY ethos are evidence of a large-scale shift in the aims and values of distinct political generations (par. 7). In contradistinction to their Baby Boom parents and predecessors—who, arguably, looked toward the promises of science, technology, and capitalism, and their

assurances of progress and autonomy—Generations X and Y are cynical of these social orders and their promises of protection and egalitarianism. Highlighted on a national level by the Occupy Wall Street protest movement, young adults today are critical of the progress narrative that has historically surrounded and supported capitalism as metonym for social democracy. Raised with the Internet in their bedrooms and on their cell phones, today's young adult populations are increasingly aware of global capitalism and its ill effects—up to and including the exploitative treatment of indigent global populations, the irreparable damage caused to the Earth, and the depletion of limited natural resources. Today's resurgence in craft and DIY ethos represent a contemporary resistance toward the general tendency of technology and capitalism to homogenize people and creative operations.

Craft and contemporary craft-based movements, yarnbombing among them, work against industrialized models of production that alienate laborers and consumers through their division and routinization of processes, people, and environments. Leonardo Bonanni and Amanda Parkes highlight craft as a social activity that is informed by communal motivations and shared resources. These shared resources informing craftwork may be environmental, as evidenced in the slow food and urban homesteading movements; they may also be personal, as evidenced by craft guilds' historical reliance on a human-to-human pedagogies, which stress hands-on teaching as means of transmitting generational skills and knowledges (Bonanni and Parkes 180).

Jack Bratich similarly situates craft as “a politicized practice of resourcefulness, local knowledge, and nonhierarchical organizational forms” (307). Positing craft as a form of affective and immaterial labor, Bratich explores in detail: craft's embedded forms of communal cooperation as a kind of demonstrative surplus, craft's small-scale circulation and gift-giving gestures, and craft's cultivation of historical and moral values amongst its producers and teachers

(308). Underscoring its creation of communities and communal subjectivities, Bratich argues that craft practice and craft communities work to resist capitalist privatization, which atomizes and reduces people, processes, and environments.

*Craft Revival and Women's Affective Labor*

The respective scholarship of Karlyn Kohrs Campbell and Silvia Federici helps to articulate understandings of craft as communal and affective labor onto feminist articulations of women's work. Campbell tracks how the teaching of craft process and the creation of craft objects frequently occur within the home and through a face-to-face mentoring. In so doing, Campbell links craft as affective pedagogy to the emotional crafts historically cultivated and reproduced by women—such as nurturance, empathy, and community (*Man* 13).

Federici argues that women, as a historically marginalized cultural group and as “the primary subjects of reproductive work,” are more likely than men to cultivate and protect communal resources and knowledge (“Feminism and the Politics of the Commons” par. 18).

According to Federici:

One crucial reason for [women] creating collective forms of living is that the reproduction of human beings is the most labor-intensive work on earth and, to a very large extent, it is work that is irreducible to [capitalist] mechanization. . . . For centuries, the reproduction of human beings has been a collective process. It has been the work of extended families and communities on which people could rely. . . . It is only with the advent of capitalism that reproduction has been completely privatized (par. 28).

Outlining domestic crafts as a distinct and enduring form of community formation among women, Kohrs Campbell and Federici work to position women as historical protectors of communalism and opponents of capitalist privatization.

Yarnbombers enact both the feminist and anti-capitalist commitments of craft as affective labor. Covering urban spaces with hand knit structures, yarnbombing works to “encode a desire for the precapitalist form of production, or the ‘personal touch’” (Bratich and Brush 246). Situated within a larger contemporary craft revival, yarnbombing provides evidence of a society exploring and re-valuing the communitarian ideals and local knowledges that have historically marked the products and ethos of craft culture and craft guilds. As a form of gendered craft activism, yarnbombers enact anti-capitalist commitments through hand production processes and modes of community engagement that women have historically protected. Finding reverberations in the words of communication theorist Marshall McLuhan, women’s textile graffiti artists are keenly aware that “the[ir] medium is the[ir] message.” Stated differently, yarnstormers as craft activists approach the very practice and pace of handcraft as a means of pushing back on global capitalism and its pervasive effects, especially as this new form of activism is carried out against a) the public sphere that has historically excluded women; and b) the cultural backdrop of today’s high-speed and industrialized world.

The historical transmutation of craft from hand production to mechanization is historically braided with capitalist and gendered strands. Contemporary enactments of textile craft combine feminist associations of women’s private labor with the political commitments of anti-capitalist activism. Having overviewed these historical and contemporary craft variations as gendered communicative phenomenon and briefly outlined women’s textile graffiti as aesthetic artifacts that rhetorically span feminist, capitalist, and technological poles, I now move on to

introduce my methods of study.

## **Method**

### *Cultural Performances*

A dramaturgical approach to culture pays close attention to rituals, ideologies, and other symbolic acts, recognizing each as forces that dramatize social relations (Bell *Theories* 118; Wuthrow 13). As concrete and recurrent practices occurring within social networks and societies (Murphy 298), Milton Singer positions cultural performances as worthy objects of study, approaching them as the ultimate units of observable culture, or, as encapsulated manifestations of the conflicting dynamics and social forces from which they were produced (70-1). Taking a dramaturgical approach within this study, I look to yarnbombing as a cultural performance that dramatizes women's historically contested identity within the public and private divisions of culture.

This study looks to yarnbombing as a cultural performance enacted by women within Western society, and expressive of women's contemporary and historically contested identities. This study follows the work of previous performance scholars like Jean Haskell Speer and Dwight Conquergood, both of whom have analyzed women's textile arts as symbolic acts that express cultural patterns and dramatize the beliefs of the culture from which they were produced. In her analysis of the oral traditions accompanying Hebridean women's cloth weaving rituals, Jean Haskell Speer argues that, "Like many ritualized activities of women in male-dominated societies, [cloth-] waulking represented a liminal period in which women found freedom to express themselves on the condition of their lives" (27). Looking to Hebridean cloth-waulking as a cultural performance, Speer illuminates their domestic textile craft as more than mere aesthetic act learned and taught by women; evidenced through Speer's analysis, cloth-waulking functions

to dramatize Hebridean cultural beliefs, as well as women's living conditions within a patriarchal culture. Through cloth-waulking rituals as symbolic acts of communication, Hebridean women were granted a liminal space of freedom, where they could communally express their sorrows and absorb survival strategies.

Dwight Conquergood has also looked to women's fiber craft as a cultural performance. In his analysis of the Hmong story cloth, or *pa ndau*, Conquergood argues that the aesthetic creation and communicative act of gifting story cloths—at Hmong weddings, as marker of the seasons, as a burial shroud honoring the dead, and as cloak for protecting the newly born (“Fabricating” 213)—serve to punctuate Hmong cultural patterns and beliefs. Like Speer, Conquergood also situates this unique form of women's textile art as a symbolic act of expression, highlighting the *pa ndau* as a textile landscape for Hmong refugee women to narrate their collective crises and perform their own personal history (233). Following performance scholars like Conquergood and Speer, this study positions textile craft as both signifier and shaper of women's contested identities within patriarchal cultures. As evidenced throughout this introduction, domestic and textile crafts have played key roles in women's multiple and conflicting roles as feminist, as mother, as caregiver, as artist, and everyday aesthete, in addition to shaping larger political and economic formations.

This study approaches yarnbombing as a cultural performance that dramatizes the public/private divide as a gendered, economic, and political formation, paying close attention to its various overlaps and conflicting historical signifiers. With consideration for the public streets on which these knitted constructions are audienced and installed, as well as the domestic sphere to which the act of knitting is historically associated, yarnstorming combines the cultural stages of a much contested public/private divide. With consideration for the disembodied

telecommunications used to popularize yarnbombing, in conjunction with the tactile handicraft of a textile tag, yarnstorming conflates the cultural media of pre- and post- industrial eras. With consideration for the cultural performers engaged in yarnbombing, its aesthetic practitioners combine and confound the contrasting associations of street artists as destructive vandals and knitters as decorous grandmothers. Through further articulation and analyses of 1) the various conflicting signifiers evidenced within the performance of yarnbombing, and 2) the conflicting representations of yarnbombing evidenced by popular media, textile graffiti appears as a cultural performance that dramatizes women's historically contested and contemporarily shifting identities within public and private divisions of culture.

*Cultural Performances and 'Directional Effectivity': The Conflicting Political Rhetorics of Textile Graffiti*

The work of performance scholar Kirk Fuoss provides me with a language and framework to better articulate the levels of contestation occurring within yarnstorming as a cultural performance. Positioning cultural performances as always agonistic, Fuoss argues that such performances “move the social formation in which they occur and of which they are a part” (“Performance as Contestation” 332). According to Fuoss, the directional effectivity that a cultural performance will take is the result of the rhetorical strategies enacted within it, and the ancillary activities that surround it—such as discussions about the performance occurring both prior to and after its occurrence (ibid.). In a web log post for the *Journal of Modern Cloth*, Lydia Trouton comments on the directional effectivity of yarnbombing. Describing the art form as “playful (with avant-garde references) but often claim[ing] a serious subtext” (par. 8), Trouton positions the directional effectivity of yarnstorming as “fraught territory,” with its



representations “split right down the middle between ‘social conformity’ and ‘social protest’” (par. 6).

My own cursory analysis of the directional effectivity of textile graffiti corroborates Trouton’s ambiguous findings. These ambiguities evidence themselves through the representational differences found within the imagistic representations of yarnbombing presented on Internet photo-sharing websites, the diversity of explicit and implicit political intentions stated by various practitioner craft collectives, and the lighthearted presentation of yarnstorming that is common to its popular news media coverage. In order to orient my reader to the contestory representations surrounding yarnbombing as a feminist, artistic, and political act—and to evidence the necessity for the in-depth study that follows—below, I offer a brief overview of these contradictory representations of textile graffiti.

To begin, many representations of yarnbombing are limited to photo-sharing websites. The visual based rhetoric of photo-stream sites like Flickr, Pinterest, and Tumblr are largely responsible for the growing popularity of yarnbombing; however, because so much of yarnstorming’s popular representation is explicitly imagistic, there is a perceived dearth of explicit rhetoric or textual argument surrounding the crafter’s political or artistic intentions. This perceived lack of discussion surrounding yarnbombing’s political, feminist, and artistic aims—especially in relation to the abundance of yarnstorming images on popular photo-stream websites—has prompted critiques of yarnbombing as a shallow visual spectacle. One Twitter user, enacts this critique, arguing that, “There’s a disingenuousness. . . Yarn bombing exemplifies the ‘do it for the photo’ method of street art” (Eppink).

There are, of course, more explicit textual discussions of yarnbombing as an emergent form of street art; however, accessing them requires venturing outside the image stream of these

highly trafficked photo-sharing websites. Many craftivist and yarnbomb collectives maintain independent websites, which—in addition to storing visual representations of a particular collective’s art—frequently offer textual documentation of the process, intention, and philosophy informing that collective’s work. The effect to which these stated philosophies make demonstrative political claims, however, varies widely from one collective to another.

The respective philosophies of craft collectives AntiCraft! and Artyarn highlight the broad range of political, feminist, and artistic intentions claimed by craftivist yarnbombers. Rife with radical feminist and political rhetoric, AntiCraft!’s philosophy reads as such:

We're all outcasts and refugees from the mainstream here. We're strange girls, tactless and profane in the face of the sacred . . . . We've discovered that we hate people *en masse*, we're sick of homogenized culture, and these realizations have left holes in our hearts. We create to fill those holes, to be able to sleep at night knowing we've done something, even a small something, to confront the manufactured culture that is currently being churned out . . . Our personalities are in this . . . which makes it personal. We want you to help us carry this along, which makes it political (Rigdon and Stewart).

Diverging from the polemic rhetoric of AntiCraft!, Artyarn craft collective offers a gentler articulation of their craft activism as “expressing a personal care with traditionally nurturing craft techniques” (Artyarn). Describing their engagement with knit graffiti as an exploration of urban spaces, Artyarn uses knitting and crochet “as a way of looking” and as “an avenue to connect with our physical surroundings, employing an extended notion of home” (ibid.). Presenting their knit graffiti as a mode artistic inquiry more so than an explicit political act, the rhetoric of Artyarn’s craft philosophy varies greatly from that of AntiCraft!’s explicit feminist agenda.

When yarnstorming is presented in mainstream news media outlets by non-practitioners—for example on television, magazine, or newspapers—its coverage is often presented lightly as a human-interest piece, its rhetoric frequently deploying stylistic puns that play off the ‘cutesy’, the ‘cozy’, and quotidian associations of knitting. Framed positively, this type of coverage has helped to cultivate yarnbombing’s popularity; however, a more negative effect of these playful media treatments is the ways in which they function as fodder for yarnbombing critics. The cynical commentary made by Steven Wells, for example, evidences rhetorical strategies used by some to undermine the stated political intentions of many craftivist yarnbombers. Describing guerilla knitting as “the death of both alternative culture and feminism” (par. 8), Wells reasons, “Germaine Greer didn’t articulate her disgust with women’s oppression by knitting a lavender and yellow toilet-roll holder. Dr Martin Luther King Jr. didn’t say: ‘I have a dream ... set of place mats that I crocheted using a pattern I got from a magazine’” (par. 10). As evidenced by Stevens as well as other mainstream news outlets, the popular outside reception and response to yarnstorming frequently critiques or capitalizes on its effeminate associations and amateur practitioner base.

Outlined above, my own cursory exploration of yarnbombing’s directional effectivity corroborates the ambiguous or contestory representations of which Trouton’s brief article takes note. These ambiguities evidence themselves through contradictory representational differences found within a) the imagistic representations of yarnbombing presented on Internet photo-sharing websites, b) the diversity of explicit and implicit political intentions stated by various practitioner craft collectives, and c) the lighthearted presentation of yarnstorming that is common in its popular news media coverage. Having presented these contradictions as evidence of the

need for this in-depth study, in what follows, I present the research questions guiding my larger study and overview the methods I will engage to provide answers to those research questions.

### *Agenda of Research*

With respect to this the “ambiguous” or “encoded” directional effectivity of yarnstorming (Trouton 6), Fuoss argues that—within a given cultural performance, as well within the ancillary activities surrounding it— multiple axes of domination may be at play (“Performance as Contestation” 332). The task of the performance critic, then, is to carefully analyze the performance, so as to account for and articulate these multiple axes of domination. Once these multiple axes of domination are accounted for, Fuoss explains, the directional effectivity of a cultural performance may be understood as “ideological along one axis”—that is, perpetuating existing power asymmetries and patterns of domination—yet resistant, or challenging existing patterns of domination, along another (“Performance as Contestation” 332).

It is with consideration for yarnstorming’s conflicting political rhetorics and Fuoss’s interrelated call to account for the multiple axes of domination occurring within a given performance, that I propose this in-depth study of yarnbombing as a cultural performance. Broadly stated, this proposed study asks: What is/are the directional effectivity/effectivities of textile graffiti as a cultural performance? What axes of domination are at play within the cultural performance of yarnbombing and the discussions that surround it? What historical movements and performative practices might serve as predecessors to the contemporary performance of yarnstorming, and how might such historical predecessors help to clarify the directional effectivities and axes of domination at play within the contemporary performance of yarnbombing? How do the varied representations and enactments of yarnbombing function to construct and renegotiate community, in the context of late capitalism, and within the public

sphere? In order to answer these questions, this study will engage genealogical research that explores the historical roots of this contemporary cultural performance, and perform rhetorical analyses of yarnstorming's varied representations within popular culture. Below, I briefly explain the relevance and import of genealogical research to this study, and then move on to discuss the specific frames of analyses that will guide the rhetorical analyses that I will carry out in this study.

### *Genealogical Research*

Recognizing fissures and contradictions that are embedded within culturally contested terms, Shannon Jackson urges performance scholars to “take seriously” such contradictions, arguing that the multi-referentiality of culturally contested concepts functions as evidence of “serious patterns of discontinuity in apparently linear historical progressions” (“Genealogies” 73). Performance historiographers like Jackson recognize that a) societal perceptions are constructed through multiple and contradictory histories, and b) the traditional, tidy, or linear historical narratives that we presently carry are always constructed through elisions and omissions (Pelias and Shaffer 40-1). By exploring unrecognized or underrepresented histories—and cultivating that which Jackson refers to as “a genealogical consciousness”—performance scholars are better able to account for, and potentially reconcile, the fissures and contradictions embedded within contested cultural terms.

Throughout this introduction, I have pointed to yarnbombing as a cultural performance that evidences contest or fault lines in cultural understandings of feminism, art, and political activism. In order to account for these fissures and contradictions—which are embedded within these contested terms and dramatized by yarnstorming and its surrounding discussions—in chapter two of this study, I will engage in genealogical research that explores the

underrepresented canon of nineteenth and twentieth century women's art history and women's art activism. This chapter will function to historicize the contemporary performance of yarnbombing, by tracking the historical movements and performative practices of women's art that predate and inform textile graffiti as a contemporary cultural performance.

Nathan Stucky positions women and historical minorities as groups whose significant actors and events are frequently excluded from traditional history (94). Recognizing historical narratives as vehicles that aid in the transfer and maintenance of hegemonic cultural values and ideologies, Stucky reasons that the recovery of women's histories can help—not only to surface significant persons and events from the past, but also—to account for the transmission and valuation of contemporary performance practices and embodiments (95-6). Lydia Trouton echoes Stucky's line of reasoning when pointing to a collective dearth of cultural knowledge surrounding women's historically situated political struggles and their interrelated artistic lineage. Trouton argues that if female craftivists seek mainstream political and/or artistic credibility, then they must be “knowledgeable about the gendered history of public space and realistic about how conventional media will perceive [and represent] their work” (par. 15). While a feminist political ethos might be inferred or extrapolated through the explicit statement or implicit intention of a yarnstormers' melding of public and private spheres, unfortunately the historical nuances of those political intentions are neither obvious nor immediately accessible to a large number of audience members who lack an understanding of women's historical political struggles or their interrelated artistic lineage.

By engaging genealogical research in chapter two of this study, I aim to offer a detailed and under-articulated through line that historically tracks the political strategies and artistic practices that serve as predecessors to the contemporary performance of yarnstorming. As

evidenced by Jackson and Stucky respectively, genealogical research is a form of performance historiography well suited for presenting the historical formation of contested concepts, and revealing axes of domination that are embedded within and through privileged historical accounts. Through a historical discovery of women's art history and art activism, this study is better situated to account for and potentially reconcile the contested representations of art, feminism, and political activism that are dramatized by yarnstorming, and evidenced within the discussions surrounding it.

### *Analyzing Contestation and Community within Cultural Performances*

Chapter three and four of this project will present rhetorical analyses of the varied representations of yarnbombing within popular media. In order to carry out these rhetorical analyses these chapters will draw on the work of performance scholar Kirk Fuoss—that is, his analysis of contestation occurring within cultural performances (“Performance as Contestation”) and his recognition of community formation and negotiation as functions of cultural performances (“Community”).

#### Contestation and Cultural Performances

Following in the work of Victor Turner, Fuoss's frameworks for analyses begin with the assumption that cultural performances are diverse orchestrations of culturally recognized aesthetic genres, which construct history, people, events, places, and cultural memories; because history is a discursive mixture of various communities, values, and practices, these cultural performances are capable of carrying multiple and contradictory messages (Turner *Anthropology* 23-4). Fuoss is concerned with discerning those various and overlapping messages, and provides his readers with analytic schemas to do so. Detailed within his systematic frameworks for

analysis, Fuoss identifies various “spheres of contestation” occurring within a given cultural performance and the ancillary activities that surround it (“Performance as Contestation”).

Throughout this introduction, I have touched briefly on the overlapping and contradictory messages occurring within yarnbombing and the ancillary activities that surround it. Embedded within the performance of yarnstorming, I have highlighted: the public and private as overlapping cultural stages, the conflation of pre- and post- Industrial cultural media, as well as the various practitioner associations of *textile* graffiti. Evidenced through yarnstorming’s ancillary activities are differences in its visual and textual representations, and even further levels of contradictions embedded within those various textual representations.

As argued by Fuoss, by applying these frameworks to analyses of cultural performances, a critic will be better able to nuance the varied levels of contestation occurring within that particular performance, and to identify the directional effectivities of that performance. In chapter three of this study, I look to the spatial and textual spheres of yarnbombing in order to identify the various axes of domination and the directional effectivities, which are dramatized through the cultural performance of yarnstorming.

#### Community Formation and Cultural Performances

Kirk Fuoss argues that community is symbolic construction, and that cultural performances construct community through their maintenance or renegotiation of the relationships among a community’s members (“Contestation” 94). Chapter four of this project looks to the citywide yarnbombing of the Andy Warhol Bridge as a case study for analyzing the production of community within the city of Pittsburg, Pennsylvania (“Knit the Bridge”).

According to Fuoss, cultural performances construct and renegotiate community by “enacting communal relationships into the very process of gathering persons for a performance event and



engaging those persons either as actors in or audience members for a performance” (ibid.)

Following Fuoss’s framework, this chapter will analyze community formations constructed through the Knit the Bridge yarnbombing project; specifically, this chapter will look to Knit the Bridge’s gathering of participants prior to the event, as well as its engagement of participants during the planning, installation, and de-installation of this large-scale community-based project.

### **Chapter Layout**

In chapter one, I introduced yarnbombing as an emergent cultural performance born through a twenty-first century craft revival, and historically situated within a long tradition of women’s domestic and textile craft. Spanning these historic and contemporary poles, I also overviewed the various roles that domestic and textile crafts have played in shaping women’s contested, devalued, and contradictory identities. In addition to stating my research questions, in this first chapter, I presented the frameworks I will draw on throughout the study in order to analyze yarnbombing as a cultural performance.

In chapter two, I engage genealogical research in order to track the historical movements and performative practices that serve as predecessors to the contemporary performance of knit graffiti. Looking to the underrepresented cannon of twentieth century women’s art history, this second chapter recovers a rich—albeit unrecognized—tradition of women’s art practice, which used domestic and textile crafts as a means to highlight and protest public/private cultural hierarchies. Additionally, by tracking the ethos and strategies that characterize not only feminist artists of the 1960s and 70s, but also their street graffiti contemporaries, I further broaden yarnbombers’ artistic lineage, and complicate negative assessments of yarnbombing as an ideological enactment of cultural appropriation.

In chapter three, I interrogate both spatial and textual spheres of yarnbombing in order to better clarify its directional effectivities. More specifically, this chapter positions yarnbombing as constituting a counterpublic of caregivers, who rhetorically manipulate a) their built environments and b) gendered symbolic practices in order to advocate for caregiving values and to publicize the necessity of human-to-human care.

In chapter four, I draw from the extensive documentation of Knit the Bridg—a recent city-sanctioned and citywide wide enactment of textile graffiti, which bombed Pittsburg, Pennsylvania’s Andy Warhol Bridge in August of 2013. In this chapter, I analyze Knit the Bridge’s formation and renegotiation of community within Pittsburgh and amongst its participants. More specifically, I detail the ways in which Knit the Bridge leverages feminist methodologies throughout its production and installation process in order to reconfigure community boundaries by reducing status quo hierarchies amongst racial, classed, aged, and ability divides.

In chapter five, I ground the previous chapters by sketching a broader image of yarnbombing as both a product of and contributor to an ongoing social drama involving a) the women living within a liberal democracy and b) the public/private divisions which constitute that democracy. More specifically, I situate yarnbombing as a cultural performance and contemporary product of that ongoing drama. Upon framing yarnbombing within this larger historical trajectory, I conclude this dissertation by answering the research questions raised in this first chapter regarding the political import and efficacy of textile graffiti.

CHAPTER 2  
FEMINIST AND STREET GRAFFITI ARTISTS:  
PERFORMATIVE PREDECESSORS OF TEXTILE GRAFFITI

In chapter one, I provided an overview of Kirk Fuoss' argument that cultural performances may simultaneously dramatize both ideological and resistant axes of domination. In this second chapter, I first detail arguments that situate textile graffiti as ideological appropriation of paint graffiti culture. Next, I detail the underarticulated history of the 1960s and 70s Women's Art Movement in order to position feminist and paint graffiti artists as yarnbombing's performative predecessors. In so doing, I work to counter ideological readings of textile graffiti as cultural appropriation and to reaffirm feminist readings of this nascent art form.

Many textile graffiti practitioners cite radical traditions and liberatory discourses when arguing for the political import of yarnbombing; however, rhetorical scholar Leslie Hahner discounts these subversive rhetorics. Charging textile graffiti artists with cultural appropriation, Hahner situates yarnbombers' political ethos as a shallow façade, which is communicated to audience members by "poaching the anti-establishment aspects of [traditional] graffiti" and "pirat[ing its] radical features . . . [as well as] its raced and classed associations" ("Aesthetic Appropriation" par. 1). In a co-authored essay with Scott Varda, Hahner expands on this argument. Together, Hahner and Varda argue that "Many of the claims about yarn bombing implicitly or explicitly compare the craft to paint graffiti [in order] to *aggrandize* the artistic potential of knitted graffiti" (3, emphasis added). Positioning comparisons between textile and paint graffiti as both appropriative and misplaced, Hahner and Varda reason that paint graffiti can be understood as an effort to reclaim public space for those whose participation in the public sphere is otherwise circumscribed. . . . [and therefore]

originates in the lived experiences of less privileged persons . . . . [Yarnbombers'] efforts to appropriate an art form emanating from those [less privileged] experiences [functions to] fortify hegemonic whiteness. . . . [by] usurping . . . cultural norms, traditions, and practices. (14, 15)

Various Internet bloggers have echoed Hahner and Varda's critique, arguing that the white female bodies of most yarnbombing practitioners shield them from the legal repercussions frequently suffered by the Brown and Black male bodies of traditional paint graffiti artists (Grant; Hahner 5; Monalismsmile). In this way, critics reason, textile graffiti artists *purport* to disrupt the established visual order of public space without actually suffering the legal ramifications attached to such disruptions (Hahner "Aesthetic Appropriation" par. 15). Established through this line of criticism, yarnstorming detractors reduce the multivalent complexities of the terms "political" and "radical," by falsely ascribing the potential for arrest as an ostensibly elemental specification. Moreover, they undermine yarnstorming's subversive ethos—positioning its anti-establishment claims as facile at best, and unethical cultural appropriations at worst.

In this chapter, I argue that Hahner and Varda's analysis of textile graffiti does not give consideration to the political-aesthetic history of the Women's Art Movement. More specifically, I argue that in order to situate yarnbombing as a form of cultural appropriation, Hahner and Varda ignore the large numbers of yarnstormers and craftivists citing its influence (see Chansky 685-7; Clegg 9-11; Pentney, par. 5; Trouton, par. 4, 5; Wallace, par. 7). To preface this larger argument, a brief overview of the Women's Art Movement is necessary.

Feminists interested in art, aesthetics, and representation initiated the Women's Art Movement in the late 1960s. At this time, female artists began critiquing the organization of the

gallery system and the aesthetic axioms of canonical art. Feminists argued that both of these institutions colluded to exclude women's private experiences, viewpoints, and aesthetic expressions (Musgrave 215). Frustrated by women's underrepresentation as gallery artists and overrepresentation as passive art objects (see Guerilla Girls), many female artists moved outside of the museum—establishing themselves as relevant pioneers of public art, unsanctioned art, and performance art (Goldberg 129; Kappel 66). Emboldened by the lack of constraints attached to these nascent art forms, women artists started to explore taboo subjects like female sexuality, female desire, and female bodily function. In so doing, their autonomous works functioned to reclaim the sexualized and idealized female body so frequently represented in male art works. Additionally, many feminist artists incorporated in their works the domestic materials, craft processes, and politically charged issues of caretaking and human reproduction—each of which were associated with women's lives, yet missing from the male canon (Phelan "Survey" 21-2, 31-2).

Among others, textile artist Lydia Trouton explicitly aligns yarnstorming with the feminist aesthetic strategies born through the Women's Art Movement—underscoring their shared deployments of craft processes and domestic signifiers, and their corresponding transformations of non-gallery spaces (par. 4 and 5). While obvious to Trouton—a feminist well-steeped in women's artistic lineage and interrelated political struggles—she cautions yarnbombing practitioners, nonetheless, that such linkages will be lost on individuals lacking a feminist historical consciousness: "This art activ[ism]," Trouton warns, can easily be made "ready for erasure by . . . [those who] trivialize [textile graffiti] into decorative trimmings . . . and/or conflate and reduce [it] into an infantilized cute-ness" (par. 6). Hahner and Varda's analysis of textile graffiti exemplifies Trouton's fears. By focusing solely on paint graffiti

as *singular* aesthetic influence informing textile graffiti, Hahner and Varda diminish the political history of women's art and disregard the home culture from which many female yarnbombing practitioners rightfully draw. Through this omission, they situate yarnstormers' subversive rhetorics as appropriative plunders of paint graffiti culture, rather than principled gleanings from their own feminist, political, and women-centered histories.

Nancy Fraser ("Feminism"), Angela McRobbie, and Peggy Phelan ("Touch" 347) echo Trouton, each describing the erasure of feminist theorizing and cultural contributions as a troubling yet commonplace phenomenon. Hahner and Varda's analysis of yarnbombing contributes to this erasure by wholly screening out from their analysis the forty years of feminist aesthetic traditions that implicitly and explicitly inform textile graffiti art. It is through the authors' exclusion of one culture, countered with a narrow focus on another, that they are able to depict yarnbombing as a "noxious" and "malevolent" appropriation of street graffiti culture (12, 14)—rather than a dialogic holding together of paint graffiti and feminist aesthetic practices.

Broadly stated, this chapter challenges Hahner and Varda's critique of textile graffiti as a cultural appropriation of paint graffiti and resituates it as a dialogic integration of feminist aesthetic strategies and street graffiti practice. Dwight Conquergood defines dialogic performances in opposition to unethical cultural appropriations, describing the aim of dialogic performances as speaking *with*, rather than *about* a culture differing from your own ("Moral Act" 10). In this sense, Conquergood explains, dialogic performances "struggle to bring together different voices, worldviews . . . and beliefs so that they can have a conversation with one another" (9). As a dialogic performance, textile graffiti practitioners draw upon women's art as exemplar of their own historic culture, while placing that home culture in conversation with paint graffiti art. With feminist aesthetic strategies battling against gender exclusions and paint graffiti

historically communicating deep-seated racial and economic inequalities, the contemporary practice of textile graffiti honors and orchestrates these two cultural forms in order to challenge contemporary establishment values. Produced through this integration, yarnbombing puts into conversation the distinct anti-establishment commitments of two historic forms of outsider art; moreover, it offers a versatile medium from which practitioners may express any variety of contemporary issues and political inequalities.

In order to complicate Hahner's reading of textile graffiti and to correct for commonplace erasures of feminist cultural contributions, this chapter presents a recuperative overview of the feminist aesthetic techniques emerging from the Women's Art Movement and places those techniques in relationship to traditional street graffiti. To make this argument, I first detail the history of feminist aesthetics—outlining its interest in: a) ephemeral transformations of non-gallery spaces; b) aesthetic deployments of culturally abject signifiers; and c) the cultivation of intersubjective relations between artist and spectators. After detailing those three themes, I then articulate them onto the history of paint graffiti. I reason that once performance critics are supplied with a more vivid illustration of the historical influences informing textile graffiti art, they will be better positioned to recognize yarnbombing as a dialogic performance, which dramatizes the overlapping—if not commonly recognized—aesthetic commitments and political intentions that align street graffiti and feminist aesthetics.

### **Ephemeral Transformations of Non-Gallery Spaces**

Lucia Ruiz of Yarn Bombing A Coruna, a Spain-based yarnstorming collective, explains “To me, yarn bombing is . . . like designing a [miniature town] square, only a temporal one, ephemeral” (Martinez). As an ephemeral art form, yarnbombing weaves together the histories, aesthetic practices, and critical insights of feminist aesthetics and paint graffiti. Both feminist

aesthetics and paint graffiti emerged in the latter half of the twentieth century in response to elitist systems that had suppressed the expressions of women and people of color. Through their ephemeral transformations of public spaces, feminist and paint graffiti artists sought to highlight and resist the hegemonic institutions responsible for their oppression—women artists engaging land art, performance art, and body art, and graffiti artists creating expressive “tags,” “throw-ups,” and (master-)“pieces.”

Danielle Endres, Samantha Senda-Cook, and Brian Cozen argue that ephemeral installations can interrupt the naturalized practices that constitute institutional spaces. According to the authors, the architecture and visual layout of institutional spaces functions to encourage certain physical practices (127). In turn, the repetition of those practices works to cultivate, naturalize, and maintain an institution's particular values and ideologies (*ibid.*). The authors argue that ephemeral artifacts and installations operate rhetorically, creating an argument by juxtaposition. Through their conspicuous and transient nature, ephemeral artifacts can highlight the constructedness of spaces. Most especially, ephemeral artifacts can reveal the constructedness of institutional spaces so often presumed natural, immutable, or permanent (128).

Yarnstormer Jan ter Heide situates Endres, Senda-Cook, and Cozen's arguments within the context of textile graffiti. According to ter Heide, through textile graffiti's temporary transformation of public spaces, “The landscape changes for us, and . . . for other people also. They look at it differently because there's something there that's strange, that can make them . . . think” (cited in Moore and Prain 86). Reasoned by Endres, Senda-Cook, Cozen, as well as ter Heide, by fracturing an institutional space's illusion of permanence, ephemeral works can encourage new thoughts, novel practices, and differing ideologies (128).



Both feminist artists and paint graffiti practitioners used ephemeral works to fracture the illusion of permanence surrounding the hegemonic institutions that had disenfranchised them. For feminist artists evacuating the gallery system, patriarchy was the hegemonic and naturalized institution that exploited their labor in the private realm and excluded their cultural contributions from the public/commercial realm (Bartky 101; Dalla Costa and James 23; Lippard *Pink* 131; Nochlin). For graffiti artists, it was the classist values and institutionalized racism embedded within capitalism that had suppressed their livelihoods and denigrated their experiences (Denalt; Sanyal). Both paint graffiti and feminist artists creatively employed ephemeral artworks in public spaces to undermine the institutional practices that had denied their subjective expressions. In order to better clarify the communicative functions and political commitments shared by feminist and graffiti artists, in what follows I briefly overview their respective trajectories, and then situate yarnbombing as a dialogic integration of both historical camps' ephemeral installations.

### *Feminist Artists' Ephemeral Transformation of Public Spaces*

Feminists within the Women's Art Movement sought to interrupt the patriarchal axioms of canonical art. Canonical art aimed toward metaphysical esteem by elevating the presumably rational and disinterested mind of the artist, while "transcending" his irrational and unruly body (Korsmeyer "Art and Artists"). Women artists, however, did not regard corporeal transcendence as a viable option (Lippard *Pink* 74). This is because women's historical subjectivities were, and still are, closely aligned with the body (Bell "Women's Work" 352). Polarized as either sexualized objects of male adornment or the physical bearers of children (Sutton 105-7), women's bodies were largely screened out of public, political, and commercial culture. On the rare occasion that women did engage in public life, their bodily presence was fetishized still, positioned either as abject contaminant (Lopez 2), or precious object in need of protection (Wolf

167-8). During the 1960s and 70s, feminist artists began to articulate the double standards surrounding gender and corporeality. Apprehending the devaluation of women's physicality as a larger function of patriarchy, feminist artists began recognizing their bodies as important signifiers of women's experiences, proudly displaying them through their public works.

Women's body art functioned to replace the gallery's static painting with the artist's ephemeral and temporally constrained body (Pelias and Stevenson Shaffer 167). As mortal and therefore temporary, the introduction of the body as an aesthetic object radically challenged the permanence of the canon, its gallery home, and the ostensibly immortal greatness of its male creator. Autonomously engaging their own living and moving bodies as both medium and aesthetic objects, women artists forced their viewers to confront the female body, and consider patriarchy as the unquestioned institution responsible for its cultural abjection. By engaging the ephemeral body as a feminist critique of patriarchal society generally and the gallery system specifically, women artists sought to fracture the naturalized practices of those institutions, and to generate more egalitarian ones. Ana Mendieta, Suzanne Lacy and Leslie Labowitz, and Jenny Holzer and Lady Pink serve as feminist exemplars of these ephemeral transformations.

Peggy Phelan argues that feminist art has been "dedicated to the consequences of the specific forms of . . . violence women experience in a world run by men" ("Survey" 44). Cuban born artist Ana Mendieta used ephemeral land installations to reclaim the womanly body degraded by patriarchy by returning to nature as its antithesis. In her iconic *Siluetas* (Silhouette) Series spanning from 1973-1980, Mendieta created "earth-body" sculptures. Using blood, feathers, flowers, dirt in various ways, Mendieta superimposed outlines of her own body onto the Earth (Frank; Lippard *Pink* 56). Mendieta believed that the (female) body was deeply connected to the abiding glory of the land, but that Western capitalist culture was severing this connection

(Phelan “Survey” 32). Exploiting the constructed relation between nature and female corporeality as “Mother Earth,” Mendieta’s ephemeral installations sought to challenge capitalist patriarchy’s domination over nature, and women by association (Goldberg 109; Reckitt 98).

Similarly, artists Suzanne Lacy and Leslie Labowitz used ephemeral installations to explicitly politicize violence against women. On December 13<sup>th</sup> 1977, following the sensationalized local reporting on a series of rape-related murders, Lacy and Labowitz staged the performance art action called “In Mourning and In Rage” outside of City Hall in Los Angeles. Forming a line comprised of nine seven-foot-tall women veiled in head-to-toe black, they individually stated, “In memory of our sister, we fight back!” while a red-clothed woman wrapped each of them with a crimson scarf. This performance art action was intended to create a temporary “public space for women to come together to share their grief and rage through a ritual” (Labowitz-Starus and Lacy 54). As a play on juxtaposition, its heightened colors, stylized layout, and prepared dictation were meant to highlight the mundane but unrecognized violence enacted daily against women within patriarchal society.

Establishing the written word as her primary form of aesthetic expression, in the 1980s artist Jenny Holzer began wheatpasting brief printed announcements on public spaces in New York City. Referred to as “truisms,” their content ranged from statements like “I am awake in the place where women die” to “Class structure is as artificial as plastic”, “Crime against property is relatively unimportant”, and “Turn soft and lovely anytime you have a chance” (Holzer). Her truisms were meant to confront their viewers in public spaces, both challenging norms and asking them to reflect on the powerful institution of advertising within our consumer culture. Interested in graffiti for its intervention within public spaces, in 1983 Holzer teamed up with the Ecuadorian-born paint graffiti artist called Lady Pink, a.k.a. Sandra Fabara—one of the few

female graffiti artists in a field then (and still) dominated by males (Thompson 157). Working together on the streets of New York, “Pink would paint a scene and Holzer would respond with her signature pronouncements, pithily tender statements, aimed at gleaning the truth of the human condition” (Wagley 132). One of their particularly salient images highlights the violence and bloodshed of war as an extension of patriarchy. Featuring two red silhouette soldiers with machine guns, standing next to a body burning on the asphalt, Holzer’s caption pointedly reads, “Trust visions that don’t feature buckets of blood.”

*Paint Graffiti Artists’ Ephemeral Transformation of Public Spaces*

As feminist artists were engaging ephemeral art works to highlight and resist patriarchy and capitalism as interrelated institutions that oppress women, paint graffiti artists were using expressive “tags”, “throw-ups” and (master-)“pieces” to resist the interlinked institutions suppressing their own communities—namely, capitalism, its socioeconomic disparity and entrenched racism. As white, upper-middle class residents of Manhattan occupied top dollar sky-rise residencies, New York’s poor and working class citizens were confined to the overcrowded and condemned neighborhoods of the less affluent boroughs (Sanyal, par. 5). Wealthy New Yorkers indifferently approached this infrastructural dereliction as an “urban problem,” while blaming the Puerto Rican and Black populations for the economic and social adversities suffered within their communities. Vested with the economic and cultural power to voice their opinions through sanctioned media channels, the affluent blamed impoverished communities for supposedly hindering the financial betterment of an otherwise thriving metropolis (ibid). In so doing, affluent populations presented a story that was consistent with capitalist values and confirming of their own individualistic and competitive ideals.

Unlike their wealthy peers, however, economically marginalized populations were understandably distrustful of capitalist systems and their false promises of meritocracy (Lombard 98; Schacter 49). Their neighborhoods and lived experiences reinforced this distrust, persistently reminding them that, “You can’t have racism without capitalism” (Malcolm X, cited in Stracey 267). Seeing their dilapidated surroundings and absorbing the indifferent responses of businesses, city officials, and wealthy citizens, these communities were keenly aware of economic and political systems that had exploited them in order to service and advantage the white middle and upper class. With no access to or control over official channels of media representation, poor and working class individuals were left without authorized channels to express their own narratives. In response, these disenfranchised citizens—specifically non-white male teenagers—took to street graffiti as both resistant and “resounding voice of the Other” (Sanyal, par. 5).

In his ethnography of street graffiti, Rafael Schacter explains that many graffiti artists understood their work as “an overt tactic to reclaim [and reframe] parts of . . . the metropolis[,] which they believed had been sequestered from them by big business and private property” (50). “What they performed,” Schacter explains, “was in fact a way of communicating this alienation, a way of suggesting other modes of appreciating and accessing urban life, a fresh means of participating in the city and engaging with the environment” (ibid). Schacter comments on the ephemeral nature of paint graffiti, explaining how practitioners did not view the erasure of their art as a negative act. More accurately, Schacter explains, “Many of the artists argued that the life-span of their images was genuinely irrelevant . . . [and that] *ephemerality was seen to be part of the very process of street-art*” (46, emphasis added). By willfully producing an ephemeral art object, practitioners resisted placing their labor within the naturalized system of economic

trade that was responsible for their disenfranchisement in the first place. And while the expensive removal efforts of public officials were meant to wound the graffiti artist and prohibit his production, ironically, the very act of destruction was that which empowered the artist and fueled his art form (ibid.).

*Textile Graffiti: As Dialogic Integration, As Ephemeral Art*

Evidenced by the above overview, 1970s' feminist artists and paint graffiti practitioners were each producing their own ephemeral transformations of public spaces in order to highlight and resist various hegemonic institutions. As women artists were using ephemeral installations to publicize capitalism as an extension of patriarchy, graffiti artists of the same era were linking entrenched racism to capitalism and its class structure. By connecting various forms of oppression, both groups were communicating prototypical expressions of that which Black feminists refer to today as *interlocking systems of oppression*—that is, seeing race, class, and gender as distinctive systems of oppression that are produced through and housed within an overarching structure of domination (see Collins; Lorde).

Kristen Williams helps to shore up textile graffiti as a dialogic integration of paint graffiti and feminist art, reckoning that “yarn-bombing . . . is a valuable model of resisting not only physical violence but also the [various forms of] systemic (and often identity-based) violence [that are] manifested by and resulting from the unequal distribution of material and cultural resources” (311). Spanning the intersections of race, class, and gender, yarnbombing installations can cover a broad range of topics depending upon practitioner motives. Disproportionately effecting women *and* people of color (Chant; Christopher), poverty is one such intersectional issue that yarnstorming installations frequently highlight and seek to combat. Below, I offer three examples of textile graffiti's engagement with poverty activism and awareness.

In Missoula, Montana, Textile graffiti artist Karen Slobod and her partner Arlan Bergoust joined yarnbombing with homeless services in a local project called “Keep Missoula Warm.” The pair adorned street light poles around the city in order to raise community awareness about homelessness, and to link up individuals with Project Homeless Connect—an event connecting people who are homeless with essential services (Cohen). The textile graffiti collective called Yarn Bombing Los Angeles [YBLA] similarly engages textile graffiti to publicize and combat homelessness. Offering free knitting lessons to interested participants, YBLA’s “Community Threads” project explores how visual art and art making can “connect disparate communities, raise awareness to the causes of homelessness, and provide skill building for women overcoming poverty” (Fuentes, par. 4).



**Figure 2.1: Tag on mannequin reads: “There is no point to a globalization that reduces the price of a child’s shoes but costs the father his job.”  
Created by the Craftivist Collective. Creative Commons Attribution.**

And finally the Craftivist Collective projects their critique of poverty, capitalism, and class onto a globalized level. Stitching explicit political messages onto miniature fabric banners and installing them onto outdoor structures, the Craftivist Collective states their allied mission as “expos[ing] the scandal of global poverty and human rights injustices through the power of craft

and public art” (Corbett 6). As representative example, one of their textile tags reads, “There is no point to a globalization that reduces the price of a child’s shoes but costs the father his job” (Corbett 20).

Rhetorical scholars Hahner and Varda argue that yarnbombing appropriates paint graffiti culture by suturing textile graffiti onto white, middle class, femininity. In so doing, Hahner and Varda argue, yarnbombing diminishes the critical race consciousness that characterized historic paint graffiti artists (5). However, when making these arguments, Hahner and Varda focus solely on the spoken discourses surrounding textile graffiti, without giving credit to *the material enactments* of yarnbombing detailed above or elsewhere. Performance scholars distinguish themselves from traditional rhetorical scholars by understanding the dangers of divorcing the body and its material enactments from language alone (Gingrich-Philbrook 1; Pineau 2). Dwight Conquergood underscores this point when reflecting on the multi-layered complexity of cultural performances. Drawing on the work of Victor Turner, Conquergood asserts, “[I]t would be a great mistake for a communication researcher ‘to sit down with a transcript of discourse’ and privilege words over other channels of meaning. Turner emphatically resists valorizing language or studying any of the multiple codes of performed meaning extricated from their complex interactions” (Conquergood “Rethinking” 189). It is in light of this understanding and in relation to the material enactments of yarnstorming that I have detailed above, that critics may be better able to recognize the complexity, reflexivity, and dialogism which textile graffiti enacts.

Evidenced by the above examples, many yarnbombing practitioners echo their historic predecessors, manifesting in their work the critical-aesthetic issues of race, class, and gender. As contemporary feminist artists, textile graffiti works often index how those identity categories intersect with social problems like homelessness and poverty. Having overviewed feminist and



graffiti artists' intersecting interest in ephemeral art as critical maneuver, I now go on to detail their mutual deployments of culturally abject signifiers.

### **Aesthetic Deployments of Culturally Abject Signifiers**

Regarding textile graffiti, Mandy Moore and Leanne Prain reason that, “As soft, touchable graffiti, yarnbombing gives a nod to street art but also comes from a long history of [women’s] textile installations” (22). Moore and Prain continue to explain how “A number of artists . . . play on the many strong associations [knitted and crochet objects] carry. . . . [they] are intrinsically homey[,] . . . . [t]hey were likely made by women, and though a good deal of skill and time was used to make them, *that skill and time has often been undervalued* (23, emphasis added). Like Moore and Prain, many yarnbombers recognize the historical devaluation of craft processes and domestic signifiers, and see textile graffiti as way to revalue those aesthetic forms traditionally cultivated by women. Caitlin Donohue of the *San Francisco Bay Guardian* underscores this point in her article on yarnstorming. Donohue asserts, “You can’t deny that [knitting] . . . and craft in general, has historically been thought of as ‘women's work’ — and has had its worth denigrated and minimized as such” (par. 10). The textile graffiti artist called Zola echoes Donohue, explaining that “I personally thought yarnbombing was a great way to revalorize crafts (mostly done by women), [and] often perceived as lower leveled compared to painting or sculpting (done by men)” (“The Problem” par. 4). And finally, Magda Sayeg, founder of the yarnbombing collective Knitta, believes that the juxtaposition of woven material and urban environment functions to “*question the assumptions of traditional craft*, while adding a previously unused material to the world of street art” (Jakobi, par. 6, emphasis added)

Evidenced by the above accounts, textile graffiti artists and enthusiasts recognize the ways in which domestic artifacts and craft processes are denigrated within patriarchal society.

More specifically, viewers and practitioners interpret those knitted objects as extensions of women's historically trivialized subjectivities, their abjectified bodies, and their cloistered livelihoods within the private realm. Debbie Stoller, co-founder of the third-wave feminist magazine *Bust*, underscores this point, reasoning that "People who look down on knitting . . . [are] being anti-feminist, since they seem to think that only those things that men d[o], or ha[ve] done [are] worthwhile" (27). Rather than dissolve their identity and historical experiences into masculine constructs, textile graffiti artists valorize domestic artifacts and craft processes as women-centered traditions, which are absent from the public sphere. In so doing, they enact aesthetic deployments of culturally abject signifiers—thereby linking themselves, once again, to feminist *and* paint graffiti artists as performative predecessors. In what follows, I briefly overview both groups respective deployments of such signifiers.

#### *Feminist Artists' Deployment of Culturally Abject Signifiers*

A key goal of the Women's Art Movement was to break through the constraints of patriarchy, so as to reform and transform dominant notions surrounding art and its constitution. In connection with this goal, feminist artists sought to deconstruct the myth of the creative genius (Nochlin), for his presumed existence within an exalted metaphysical realm (Korsmeyer "Aesthetic Categories"). Detailed in the previous section, one way that feminist artist pursued this agenda was by publicizing and revalorizing their objectified bodies, reframing them as ephemeral art objects. Another interrelated route was the deployment and transformation of the abject signifiers associated with women's bodies—specifically, internal and domestic imagery, as well as craft processes and their associated textile media.

## Internal Imagery

Elizabeth Grosz points out how patriarchal representations of the female body have been constructed in doubled-manner. The ideal female body—understood to be clean, tidy, and constructed as a lack or absence—is elevated through its abject and shameful opposition as “leaking, uncontrollable, seeping liquid; as formless flow; a disorder that threatens all orders” (Grosz 194). Canonical depictions of the female nude articulate onto the former representation discussed by Grosz; removed from any visceral or interior representation of the body, this idealized imagery aligns with the elevated, metaphysical, and bodily remove associated with the genius artist and his ostensibly unique vision. Feminist artists recognized this fissuring of women into idealized or abject forms, diagnosing it as a detrimental construction produced through the male gaze (Mulvey), and then reinforced within the gallery system. By naturalizing glorified standards of feminine embodiment and debasing others, idealized representations of the female body contribute to myths about and shame surrounding female sexuality, female reproduction, and female anatomy—each of which feminists at the time were working tirelessly to combat (Hammond 94). As insurgent response, feminist artists like Carolee Schneemann, Judy Chicago, and Catherine Elwes used the biological, reproductive, and visceral imagery of the female body to interrupt the idealized and sexualized feminine exterior so often depicted in male paintings.

In her photo lithograph *Red Flag*, Judy Chicago drew on feminine interiority, while combining it with military terminology. Showing her own hand pulling a soiled tampon from her vagina, Chicago’s piece situates women’s “leaking, uncontrollable, [and] seeping” interiority as a weapon for deconstructing the male gaze. Similarly drawing upon menstrual imagery is Catherine Elwes 1979 work titled *Menstruation*. Coinciding with the duration of her menstrual period, this three-day piece was performed in a white box room with a clear glass frontage.

Dressed in all white upon which her menstrual blood was visible, she was asked questions by the audience and answered by writing on the glass wall. This work, Elwes explains, was intended to “‘reconstitute’ menstruation, enabling it to become a ‘metaphorical framework . . . [a] medium for expression of ideas and experiences . . . giving it the authority of cultural form and placing it within an art context’” (cited in Pollock and Parker 32).

In 1975, Carolee Schneemann performed *Interior Scroll* in East Hampton, Long Island, and at the Telluride Film Festival in Colorado. Standing naked in front of her audience, Schneemann extracted a scroll from inside of her vagina and then read aloud the feminist texts inscribed upon it. Schneemann writes: “I thought of the vagina in many ways—physically, conceptually: as a sculptural form, an architectural referent, the sources of sacred knowledge, ecstasy, birth passage, transformation” (cited in Ankori 143). Producing a “sacred” scroll from her abject feminine interior, Schneemann transmogrified the male artist’s metaphysical genius, reframing her own debased internal cavities as “a site of carnal *and* spiritual potency” (ibid., emphasis added). Evidenced by the above, Schneemann, Chicago, and Elwes were among many feminist artists who sought to reclaim the abject signifiers of female embodiment, reconstructing them as a credible means from which to create and understand art.

#### Craft Processes and Domestic Imagery

In addition to using the visceral and internal imagery associated with the debased female body, feminist artists have also deployed the domestic imagery and craft processes that are associated with women’s history, yet excluded from canonical art. Carolyn Korsmeyer explains how the category of fine art is constituted through singling out of the aesthetic values of art works. In this sense, fine art or “high art” is appreciated for “its beauty or other aesthetic virtues [and] is distinct from the sorts of arts that produce items for practical use” (“Art and Artists” par.

7). According to Korsmeyer, the latter category came to be designated as lowly “crafts,” which were “considered decidedly less of an original achievement than the creation of a work of fine art” (ibid.)

The significance of the fine art-craft distinction is substantial to the assessment of women’s aesthetic production. Historically, women have been prolific makers of domestic artifacts—quilts, doilies, table spreads, jewelry, clothing, and elaborate meals to name a few; however, because these domestic artifacts had a functional quality embedded within them, they were removed from the history of art proper. For women throughout history—whose creative efforts were likely directed to the production of domestic wares—the degradation of domestic craft meant scant representation within the gallery, coupled with a commercial-public trivialization of their skilful labor in the home (ibid.). Mary Celeste Kearny underscores this point. “Largely utilitarian in nature” Kearny explains, “the domestic arts of girls and women have long been disparaged as ‘handicrafts,’ products of manual household chores that allegedly do not require much intellect, reflection, or creativity to produce, and thus do not hold the same cultural status as the non-utilitarian artistic objects created by wealthy [and/or male] individuals” (25). In response to the aesthetic and public devaluation of women’s domestic arts and interrelated domestic labor, artists like Miriam Schapiro, Faith Ringgold, Judy Chicago, and Faith Wilding revered and incorporated women’s craft processes and associated domestic imagery within their art works.

In the early 1970s, Miriam Schapiro and students at the California Institute for the Arts began exploring vernacular traditions of women’s art making across a broad range of cultures (Reckitt 74). Through their explorations, these women incorporated in their art the production patterns of weaving, piecing, quilting, and embroidery, as a means to critique the presumed

purity of fine art's geometric abstraction (ibid.). Collaging acrylic painting with patchwork fabric, Schapiro and her students termed these works *femmege*, while asking their viewers, "How will the authorities be convinced that what they consider low art is worth representing in history? . . . . The answer . . . lie in . . . . women themselves regard[ing] their own past with fresh insight" (Schapiro and Meyer 68-9). Using women's debased culture as a framework for *femmege*, Schapiro worked to imbue women's "craft" with the rigor and respect of fine art, despite its traditional production for utilitarian purposes.

Moving alongside Miriam Schapiro was Faith Ringgold, an African American artist best known for her detailed story quilts chronicling Black life in Harlem. Ringgold's mother taught her African American quilt making—a tradition passed down from Faith's great-grandmother, a former slave. For these reasons as well as the rich historical record of women's textile work, Ringgold understands quilting as a visual form of woman's story-telling traditions (Millman 383). In her 1983 quilt *Whose Afraid of Aunt Jemima?*, Ringgold redeploys the domestic icon—transforming her from her original stereotypical context as a Black 'mammy' into a successful restaurateur. The complexity of the piece is threefold: re-appropriating Jemima as minstrel show character produced by racist white culture; transforming her into a self-sufficient, successful, and other-nourishing career woman; and revalorizing the fiber arts as a domestic and woman-centered medium.

Judy Chicago, Miriam Schapiro, and Faith Wilding's 1972 collaborative installation called *Womanhouse* serves as a final example of feminist artists' incorporation of women's devalued craft processes and associated domestic imagery. In collaboration with twenty-one female young artists, Schapiro, Chicago, and Wilding transformed a condemned home in Los Angeles, California into a six-week environmental performance installation. Reflecting on the

project, art critic Lucy Lippard recalls how “the project included a dollhouse room, a menstruation bathroom, a bridal staircase, a nude wo[-]mannequin emerging from a (linen) closet, a pink kitchen with fried egg-breast decor, and an elaborate bedroom in which a seated woman perpetually made herself up and brushed her hair” (*From the Center* 57). Additionally, one of the *Womanhouse* rooms included a dome-shaped, fiber art installation called *Crochet Environment*, created by Faith Wilding. Regarding the installation, Wilding wrote: “[O]ur female ancestors first built themselves and their families round-shaped shelters. These were protective environments, often woven out of grasses, branches or weeds. I think of my environment as linked in form and feeling with those primitive womb-shelters” (Wilding 11). Evidenced by the examples above, Schapiro, Ringgold, Chicago, and Wilding were among many feminist artists who sought to reclaim women’s devalued craft processes and associated domestic imagery—restoring them from patriarchal debasement and reviving them as credible means from which to create art.

#### *Paint Graffiti Artists’ Deployment of Culturally Abject Signifiers*

At the same time that feminist artists’ were deploying imagery attached to their culturally devalued bodies and the associated domestic realm, graffiti artists were engaging in similar strategies—inscribing their work with complex visual signifiers attached to their own debased subjectivities and forsaken urban communities. According to famous New York graffiti writer, Phase II, graffiti is best understood as “[urban] youth’s . . . response towards a society which showed no love for them” (cited in Werwath, par. 11). Dwight Conquergood positions street graffiti in relationship to the uncaring society which Phase II refers, situating the expressive art as a communicative mechanism that protects disenfranchised groups by creating a barrier between them and a hostile outside world (“Homeboys” 26-7). This protection, Conquergood

reasons, is garnered through densely coded visual signifiers, which articulate onto the specific values, shibboleths, and practices of a particular urban community or crew (ibid). Elaborating further on this point, Conquergood explains how,

[G]raffiti is inscrutable to outsiders because it draws on an elaborate system of underground symbols, icons, and logos. Middle class citizens driving through the so-called ‘inner city’ look at a graffiti-covered wall as meaningless gibberish and a sign of social disorder, whereas the local homeboys look at the same graffiti mural and appreciate the complex meanings and messages it artfully conveys. (“Homeboys” 27)

Evidenced by Conquergood and similar to feminist artists, street graffiti writers in the 1970s drew upon the personal, vernacular, and culturally abject signifiers attached to their devalued communities and subjectivities. In so doing, both feminist artist and graffiti writers sought to express and empower themselves, while “reppin’” and revalorizing their home and historic cultures. While feminist artists worked to restore the integrity of their bodies and the undervalued domestic, street graffiti artists asserted their own identities and reclaimed their (neighbor)’hoods—offering visual perspectives on the social world in which they dwelled. In so doing, graffiti artists constituted a sense of inclusion within their communities “by writing on its wall[s]” and “throw[ing] up their love” (Conquergood “Homeboys” 26).

*Textile Graffiti: A Dialogic Integration of Abject Signifiers and Outsider Art*

Enactments of textile graffiti position the art form between the cultures, histories, and politics of feminist and paint graffiti art. More specifically, various textile graffiti installations evidence both historic camps’ interest in the politicization and public display of marginalized bodies, marginalized subjectivities, and marginalized communities. Various yarnstorming installations deploy signifiers associated with women’s culturally abject bodies. For example,



The Big Breast International Yarnbombing Event turns the rounded tops of street poles into knit and crochet breasts (“Big Breast”). This action serves to spread awareness of breast cancer research and prevention, while imbuing the masculine ethos of the public sphere with explicitly feminine symbology. Other textile graffiti similarly feminize a masculine polis by attaching textile-fabricated vulvas onto male figure memorial statues (Zutter). In so doing, practitioners highlight the abundance of public statues memorializing men, and the drastic underrepresentation of those that honor women (Shanem).



**Figure 2.2: Artist Olek poses by her textile installation. Quoting Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., the tag reads “Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.” London. Courtesy of Olek.**

In addition to their consistent use of the fiber arts—a medium that is linked to women’s abject bodies and their historical association with the undervalued domestic—various textile graffiti artists layer onto those fiber mediums the historical and contemporary signifiers associated with bodies of color generally and women of color specifically. For example, in conjunction with Anti-Slavery International, textile graffiti artist Agata Oleksiak used her signature pink and purple threads to adorn a building façade in London with a four-panel crochet piece. Rendering the famous words of Civil Rights and peaceful protest activist Dr. Martin

Luther King Jr., the installation reads, “Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere” (Olek). Summarizing her piece, Olek argues, “Life and art are inseparable” (ibid.). In so doing, she underscores feminist *and* graffiti artists’ intense politicization of their personal, everyday, and historical lives.

In a similar gesture of racial solidarity, during January of 2015 Yarn Bombing Los Angeles [YBLA] displayed the phrase “Black Lives Matters” in colorful, hand knit letters on the fence outside the Craft and Folk Art Museum (T. Anderson). Surfacing in the wake of Eric Garner, Michael Brown, and Tamir Rice’s unnecessary deaths at the hands of United States police officers, “Black Lives Matter” is a protest phrase associated with an emergent movement against police brutality and their interrelated racial profiling. YBLA describes their actions as a way of “supporting the national movement against police brutality and the killings of unarmed African Americans” (ibid).



**Figure 2.3: Tag reads “Black Lives Matter.” Los Angeles.  
Courtesy of Yarn Bombing Los Angeles.**

A final example of raced and gendered signifiers intersecting is Montreal's yarnstorming collective called Maille à Part, and their collaboration with the March for Missing and Murdered Native Women in Canada. Formed in response to the Canadian governments' negligent investigations of murdered, missing, and prostituted Aboriginal girls and women (Amnesty International), Maille à Part honors the memory of these women and girls through public yarnbombs with victim's names stitched onto them. Maille à Part describes their yarnbombs as a gesture of "solidarity with Aboriginal Peoples of Canada and elsewhere who fight for self-determination" and a symbolic effort to "break[. . .] the racism barrier with . . . Settlers and people of colour" (Zola "Solidarity").

The above examples evidence the ways in which yarnbombing installations can weave two historic worldviews into a tense and contemporary exchange. Drawing from Mikhail Bakhtin's dialogical theory, textile graffiti can be appreciated as an active and hybridized medium of expression. According to Bakhtin, hybridization is "a mixture of two social languages [occurring] within the limits of a single utterance" (358). This single utterance then functions as "an encounter . . . between two different . . . consciousnesses, [which are] separated from one another by . . . social differentiation" (ibid). Textile graffiti can be understood as dialogic and hybridized "utterance," by recognizing the fiber arts and paint graffiti as distinct "social languages," emerging from women and bodies of color as "two different consciousnesses [that are] separated by social differentiation." Through their juxtaposition of knitting and street graffiti, textile graffiti practitioners work to create a *single utterance*, which seeks to unmask patriarchy and racism as authoritative discourses.

According to Homi Bhabha, Bakhtin's notion of intentional hybridity can help to reveal "the ambivalence at the source of traditional discourses of authority" (112). It is through

conscious contrast, Bhabha argues, that an authoritative discourse can lose its “univocal grip on meaning . . . . enabling the critic to chart complex movements of disarming alterity” (cited in Ackerman 13). Detailed throughout the essay, yarnstorming practitioners recognize patriarchy as the authoritative discourse that devalues knitting as women’s work, and racism as the authoritative discourse that degrades paint graffiti as vandalism. By intentionally contrasting the “outlaw and masculine nature of graffiti” with the ostensibly “feminine . . . [and conservative] nature of knitting” (Knitta cited in Valis, par. 10), yarnstorming practitioners enact Bakhtin’s notion of intentional hybridity and encourage audience members to “rethink . . . [the discourses surrounding] knitting/crochet *and* street art” (Zola “The Problem,” web log comment).

Yarn Bombing Los Angeles and Magda Sayeg help to contextualize Bhabha’s notion of “disarming alterity” within the art of yarnstorming. For YBLA, “Yarn bombing . . . recontextualiz[es] . . . knitting *and* graffiti, both of which are marginalized creative endeavors that fall outside ‘high art’” (“What is YBLA?”). On her end, Sayeg eloquently underscores Bakhtin’s intentional hybridity, explaining that at its core yarnbombing, is, quite simply, “turning knitting on the head and . . . turning graffiti on the head” (“Guerilla Knitter”).

Evidenced by the above examples, many yarnbombing practitioners echo their historic predecessors, deploying culturally abject signifiers in their aesthetic works. As contemporary feminist artists, textile graffiti works often index how those signifiers intersect with critical issues like race and gender relations. Having overviewed feminist and graffiti artists’ mutual deployments of culturally abject signifiers, I now go on to detail their shared cultivation of intersubjective relations between artist and spectators.

## Performative and Intersubjective Relations Between Artist and Spectator

The cultivation of performative relations is a final theme linking feminist and paint graffiti art. Stated differently, both feminist and graffiti art objects are constituted through the provocative, destabilizing, and intersubjective effects they have on their viewers. Throughout the essay I have detailed various approaches and techniques used by such artists to confront or awaken their viewers; however, this final section looks to movement and touch as salient performative features found in graffiti and feminist art.

### *Movement*

Art critic Rosalind Krauss approaches graffiti as a way to “interpret[. . .] the meaning of action painting” (118). *Action painting* emerged in the wake of World War II, as artists of that time were faced with the “incoherence and incomprehensibility of massive death, a story in which *the authenticity of images*, the risks and responsibilities of seeing, and the ethics of knowledge play[ed] an immense part” (Phelan “Survey” 25, emphasis added). Stated differently, war fallout functioned to collapse naiveties surrounding human nature and authority figures, and impelled artists to suspend their aesthetic interests in figuration and faithful representation. Born through this suspension was the focus toward and theorizing of the physical, gestural, and performative *action* of painting itself. In his 1952 essay “The American Action Painters” Rosenberg summarizes the critical consequences of this axiomatic shift toward movement, explaining how “Criticism must [now] begin by recognizing in the painting the assumptions inherent in its mode of creation. *Since the painter has become an actor, the spectator has to think in a vocabulary of action*: its inception, duration, direction—psychic state, concentration and realization of the will, passivity, alert, waiting” (23, emphasis added). Action painting moved beyond the physical art object and toward understanding painting as a physical performance in

and of itself. In so doing, it helped to create “a new language, both visual and conceptual, for painting” and to “inaugurate[. . .] a different set of possibilities for post-war art practices and discourse” (Phelan “Survey” 25).

Krauss reasons that, similar to action painting, graffiti is performative in that “it suspend[s] representation in favor of action” (ibid.). Rafael Schacter corroborates the physical and active nature of graffiti production, arguing that its powerful efficacy is created through the intensity of its very production. . . . Jumping over walls, scrambling up drain-pipes, working side-by-side with speeding commuter trains . . . . the[se] artists [are] . . . constantly interacting with the city in a highly physical, highly material way. . . . [N]ot only must the artists reach perilously inaccessible sites, from train tracks and railway bridges to central city locations, but once there they must spend hours perfecting their work, whilst constantly ready to sprint from the authorities. (41)

Social anthropologist Alfred Gell helps bridge the physicality of graffiti to its intersubjective effects. Gell reasons that, “Any object that one encounters in the world” impels the viewer to mentally “play out . . . [its] origin-stor[y] . . . reconstructing . . . [its] histor[y] as a sequence of actions performed by another agent” (67). In other words, the intensity and bodily action involved in graffiti’s initial production is extended and re-experienced by the audience in its visual reception. In this way, Krauss argues, the defiant physicality involved in graffiti production pierces its viewer (118). Without asking permission, graffiti interrupts its viewer’s individuated experience and replaces it with an intersubjective one—that is, one that fuses the artist producing and the audience member experiencing their work. Philosopher Emmanuel Levinas speaks on the radical nature of the intersubjective encounter, explaining how “The Other

becomes my neighbour . . . and in so doing recalls my responsibility, and calls me into question” (83). Refusing erasure and subverting the status quo, the graffiti artist cultivates an intersubjective experience with his viewer by crossing psychic and environmental boundaries.

Like graffiti artists, feminist artists have also deployed striking and permission-less physical actions as a form of expression and societal critique. For instance, in Valie Export’s *Genital Panic*, the artist entered a Munich sex cinema wearing crotch-less trousers, a leather jacket, and a machine gun slung over her shoulder. Roaming the theatre rows, her exposed genitalia level with audience faces, Export announced that a “real woman” was present and freely available to them. Laurie Anderson’s *Fully Automated Nikon* and Adrian Piper’s *Catalysis* series are similarly intrusive; by physically and visually interrupting a public individual’s sense of comfort, safety, and control, these aggressive and action-based performances were meant to empower their performers, and enlighten their audiences—flooding them with recognition of the artist as a devalued, objectified, and repressed Other. While shocking and formidable techniques for highlighting patriarchy’s physical and representational violence, these performances had to *repeat* the visual and physical practices of patriarchal cruelty in order to underscore them. Running alongside these repetitions, as a different strategy of approach, there also were feminist artists working to counter patriarchal logics, manipulating our precarious sense of sight while introducing vulnerable and receptive offerings of touch.

### *Touch*

As action painters venerated the physicality of images, believing it could cultivate an intersubjective encounter, feminists have criticized vision for its aggressive and mechanizing functions. Luce Irigaray, for example, argues that sight distances the subject away from the gazed-upon object, creating spaces and objects that can be seen, measured, bounded, and

conquered (cited in Young 203). Elizabeth Bell echoes Irigaray, arguing that “The importance of sight . . . to measure, to gauge, and to know the world . . . renders the other senses ‘second class’ and detaches the knower from the object of study” (*Theories* 22). Evidenced by Irigaray, Bell, and Laura Mulvey’s theory of the gaze, feminists have approached vision as a mechanistic sense that engenders patriarchal relations of dominance. In response, feminists and women have often favored the sensuousness and relational aspects of touch. Sociologist Martina Löw underscores this point through her reading of Jean-Claude Kauffman’s study of nude beach practices. According to Löw, while men reported vision as their primary sense of other-oriented perception, women were more likely to *sense* external physical relations with and throughout their tactile bodies (123). Jennifer Fischer corroborates Löw’s assessment, situating “tactilism” as a quality that can de-center the cultural authority of sight, by redistributing the sense experience throughout the entire body (167).

In addition to subverting vision as dominant epistemological sense, feminists have also appreciated touch for the relational experience it inevitably produces. By its very nature, Marion Iris Young argues, touch “immerses the subject in fluid continuity with the object . . . blurring the border between self and the other” (204). Judith Butler similarly comments on the intersubjective effect of touch. “Let’s face it,” Butler reasons, “We’re undone by each other. . . . by the touch . . . by the prospect of the touch, by the memory of the feel” (*Undoing Gender* 19).

Approaching women’s art as an expression of female subjectivity, Peggy Phelan argues that feminist artists have cultivated a unique relationship to touch (“Touch” 347). Women’s life experiences and social positioning are marked by the physical and cultural contours of touching and being touched: sexualized and objectified within patriarchal society, women are touched more often and on more parts of their bodies than men (Bartky 98); socially overdetermined as



caregivers to children and elders (Oliker), women are attentive to the affective comforts incited by caring touch. By virtue of their life experiences, women are sensitive to the ethics of touch—its powers, pleasures, and potential traumas. Fluent with these contours, feminist artists like Eva Hesse, Mierle Laderman Ukeles, and Yoko Ono have offered up tactility a receptive and vulnerable gesture that is capable of undermining traditional aesthetic tenets and cultivating intersubjective relations between artists and audience members.

Artist Mierle Laderman Ukeles used the power of touch to link class and gender to the maintenance activities of daily life. In her *Touch Sanitation* project, Ukeles traveled around New York City for eleven months—the time it took to meet and work alongside each of the city’s 8,500 sanitation workers. Seeking to interrupt the public degradation of sanitary workers, the project required Ukeles shake hands with each worker, as a “maintenance ritual act celebrating daily survival” and “in order to represent a ‘healing vision’ and ‘share’ in the housekeeping of the city” (Ukeles cited Reckitt 128). Meticulously documenting the laborers’ “private stories, fears, castigations, and public humiliations” (Krug, par. 7), Ukeles told the workers, “I’m not here to watch you, to study you, to analyze you, to judge you. I’m here to be with you: all the shifts, all the seasons, to walk out the whole City with you” (Brooklyn Museum). Ukeles used touch to highlight the unrecognized and undervalued maintenance tasks carried out regularly by women and classed populations, reasoning that without this labor, society would fall apart. By literally connecting with New York’s thousands of sanitary workers, *Touch Sanitation* highlights touch *and* maintenance labor as a healing, necessary, and restorative social gestures.

The sculptural works of Eva Hesse evidence the human urge to touch and experience that which is delicate. Playing serial repetitions and impersonal gridded forms against softened and tactile materials like rubber, latex, papier-mâché, and wax, Hesse’s oeuvre cultivated a tension

between the emotional excesses of Abstract Expressionism and the sterile quality of Minimalist art. Anne Swartz underscores the relational quality of Hesse's softened gestural forms, describing her works as "evocative . . . [they] invade the viewer's experience, communicating the artist's inner sensibilities through tactility, sensuality, and content" (37). Hesse's 1967 piece *Accession II* exemplifies the audience's relational call to touch. A galvanized steel box with thirty thousand perforations, through which Hesse hand-threaded rubber tubing, Lucy Lippard describes *Accession II* as a "softly bristling interior hidden by a 'woven' or relatively peaceful exterior" (*Hesse* 103). During its 1969 exhibitions at the Milwaukee Art Centre and the Chicago Museum of Contemporary Art, audience members ignored museum protocol and destroyed the box by climbing inside of it (*ibid*). Following her painstaking hand re-fabrication of *Accession II*, in a 1970 interview with Cindy Nemser, Hesse spoke on the engaging yet perplexing quality of her sensuous works: "I'm not asking everyone to [do it]," Hesse explained "but every time I've been in my place where I've seen my work, there were hands on it" (11). Exemplified by *Accession II*, Hesse's oeuvre illustrates the provocative power of the human call to touch, as well as the selfish and sometimes destructive willingness to engage it.

Yoko Ono's *Cut Piece* illustrates the power of touch and its coextensive relationship to sacrifice, passivity, aggression, intimacy, and public ritual (Phelan "Touch" 350). Seemingly uncomplicated, the performance begins with Ono seated passively and fully clothed on a stage. Audience members are invited to come up, one at a time, and cut pieces away from Ono's garments with a pair of scissors. Kathy O'Dell points out how this performance premise replicates the "stereotypically male practices of voyeurism . . . [and the] stereotypically female states of passivity" (53). The power of *Cut Piece*, however, extends beyond its initial set-up, lying more specifically in the range of audience responses it produces—that is, in the

potentialities of touch. Spanning across *Cut Piece*'s forty-two year history, audience members have been variously gentle, meditative, aggressive, and domineering in their handling of Ono. Presented in Paris of 2003 as a post-9/11 offering for world peace, this most recent performance of *Cut Piece* sharply contrasts with the “violent misogyny and racism” displayed by the 1965 cutters of Carnegie Hall. Captured by documentarians Albert and David Maysles and described by Peggy Phelan, the latter performance “dramatizes the politics of sexual and racial difference at the site of touch . . . expos[ing] the aggression that marks sexual difference and the laborious efforts women make not to be undone by it” (Phelan “Touch” 352, 353). As a showcase of physical intimacy, *Cut Piece* highlights the variously compassionate and destructive drives that are materially, emotionally, and politically catalyzed at the touch and vulnerabilities of the Other.

Claire Pajaczkowska argues that “[W]e intuit the meaning of enveloping, draping, covering and clothing as gestures of touching, possessing, and protecting” (223). Through wrapping, Pajaczkowska continues, we “intuit the imbrication and interplay between touch and sight” (ibid.) Evidenced by the above, there were many feminist artists who engaged touch, entwined and alongside vision, as a metaphor for women’s subjectivity, as a mirror to society’s pleasures, and as a technique for cultivating intersubjective relations. Similar to the above artists, yarnstorming practitioners recognize the visual *and* physical lure of their tactile works. “People . . . love it,” one textile graffiti artist explains. “[They] realize it’s flexible, that is moves. . . . [so] they touch it. . . It’s something engaging, very human. But it’s not only children; grown ups do the same thing” (Martinez). Like Ukeles, Hesse, and Ono as feminist artists preceding them, yarnstorming practitioners recognize the lure of tactile materials and the intersubjective power of the human call to touch.

*Dialoguing Touch, Vision, and Movement: Textile Graffiti as Re-Articulation of Spaces and Subjectivities*

Magda Sayeg positions yarnbombing as a respectful union of hard-hitting graffiti and the effeminate arts. Sayeg asserts,

I love graffiti and what's happening with street art and street culture. . . [It's] a movement that . . . needs to be recognized as something that's legitimate. We [yarnbombers] didn't have a spray can, we had knitting. And so . . . it's not as "tough" [as traditional graffiti] . . . [because] it's eas[ier] to take off . . . but there are some pretty daring things that I've seen out there with knit graffiti . . . [and so] I . . . think [yarnbombing] fits in very well into that [graffiti] world. (Gonzales)

Highlighted through Sayeg's statement, yarnstormers draw upon and combine the physicality, visuality, and daring assertiveness of the action painters and graffiti writers with the softened, tactile, and vulnerable quality of women's needlecraft. Yarnstormers approach these mixed-method techniques as aesthetic expressions of their subjectivities, which can pierce or provoke viewers into new thoughts and surprising actions. Various practitioners underscore this point, explaining how the visual placement of a tactile knit within an urban environment "catches people off guard" (Gonzales). In so doing, the textile tag "re-contextualizes an urban environment . . . mak[ing] people think about their [neighbors and] surroundings in a different way" (Foster). Sharon Ellam believes that yarnbombing "seeps into the cracks of our consciousness and repels [our] defenses . . . encouraging people to reflect upon these subjects in their own space and time." Combining the physical action, striking visions, and sensuous touch of paint graffiti and feminist artists, yarnbombing helps to produce altered expressions of the urban city and the people who reside within it.

In addition to altering people's vision of public space, yarnstormers also wish to alter public perceptions of contemporary women (Goggin). Textile graffiti artists and enthusiasts frequently approach yarnbombing as a woman's intervention into the "the male-dominated world of street art" (Sayeg cited in Derringer, par. 11; Hemmons, par. 4; Ward, par. 6; Wollan, par. 4), as well as a woman's intervention into the male-dominated and "masculine ethos" of the public sphere (Gonzales; Liraz 10; "The Society" par. 2). A group of yarnbombers at the University of Chester underscore this later point, arguing that "Encapsulated within [public] knitting is the legacy of feminist reclamation and domestication of (masculine) public space" ("Making Feminism" par. 5).

Given these spatial and gendered interventions, as well as the political nature of many textile tags, the practice of yarnbombing can be appreciated as employing the conventional attributes of gender—signified by knitting and its delicate artifacts—in order to justify a feminist opposition toward the aggressive, impersonal, and cutthroat politics of contemporary public and commercial life. At the same time, however, yarnbombing undermines this performance of traditional femininity, by expressing the confidence, physicality, and assertiveness of street graffiti culture. Denise Litchfield underscores this point, defining yarnbombing or "Guerilla knitting" as, "[employing] knitting as a medium to make your statement [while] . . . us[ing] the urban Environment to your advantage; which is what Guerilla's did, they were *masters of their own environment*" (emphasis added). Combining the mastery or dominance of physical spaces and physical objects that are so often ascribed to masculine culture, with and the vulnerable or tactile quality of knitting that is so often associated with feminine culture, textile graffiti combines and confounds the two, producing novel aesthetic and performance forms.

It is through this mixture of conventionally feminine elements with less familiar and more discordant ways of articulating the female gender, that textile graffiti asserts a more complex and non-binary image of gendered subjectivity. In a time where most legal barriers prohibiting women's full participation in public and political life have been lifted, but perceptual barriers still remain, re-mixtures of gender expression can be especially useful (Abrams 857, 877). Textile graffiti contributes that re-articulation by altering gendered spaces and the performances that constitute them.

### **Conclusion**

Both paint graffiti and the Women's Art Movement emerged during the late 1960s and early 1970s in New York City. During this time, Pamela Dennalt notes, "The social cultural and political ground was undergoing a rapid transformation" ("Urban Expression"). Dennalt lists the Women's Rights Movement, "the growth of technology, the changing job front, the changing infrastructure of federal funding and housing" as some of the many social, political, and economic re-designations occurring within this tumultuous time (ibid). Given feminist and paint graffiti art's co-temporal cultural emergence, it is unsurprising that they share similar characteristics, namely: a) ephemeral transformations of non-gallery spaces; b) aesthetic deployments of culturally abject signifiers; and c) the cultivation of performative, intersubjective relations between artist and spectator.

In this essay, I have provided an overview of those three shared features, and also offered a recuperative overview of the Women's Art Movement. I have done so for three reasons: (1) to honor women's cultural and historical endowments that are so frequently omitted from traditional historical narratives. Fostered through this recuperative work, audience members and performance critics are better able (2) to recognize the legitimate feminist/political ethos

embedded within textile graffiti art and reflective of its feminist art predecessors of the 1960s and 70s, and (3) to complicate Hahner and Varda's reading of textile graffiti as an appropriative plunder of street graffiti culture.

Theatre practitioner Craig Latrell argues that scholarly analyses of cultural and aesthetic exchanges increasingly “foreground and perpetuate images of inequality and victimization” (45). Such analyses, Latrell continues, “center[. . .] on the perceived politics of the phenomenon to the near exclusion of any other considerations” (45). Reasoned by Latrell, when cultural critics continually and simplistically position the aesthetic introduction of external cultural elements as acts of “looting, plunder, or pillage,” they may inadvertently reduce the intricacies of such interactions to a “simple victim-victimizer narrative . . . [that can] miss the reciprocal essence of these relationships” (54). Leslie Hahner and Scott Varda's depiction of textile graffiti as “malevolent”, “noxious”, and ideological appropriation of street graffiti culture corroborates the phenomenon described by Latrell. In order to position yarnbombing as appropriation or pilfering of paint graffiti culture, Hahner and Varda screen out feminist art and women's historical culture as equally salient inspirations for many yarnstorming practitioners. In so doing, Hahner and Varda not only miss key feminist and resistant elements of textile graffiti, but also, they disregard the overlapping political and aesthetic commitments that have always aligned street graffiti and feminist art. By presenting a detailed account of these overlapping characteristics and highlighting their presence within the contemporary practice of textile graffiti art, this chapter better positions critics to recognize the complexity, reflexivity, and dialogism that many yarnbombing practitioners enact.

## CHAPTER 3

### TEXTILE GRAFFITI ARTISTS AS A COUNTERPUBLIC OF CAREGIVERS

In chapter one I provided an overview of the historical relationship that links women-as-caregivers, as well as the act of knitting, to private sphere relations of nurturance and communal comfort. In this chapter, I present textile graffiti as a symbolic response to political policies that discontinue social welfare, as well as mainstream public ideologies that devalue communal relations of care. More specifically, I argue that textile graffiti artists engage the cultural performance of yarnbombing in order to constitute a counterpublic of resistance.

From 1935 to 1970, collective American values supported care work practices. Political policies reflected those values by subsidizing family maintenance through social welfare programs, which absorbed many of the costs and responsibilities associated with domestic caregiving practices (Abramowitz 34). For the past forty years, however—in response to the economic crisis of the 1970s—neoliberalism has functioned as a larger political strategy set to increase market production by dismantling the welfare state. Feminist political economists recognize women’s socially overdetermined status as care workers and caregivers and underscore the disproportionately gendered effects of neoliberal attacks on social welfare services (Oliker; Chant; Fraser and Gordon). Mimi Abramowitz summarizes these gendered effects, explaining that “Employed or not, women are the majority of the nation’s sixty-seven million informal caregivers, and they pick up the slack when [social and welfare] services disappear” (34). Regarding neoliberal austerity measures, Eva Feder Kittay argues that such operations can only exist through blatant ideological denials of human frailty and relational dependence (539). Recognizing these human qualities as ontological rather than negotiable, Kittay argues that there is “moral, social, and political importance . . . [in] relationships of



dependency” and care (Kittay 529). As an extension of Kittay’s reasoning, when government policies deny and devalue relational care as a public good, collective society loses out on its moral, social, and political dimensions.

Judith Butler corroborates Kittay’s line of thinking, arguing that the neoliberal policies and ideologies undergirding advanced capitalism have devastated our “collective, conceptual . . . orientation toward ‘public goods’” (“Question”). Butler is concerned—not only with the replacement of interdependent relations, social welfare, and goodwill by a “new moralization” of competitive individualism, productivity, efficiency, and profitability—but also by the mainstream ridicule and charges of naivety that are increasingly leveled against citizen attempts to resist or critique those neoliberal logics (ibid.). Evidenced by the above, the activities, epistemologies, and value systems associated with care and dependency work are increasingly absent and devalued within mainstream publics and political life. Despite this broader absence, millions of women-as-caregivers work tireless and thankless second shifts—laboring to preserve these relational values and skill sets in the face of financial, emotional, and physical burdens, and despite fewer and fewer external supports (Chant).

In this chapter, I situate yarnbombers as feminist activists responding to this dearth of public care, and its gendered effects. More specifically, I present textile graffiti artists as a counterpublic of caregivers who deploy visual, medium-based, and feminist rhetorical strategies in order to symbolically forward their marginalized relational values. This argument proceeds in three sections. In the first section I overview the concept of counterpublics and its relationship to cultural performances and/as yarnbombing. In the second section I argue that our built environment contributes to alienating social conditions by promoting isolation and denying human interdependence. More specifically, I argue that textile graffiti artists work to break the

frame of modernist architecture—wielding medium and content-based appeals to tradition so as to interrupt the alienating social instructions that are communicated through modern built environments. Finally, in the third section of this chapter, I detail women activists’ historical efforts to mitigate impoverished social conditions, looking specifically at the “moral mother” as potent and reoccurring rhetorical trope. Projecting those historical strategies onto contemporary public life, I detail how yarnstormers invoke the “moral mother” trope through the medium and content of their work. Positioning yarnstorming as an enactment of feminist rhetorical subversion, I argue that textile graffiti practitioners mimic and performatively rework the “moral mother” trope—leveraging her communal and persuasive characteristics, while also defying and reworking her patriarchal imperatives.

### **Counterpublics and Cultural Performances**

First conceptualized by feminist rhetorical scholar Nancy Fraser, counterpublics function inventively as “parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counterdiscourses” which contest the exclusionary values, beliefs, and practices that are held by a wider, dominant public (“Rethinking” 67). For Robert Asen, counterpublics serve to contest hegemonic values and to “articulate [. . .] alternatives to [those] wider publics that exclude the interests of potential participants” (425). Within the context of contemporary public, political, and economic life, the needs and values of caregivers are marginalized and excluded. As a counterpublic existing outside of the formalized discourses of public sphere communication, I argue that women-as-caregivers use the cultural performance of textile graffiti as a creative and symbolic means to forward their relational values and their interrelated political sentiments.

According to Dwight Conquergood, cultural performances often serve as vehicles for the inventive political discourses that constitute counterpublics as inclusive arenas for marginalized groups (“Rethinking” 189). Conquergood explains that “[F]or . . . marginalized people denied access to . . . ‘public’ forums, cultural performance becomes the venue for ‘public discussion’ of vital issues [that are] central to their communities” (ibid.). Unlike the formalized and spoken discourses that characterize exclusionary public sphere communication, the discourse of a cultural performance “is not always and exclusively verbal: Issues and attitudes are expressed and contested in dance, music, gesture, food, ritual, artifact, symbolic action, as well as words” (ibid.).

Activist knitter Betsey Greer echoes Conquergood. Underscoring the non-verbal and non-traditional approaches that yarnstormers take when voicing their political opinions through craft, Greer helps to situate textile graffiti as a cultural performance. Greer explains, “[As] craft skills such as knitting regained popularity, the idea emerged that instead of using solely one’s voice to advocate political viewpoints, one could use their creativity. . . . craftivism allows those who wish to voice their opinions and support their causes the chance to do just that . . . but without chanting or banner waving and at their own pace” (402). Artist Robin Love similarly underscores yarnstorming’s symbolic dimensions, situating public textile art “as much a poetic gesture as a political one” (cited in Moore and Prain 212). Materialized through the domestic and effeminate artifacts installed by textile graffiti artists within the public sphere, such examples of non-traditional and non-verbal creativity include a gagged and bruised Barbie doll taped onto a light post, holding in her hand a tiny textile banner that reads, “You can tell the condition of a nation by looking at the state of its women<sup>1</sup>” (Corbett 17). Evidenced by Love and Greer and pursuant

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<sup>1</sup> Quote attributed to Jawaharlal Nehru, the first Prime Minister of Independent India.

to cultural performances as counterpublics, textile graffiti practitioners eschew the traditional protocols of style, decorum, and voice that constitute mainstream political discourse.



**Figure 3.1: Bruised Barbie doll with tag that reads, “You can tell the condition of a nation by looking at the state of its women.” Created by the Craftivist Collective. Photo: Courtesy of Robin Prime, Creative Commons Attribution.**

### **Yarnbombing as Visual and Architectural Argument**

As a counterpublic, textile graffiti artists forward their marginalized relational values through nuanced visual arguments. According to Dennis Stevens, third-wave feminists possess a strong sense of semiotics (par. 10). Born through their critiques of hegemonic visual representations that reflect a male gaze (Mulvey), third-wave feminists are fluent readers of semiotics and adept re-mixers of signs and symbols (Stevens, par. 11). “Rather than bringing revolution to the front door and kicking it open,” Stevens argues, third-wave feminists often employ the visual language of re-mixture, in order to “make subversive statements about the world in which they live” (ibid.). As an enactment of third-wave feminism, textile graffiti art exemplifies the visual re-mixture of which Stevens speaks. Yarnbomber Magda Sayeg underscores this point, explicitly linking the art of yarnbombing to the art of visual juxtaposition. “I feel like there’s something very compelling and strong about knitted material—about something that’s weaved” Sayeg argues. “To see that on the urban environment, that’s what’s

catching people's eyes" ("Guerilla Knitter"). Situating yarnstormers as savvy semioticians, I argue that practitioners recognize the domestic, effeminate, and comforting associations that are attached to woven textiles, as well as the alienating associations that are attached to modern urban architecture. More specifically, I argue that by layering those woven textiles onto urban architecture, yarnbombers engage the art of visual re-mixture as a form of consciousness raising.

### *Architecture as Mass Communication*

Architect Darryl Hattenhauer and cultural geographer Yi-Fu Tuan position the outdoor environment as a visual form of mass communication (Hattenhauer 74; Tuan 102). Hattenhauer argues, more specifically, that our surrounding urban architecture functions to communicate our expected social roles as capable, predictable, and independent actors (72). Sayeg helps to corroborate these isolating instructions when commenting on the architectural impetus motivating her textile work. Sayeg explains, "I was reacting to my environment. . . [E]ven if it was . . . subconscious, I was reacting to . . . a city that has more freeways than it does parks. We tear down more trees and put up more parking lots. And I was . . . reacting to it" (ibid.). Intimated by Sayeg and corroborated through further analysis, our modern built environment works to discourage human interaction and to mystify human interdependence.

The imposition of textiles onto the built environment functions to undermine the individualizing instructions communicated through modern architecture by invoking nurturant and domestic association. In order to better clarify how yarnbombing interrupts modernist architecture and its social instructions, it is first necessary to overview the codes and signifiers that constitute the modernist architectural frame, and to explain how those conventions shape citizens' perceptions and everyday actions. After reviewing these pervasive genre conventions, I

go on to explain how the medium and content of textile graffiti functions rhetorically to break the modernist architectural frame, as well the values and behaviors it communicates.

*The Modernist Architectural Frame: Isolation and Efficiency*

Anthropologist Gregory Bateson describes *framing devices* as ways of organizing, understanding, and interpreting experiences in social interaction (8). Within a performance context, frames are erected through deployments of specific genre conventions. These conventions function as implicit instructions to an audience, serving to delimit their interpretations and re-actions (Bell *Theories* 36, 39). As a performance frame, modernist architecture is characterized by a common set of material and design elements. First emerging in Europe and America during the late nineteenth century, the International Style is the quintessential form of the modernist architectural movement. Its common materials are glass and steel, in combination with less visible concrete reinforcement. Its common design elements are concise surfaces removed of ornamentation or decoration, and open interior spaces (“International Style”). On a practical level, these forms and materials functioned as feasible and inexpensive design options for the post-World War Two surge in large-scale urban development projects. Indeed, the International Style was so affordable and so prolific, it still dominates our visual environment today (Wolfe)—accounting for the design of warehouses, factories, and shopping centers, as well as churches, schools, and homes (Hattenhauer 76).

The practical purposes of modern architecture’s forms and materials give way to the audience behaviors this frame seeks to delimit. According to Darryl Hattenhauer, the rhetorical purpose of the modernist architectural frame is to persuade citizens to identify, think, and behave as highly functional, efficient, and predictable entities (72). Born as a mixture of the Enlightenment era’s scientific rationality and the machinic influence of the Industrial Age, these

behavioral aims are rhetorically accomplished by removing the ornamental, the cultural, and therefore humanistic elements from modernist building designs (75). Architect Geoffrey Broadbent corroborates Hattenhauer's argument, explaining how modernist buildings are designed to be "free of any reference to foreign, exotic or native historical styles" lest they "prevent its [and its inhabitants'] efficient functioning" (235). Jamie Aron argues similarly, explaining how "[M]odernist architects theorized that . . . [anything] considered inherently ornamental . . . even textiles . . . needed to be rejected if architecture was going to lead society towards a better future" (24). Noted modernist architect Le Corbusier describes this "better future," reasoning that, "a well-mapped-out (architectural) scheme, constructed on a mass-produced basis . . . gives a feeling of calm, order and neatness and inevitably imposes discipline on the inhabitants" (224-5). Confirming the assertions of Corbusier, Aron, and Broadbent, architect Peter Buchanan describes modernist architecture as an arena which "deliberately dissociates from context, local culture and history" in order to create an environment of ahistoricism, acontextuality, and supposed neutrality ("Place and Aliveness" par. 10).

Buchanan argues that modernist architecture—by way of its austere and ostensibly neutral style—cultivates a mechanistic sensibility, which strips us of our full humanity and "[its] connections to nature, place, and community, and the responsibilities that go [along] with those [connections]" ("Farewell to Modernism" par. 32). Describing textile graffiti as a way to connect with one's environment and larger community, yarnbomber called Niddy Noddy confirms this sense of modern day alienation of which Buchanan speaks. "[Modern] life can be so insular," Niddy Noddy reasons. "People go to work, come home and shut their doors" (Donaldson, par. 13, 14). Modernist architecture divests "ornament" from our surroundings, therein removing the very signifiers that highlight our shared history and shared culture. In so doing, modernist

architecture deprives its audiences of their connection to larger cultural, physical, and temporal realities, as well as the meanings and psychic satisfactions those connections can ultimately deliver.

This recognition of human isolation, proffered through our built surroundings, is the motivation undergirding yarnbombing practice. Despite this isolation and depletion of community and relational values, Buchanan believes that we can still “mature into and express our full humanity” by a) recognizing the role that our outdoor environments play in shaping our collective and individual subjectivities, and b) redesigning those environments to reflect and encourage our cultural, temporal, and interpersonal connections (“Farewell to Modernism” par. 32). Textile graffiti artists do just this. First recognizing the urban outdoors as “gray, and steel, and cold and inanimate” (“Guerilla Knitter”), yarnstormers then work to “soften the edges of an otherwise cruel, harsh environment” (Moore and Prain 106), and to “bring . . . brightness to drab, cement landscapes” (Schwartzman, par. 2). Through their installations, textile graffiti artists blunt the harsh and inanimate surfaces of public life, while also physically connecting with strangers, fellow knitters, and their outdoor environments. Textile tags make strange our everyday travels, therein interrupting standard architectural instructions by shocking individuals out of isolation, and “compel[ing them] to evaluate their interactions with their town or city and, concurrently, with the people residing in those habitats” (Clegg 79). Through appeals to tradition as a keying mechanism, yarnstormers break the frame of modernist architecture while also making explicit the relational connections that bind humanity to our environments and each other.



*Yarnbombing as Appeal to Tradition: Re-Keying Urban Architecture as Site of Connection*

If modernist architecture encodes alienation, utility, and efficiency by removing cultural and historical referents from the built environment, then yarnbombers counteract those encodings by consciously introducing needlecraft as cultural and historic signifier. Publicizing the gendered tradition of needlecraft, textile graffiti artists break the modernist architectural frame through the performative mechanism of *keying*. Erving Goffman extends Bateson's work on frames, and defines *keying* as the process by which particular frames are invoked (43-4). Richard Bauman lists the various communicative techniques that are used to key aesthetic performances. Of these techniques and relevant to the discussion of textile graffiti is *appeal to tradition*, which relies on performers' deployment of historical signifiers, and audience members' recognition of those signifiers as a standard reference for interpretation (de Farias 418).

Within the context of textile graffiti, appeal to tradition is keyed through practitioners' deployment of needle arts as historical, gendered, and domestic art form. Invoking appeal to tradition in order to break the modernist architectural frame, yarnstormers construct a new and different one. As a novel and unique performance frame, the medium and content of textile graffiti functions to forward the undervalued axioms of sociality and nurturance, and to elicit from its audience members the interpretations and behaviors that are associated with those values.

*Needle Arts: A Historical, Gendered Tradition*

Needle arts and their woven artifacts reflect a long-held tradition that is practiced predominantly by women, and in cultures across the globe. Despite its link to women's history, second-wave feminists shunned the act of knitting. Initial and restrictive definitions of feminism made the claim that any performance of domestic activities by females reinforced their

domination by men. Author Stephanie Pearl-McPhee underscores this point, noting how very few women knitted during the seventies and eighties. “I think it’s almost that they couldn’t afford to,” Pearl McPhee says. “In order to break down notions of what women were capable of, they could not be seen engaging in traditionally female activities at all” (cited in Willis 52-3). Noted by Pearl-McPhee, many second-wave feminists hyperbolized knitting’s association with oppressive gender scripts and internalized patriarchal devaluations of women’s art and women’s work (Chansky 681). Consequently, domestic arts like knitting, crochet, and needlepoint would be temporarily rejected, as women fought for their equality by assimilating to the activities and values of an androcentric culture. While second-wave feminists succeeded—virtually eradicating the legal barriers to women’s equality—these triumphs, unfortunately, rested on the rejection of women’s historic culture and traditions. Today, third-wave feminists, yarnbombers among them, work to extend and differentiate their own feminist trajectories from those of their second-wave mothers (Greer “Craftivism”). Enjoying their more equal citizenship rights, many third-wave feminists also seek to restore women’s culture and history, as well as cooperation, nurturance, and communal non-violence as associated values (Dicker 9, 135).

Yarnbombers communicate this restoration of women’s history— also interrupting modernist architecture’s isolating ideologies—by publicizing textile artifacts as a persuasive appeal to tradition. Kristy Robertson corroborates this form of appeal, arguing that “Knitting as a radical act depends upon the conservatism of its history” (216). Diverging from views of second-wave feminists—who are more likely to associate knitting with “containment . . . and unequal gender relations,” (ibid.)—Robertson proposes that “the conservatism of knitting” can function as “a point of potential and connection” (ibid.). “Knitting,” Robertson continues, is “able to occupy spaces often closed to more radical political manifestations. . . . [K]nitting is productive

in its ability to cross lines, to start conversation, to form connections from the strangest of bedfellows—it is tactile, affective, and attentive. (ibid.) Unlike modernist architecture, which attempts to remove historical and cultural signifiers in order to promote human isolation and efficiency, textile graffiti’s woven artifacts invoke women’s history and its private sphere associations with nurturance, protection, and human-to-human care. Given such linkages—as Robertson suggests—knitting in public has the potential to diffuse cultural norms of austerity, violence, and disassociation. Invoking women’s historical artifacts and traditions, yarnbombers politically forward their tender, communal, and caregiving qualities through the knitted medium of their work.

#### Medium

Art historian Hans Belting argues that an image only, in fact, gains its agency, “when one speaks of the image and the medium as two sides of a coin, sides that are inseparable, even though they separate and mean separate things to the eye” (304). Stated differently, a critic can fully apprehend the significance of an image, only by taking into account its medium as the means by which that image is transmitted (Schacter 39). Within the context of yarnstorming, the significance of an installation is transmitted through its knit medium, which indexes sociality and nurturance as two vital areas that are waning within contemporary society.

#### *Sociality*

Social anthropologist Alfred Gell argues that, “any object that one encounters in the world invites the question, how did this thing get to be here?” and furthermore, consists of “playing out their origin-stories mentally, reconstructing their histories” (67). Within the context of textile graffiti, Gell’s assertion holds true; appealing to the social aspects of knit-based traditions, textile tags summon audience members to recount the sociality that is historically and

contemporarily embedded within their hand-made production processes. In so doing, yarnbombs imbue their audience and architectural surroundings with a sense and value of human interaction that is increasingly absent from contemporary public life.

From knitting circles to quilting bees to the modern day “Stitch’nBitch” (see Minhan and Cox), for centuries women have engaged fiber crafts as a social opportunity to dialogue, commune, and connect with other women—expressing joys and sorrows, exchanging survival strategies, and creating aesthetic artifacts of other-oriented care (Conquergood “Re-Fabricating”; Garmaz; Speer). Even outside of women’s needlecraft specifically, Leonardo Bonanni and Amanda Parkes situate the general process of crafting as “a social activity, shaped by communal resources and motivations” (180). Bonanni and Parkes argue further that there is a “collective approach . . . [to] craft communities . . . where practitioners devote significant time passing on their skill to the next generation of crafters” (ibid.). For contemporary knitting circles and yarnbombing collectives, group meetings frequently reflect the communal and pedagogical aspects detailed by Bonanni and Parkes. Moore and Prain underscore these communal and beneficial aspects, arguing that,

Part of the fun of being a yarnbomber comes from connecting with like-minded knitters and crocheters. Becoming tight with a crew offers many advantages. With the support of like-minded individuals, you’ll have a group that plans projects together, teaches each other stitching techniques, and provides support and inspiration. (93)

With meeting activities ranging from idle chitchat, to deeper emotional processing, to one group member teaching others a new type of stitch or craft technique, yarnstorming collectives enact much needed forms of sociality through their production of textile tags.

Yarnstorming audience members appear to recognize—and, to a certain degree, replicate—the historical and contemporary sociality that is imbedded within knitting as construction process. Yarnbombing enthusiasts corroborate this transfer, arguing that, “A yarn bomb . . . helps us all notice our surroundings. . . spark[ing] conversation between strangers about the nature of the handmade” (“Yarnbombing in Downtown Little Rock” par. 5). Stacy Cantrell echoes these sentiments, reasoning that as a form of “public art . . . [yarnbombing can] bring together people from all walks of life [and] ages” (Mallenbaum, par. 14).

As a counterpublic, yarnstormers politicize the loss of relational values within contemporary society. Human care and interaction function as impediments to the isolation, efficiency, and productive frenzy, which are encouraged by the architecture of our public streets and the neoliberal policies of our political sphere. Within this political and architectural landscape, truly public spaces—parks, for example—are increasingly privatized. Once designed as a public reprieve from the tireless speed and autonomy of the city streets, parks today are frequently isolated and commercialized—housed within homeowners’ associations and McDonald’s “play-lands.” Yarnbombs function to interrupt these architectural instructions and political-commercial frameworks, creating temporary structures that reflects our social and communal history, while cultivating contemporary moments of human interaction.

### *Nurturance*

Textile graffiti’s woven medium also highlights care and nurturance as much-needed public goods. Moore and Prain help to underscore knits as placards of nurturance, while also situating knitting as a gendered tradition: “Many of us have a lifetime of memories of sweaters and Afghans” Moore and Prain reason (23). Those textiles and the memories they invoke, are “warm, comforting, soft . . . [and] likely made by women” (ibid.). Yarnstorming practitioners

recognize the powerful and comforting associations attached to knitting, and use those associations to offset the alienating instructions offered by our built environment. Sayeg underscores this point, positioning the nurturant medium of knitting as salve for the isolating urban outdoors: “There's something very compelling and strong about knitted material—about something that's weaved,” Sayeg argues (“Guerilla Knitter”). “You knit a blanket because of someone that you're knitting it for that you love, and care about. So when people see these things on their own urban environment is when *there's some strange message that's being sent* that they're catching on to” (ibid., emphasis added).

This “strange message” that Sayeg refers to, is the essence of yarnstorming practice. Situated within an alienating built environment that reflects larger cultural values, the practice of nurturance and sociality—as well as the larger caregiving axioms to which they're attached—are considered strange, out of place, and even defiant. One practitioner comments on the austerity and rigidity normalized within contemporary society, by linking the caregiving qualities that circulate around knitting with the insurgent associations of street graffiti: “The situation is such that doing crochet is rebellious. That's how bad things are” (Martinez). Evidenced by the above examples, textile graffiti functions to publicize nurturance, caregiving, and sociality as communal goods. While these values are implicitly highlighted through the historical associations of their knitted medium, they are also more explicitly highlighted through the textual content that is woven onto many textile tags.

## Content

Various yarnbombing examples lend explicit textual support to the visual and non-spoken rhetorics of which all yarnstormers engage. Consider for example The Side Streets Project, curated by Yarn Bombing Los Angeles (YBLA). Soliciting nominations and stories of personal

achievement from the Northwest Pasadena community, YBLA seeks to award individuals for “the hours they spend in caregiving for another family member” (par. 1). YBLA then transforms a selection of those nominations into public, large scale, knitted installations. Conceptualized as “a redefinition of the public monument”—which so often honor political and military figures at the dismissal of everyday caregiving heroes—YBLA seeks to “play [. . .] with the meanings and aesthetics of the monument,” using the quotidian practice of knitting to valorize and reward the “anti-monumental” and undervalued practice of caregiving (par. 2). Corroborating the communal and caregiving spirit of YBLA is the anonymous yarnbomb placed under the Brooklyn-Queens Expressway on Metropolitan Avenue in New York. At the center of the installation is the mathematical sign for “greater than” with a large pink knit heart to its right and green knit money sign to its left (Brooklyn Imbecile). Offsetting a capitalist economy that devalues care work and neoliberal policies that abject relations of dependency, “Love is Greater than Money” revalues and politicizes human care within the public sphere.



Figure 3.2: “Love Is Greater Than Money.” New York City. Photo: Courtesy of Tony Luib

Performance scholar Shannon Jackson argues that women’s “implicit domestic, everyday, life-producing performances” are often overlooked by historical accounts that privilege

transgressive interruptions of culture and society (*Professing* 175). Evidenced by the medium and content of the yarnbombing examples listed above, textile graffiti—in many regards—echoes and dramatizes Jackson’s sentiment. Using visual and architectural techniques, yarnstormers engage the medium of knitting as a rhetorical appeal to tradition. Through such appeals, textile graffiti artists: interrupt the isolating instructions communicated through modernist architectural frames; highlight women’s historical culture, while valorizing their “domestic, every-day, [and] life-producing performances”; and stake political claims on the dearth and devaluation of such performances within contemporary public, political, and economic life.

### **Yarnbombing as Feminist Rhetorical Invention**

In addition to the visual and medium-based strategies that are detailed in the above section, as a counterpublic, yarnstorming practitioners also deploy feminist rhetorical invention in order to forward their marginalized relational values. According to Karlyn Kohrs Campbell, for women and other marginalized rhetors seeking to insert themselves into public discourse, *subversion* functions as the principle form of feminist rhetorical invention. This type of invention, Campbell explains, “exploits the past; . . . it is parasitic, it adapts, reframes, juxtaposes, associates, satirizes, reverses, ridicules, and appropriates dominant discourse, using and misusing every means by which meanings are corrupted and contested” (“Inventing Women” 112). Through feminist appropriations of dominant and patriarchal discourses, subversion functions on two simultaneous levels: it creates a public space for women to articulate their unique experiences, values, and concerns, while also throwing into relief the “means and myths” that are used to oppress them (Laware 24).



In what follows, I argue that yarnbombers enact feminist subversion through conscious mimicry of the moral mother trope. In order to better clarify how yarnstormers use feminist subversion to forward and communicate their marginalized experiences, values, and political concerns, I first overview the moral mother figure as a persuasive, resilient, and restrictive representation of maternal femininity, and position textile graffiti in relationship to this gendered trope. Next, I detail the maternal symbology as well as the nurturant and communal value systems that characterize the moral mother, and position yarnstormers' mimicry or strategic wielding of those elements as an act of feminist subversion. Placing the cultural performance of textile graffiti against a contemporary backdrop of political and economic austerity, I argue that yarnbombers leverage the moral mother's caregiving values, while simultaneously defying and reworking her patriarchal imperatives.

### **Moral Mothers and Textile Graffiti**

The moral mother trope is a glorified representation of femininity that associates and conflates motherhood, domesticity, and moral virtue (Abrahms 855). Textile graffiti practitioners exhibit many characteristics associated with the moral mother trope. Presenting moral admonishments of economic austerity, unregulated capital, war, and environmental damages through their knit and crochet artifacts, yarnbombers function as modern day moral mothers—similarly triangulating domesticity, motherhood, and morality. Before situating textile graffiti artists in relationship to this gendered trope, a brief historical and political overview of the moral mother is required.

#### *The Historical Emergence of the Moral Mother*

The moral mother trope emerged at the height of industrialization, and through historical shifts in the division of labor. Naomi Wolf explains how during this time period, capitalist and

patriarchal forces combined, instructing middleclass white women that the emergent public sphere of politics, competition, and commerce was nefarious and corrupt—the exclusive realm of men—and that their unpaid exclusion from it was further evidence of their elevated virtue (ibid.). Through these structural and geographical shifts, the moral mother emerged as a complex composition of gendered, classed, and moral strictures: as expert cook, gracious host, and stylish interior designer, the moral mother was to privately display her status as domestic artisan; as benevolent caretaker to unfortunate others, the moral mother was to display her goodwill through charitable donations of homemade works and communitarian good deeds; as caretaker of her husband and children, the moral mother was to cultivate a nurturing environment—even at the expense of her own physical and emotional needs; and as embodiment of piety, the moral mother was to fear and repress her own sinful sexuality so as to best model for her children the path of spiritual righteousness (Abrams; Bloch).

Now removed from the presumed sins of the capitalist and industrialized city, a woman's pre-Industrial contributions to her family's monetary livelihood were replaced by her new position as "Angel of the House"—that is, an unpaid domestic servant, a familial caregiver, and a moral guide. According to Ruth Bloch, the emergence of the moral mother trope vested middle and upper middle class white women with unprecedented levels of morality and maternal strength within the domestic realm (113). On a structural level, however, the trope served patriarchal ends by precluding "respectable" women from wielding sexuality, engaging in public protest, or their airing political grievances in mixed company without violating most precious standards of propriety.

### *The Moral Mother as Protest Trope*

Despite the negative potentialities of the moral mother ideal, twentieth century women activists performatively leveraged the socially desirable qualities that characterized the moral mother trope in order to challenge the negative social perceptions surrounding women's role in public life. Kathryn Abrams underscores this point, reasoning that when women have entered that realm of protest and political critique, "they have had to rely on those gendered characteristics that constitute their more limited sources of authority. These characteristics include motherhood, the capacity for care and order that stems from domestic responsibility, and a particular kind of conformist moral virtue traditionally associated with these gendered roles" (855). Argued by Abrams and detailed below, Western women have repeatedly leveraged the heightened virtue associated with the moral mother, in order to assert their citizenship rights, to fight for social welfare and economic justice, and to protest war and environmental damages.

Surfacing in the late nineteenth century through the Victorian era's rigidly prescribed gender roles, the moral mother ideal retained and transfigured its powerful rhetorical sway throughout the twentieth century (Bloch 100). Suffragists, for example, exploited normative Victorian views of maternal piety in order to mainstream the women's right to vote (Dicker 46). Arguing that women's unique maternal values and viewpoints were necessary to the moral and humane advancement of Western civilization, Suffragists successfully leveraged this argument to soften men toward their feminist cause. Upon securing their right to vote, early twentieth century activists continued to argue that women's source of political power was located in their domestic experiences revolving around "responsibility, care, and obligation" (Elshtain 157). In this regard, activists like Jane Addams and Ellen Gates Starr called upon other women to transform their standard housekeeping activities and well-cultivated understanding of human welfare and

emotional needs into “civic housekeeping” as a form of political activism (ibid.). Castigating the greed and corruption of the commercial-political realm, this notion of civic housekeeping included fights for adult labor reform and eight hour work days (Dicker 54), as well as efforts to legalize child labor, and to limit the work hours of children under sixteen.

Extending past the early twentieth century, mid and late twentieth century deployments of the moral mother trope include protests against war and environmental damages. For example, Ecofeminists of the 1970s and 80s have drawn on the moral mother ideal, arguing that women’s biological capacity for pregnancy and childbirth confers them with a unique concern for protecting the Earth’s similar life-producing and life-sustaining qualities (Merchant). Various women-led anti-war protestors—the Greenham Common Women’s Peace Camp, for example (see Laware)—have similarly drawn on the concrete and metaphorical states of motherhood, arguing that women’s socialized or biological “orientation toward care-giving and the preservation of life . . . provides [them with] a ground . . . to expose the [moral] error of war” (Abrams 855).

Evidenced by the above, women have deployed the moral mother trope for over a century in service of their own political agendas and ends. Leveraging the ideologies and discourses that exalt women’s capacity to mother, as well as the axioms attached to that maternal role—namely, the values of nurturance, communalism, morality, and domestic responsibility—women and feminist activists have publicized and politicized community and care work above military obligations, economic imperatives, and market-based value systems. Recognizing the persuasive potency and the historical significance of the moral mother trope, in what follows, I detail textile graffiti as a contemporary rendering of this gendered rhetorical device. I then go on to situate

yarnstormers as feminist mimics who wield the persuasive characteristics associated with the moral mother trope, while simultaneously undermining her patriarchal imperatives.

### *Textile Graffiti*

Yarnbombers mirror their feminist predecessors, strategically leveraging the maternal symbology associated with the moral mother in order to forward communal values and stake political claims. Malia Wollan of the *New York Times* links textile graffiti to traditional notions of maternal care, writing that “Yarn bombing takes that most matronly craft (knitting) and that most maternal of gestures (wrapping something cold in a warm blanket) and transfers it to the concrete and steel wilds of the urban streetscape” (par. 5). Hilary Bromberg similarly underscores textile graffiti’s maternal iconology. Commenting on the knit and crochet medium that constitutes this contemporary form, Bromberg argues that “yarnbombing adds a layer of much-craved humanity to everything it touches. . . . [It] turns the visual landscape around completely, cueing grandma and soft blankets and hugs and gentle unconditional love” (par. 3, 4). Cleverly wielding maternal associations and domestic iconography, yarnbombers mirror their feminist predecessors and Victorian women alike.

Textile graffiti artists symbolically leverage the domestic and effeminate symbology associated with fiber craft in order to forward the communal values associated with women and the private sphere. According to Bonnie Dow and Mari Boor Tonn, traditionally effeminate communicative styles align with those patterns of communication that are frequently exhibited within the private sphere; both are focused toward cooperation, communalism, and the maintenance of concrete human needs and relationships (288). As exemplar caretaker and overseer of the domestic realm, the moral mother trope embodies these communicative characteristics (Bloch 117), and distinguishes herself from the abstract, hierarchical, and

dominating communicative styles associated with men and the public sphere (Dow and Tonn 288). Textile graffiti artist Sarah Corbett highlights this effeminate, non-hierarchical, and non-domineering ethos. A self-described “introvert activist,” Corbett explains,

I wasn't convinced that shouting, preaching and demanding someone to do a particular action would change [people's] mind[s] and result in any long-lasting change. . . . So I decided to hand embroider [my local Member of Parliament] a message on a handkerchief, asking her to use her power and influence to support the most vulnerable in society, and not to *blow her chance* of making a positive difference in the world. (5, emphasis added)

Resulting from this creative gesture, Corbett founded the London-based street crew called the Craftivist Collective—a group of women who cross-stitch political sentiments onto floral textile banners trimmed with buttons and lace. Affixing these banners onto public fixtures around the cityscape, Corbett explains how “The Craftivist Collective’s projects are small, attractive, and unthreatening. Our mini protest banners catch the attention of passers-by in a respectful and thought-provoking way without forcing our views on them” (5-6). Detailed above, textile graffiti artists like the Craftivist Collective wield the maternal, domestic, and caregiving characteristics that are associated with needlecraft, as well as the effeminate communication style associated with private sphere communication and the moral mother trope.

In addition to mirroring the communicative patterns associated with women generally and the moral mother specifically, textile graffiti artists also reflect and reinforce the moral mother’s valuing of communal care over and above economic imperatives. Dramatizing the moral mother’s historical critiques of political austerity and economic greed are the textile tags of microRevolt, the Craftivist Collective, and the Secret Outdoor Crochet and Knitting collective

(S.O.C.K.). Reflecting the “civic housekeeping” endeavors that characterized early twentieth century maternalist activists, the microRevolt collective uses their public textile art to investigate and expose “the current crisis of global expansion and the feminization of labor” (“Mission”). For example, in 2008, microRevolt advocated for the fair labor practices of Nike’s exploited and predominantly female factory workers by collecting and sewing together hand-knit and crochet squares from thirty different countries around the world. “Each 4 x 4 inch stitched square creates the Nike logo,” microRevolt explains, “[Each square] act[s] as a signature for fair labor policies for Nike garment workers” (“Nike Blanket Petition”). Invoking the domestic associations of knit and crochet, microRevolt mirrors their moral mother’s historical concern for humane labor practices, and her symbolic connection to the domestic.



**Figure 3.3: Nike Blanket Petition, 2003-2008, mixed fiber yarn. Photo: Courtesy of Cat Mazza, microRevolt.**

The yarnbombs of S.O.C.K. and the Craftivist Collective similarly reinforce the moral mother’s valuing of communal care over and above economic greed. Installed outside the civilian barrier gates of the 2013 G8 summit in Enniskillen, S.O.C.K.’s knitted protest banners include messages that read: “Stop Capitalism”, “Have a Heart”, “No Greed = No Hunger”, and “Austerity = Cruelty” (“Yarnbomb the Prom”). Likewise, the Craftivist Collective’s miniature protest banners produce moral critiques of unchecked capitalism. Situating their art as a means to

“expose the scandal of global poverty and human rights injustices through the power of craft and public art” (Corbett 6), the Craftivist Collective’s textile banners read things like: “Charity begins at the home but should never end there . . .” (Corbett 15); “There is a gap in the clouds of unbridled capitalism, now’s the time to act for social justice” (Corbett 10); and “If we have no peace, it is because we have forgotten that we belong to each other” (Corbett 16). Bringing together women’s history of caregiving in the private home with a feminist ethos of public protest, yarnstormers like Craftivist Collective, S.O.C.K., and microRevolt parallel their moral mother predecessors’ by valorizing and politicizing “women’s work”—positioning it as both an exploited source of capital gain, as well as antidote to the contemporary austerity of political and economic life.



**Figure 3.4: Tag Reads: “There is a gap in the clouds of unbridled capitalism, now’s the time to act for social justice,” 2009.**  
Photo: Courtesy of the Craftivist Collective.



**Figure 3.5: Tag reads: “No Greed = No Hunger.”**  
Created by the Secret Outdoor Crochet and Knitting. Photo: Purl Wunn.

Historical and contemporary women activists have repeatedly leveraged the virtue, maternal care, and domestic associations of the moral mother trope in order to critique public sphere politics, profit, and competition. Despite the trope’s persistence and persuasiveness in politicizing women and caregivers’ perspectives, however, the moral mother remains a contentious trope among feminists. In what follows, I overview these feminist concerns and then



detail the ways textile graffiti practitioners circumvent those concerns through feminist subversion. More specifically, I argue that yarnbombers performatively refashion the moral mother trope—strategically wielding her persuasive characteristics, while simultaneously undermining her patriarchal imperatives.

### **Feminist Contention**

Notwithstanding its rhetorical potency and historical endurance, the moral mother trope remains a contentious issue among feminists. Abrams, for example, argues that rhetorical deployments of this gendered trope may ultimately serve patriarchal ends, by “venerating an image of women that has been, and can be, used to constrain and disadvantage them” (Abrams 856). Despite the trope’s potential for leveraging women’s socially vaunted morality and for politicizing caregivers’ values, perspectives, and needs, Micaela di Leonardo argues that patriarchal forces can too easily diminish or renege this elevated morality, if and when women defy the pious, self-sacrificing, and domestic imperatives that are also associated with this gendered trope (602). Recognizing the moral mother’s self-abnegating and unsustainable standards of behaviors as tacit prerequisites undergirding her elevated virtue, di Leonardo positions contemporary deployments of this gendered trope as risky political maneuver (*ibid.*).

In spite of di Leonardo and Abrams’s cautioning, textile graffiti practitioners mirror their Suffragist predecessors and strategically summon the moral mother trope. In order to forward their caregiving values in a society that is politically bereft of them, yarnbombers wield the moral mother’s domestic, chaste, and maternal symbology. Simultaneously, textile graffiti artists defy and rework the moral mother’s patriarchal imperatives by employing mimicry as a form of feminist subversion.

## **Textile Graffiti Practitioners as Feminist Mimics**

According to Karlyn Kohrs Campbell, *subversion* functions as principle form of feminist rhetorical invention—especially for women and other marginalized rhetors seeking to insert themselves into public discourse. This type of invention, Campbell explains, “exploits the past; . . . it is parasitic, it adapts, reframes, juxtaposes, associates, satirizes, reverses, ridicules, and appropriates dominant discourse, using and misusing every means by which meanings are corrupted and contested” (“Inventing Women” 112). Through feminist appropriations of dominant and patriarchal discourses, subversion functions on two simultaneous levels: it creates a public space for women to articulate their unique experiences, values, and concerns, while also throwing into relief the “means and myths” that are used to oppress them (Laware 24).

*Mimicry* as a key form of feminist subversion (Demo 246). Mimicry begins with a critic or practitioner recognizing common effeminate tropes and personae as, more often than not, flattened representations of women that are created through patriarchal forces. Argued by Luce Irigaray, mimics can demonstrate the dubiousness of “a masculine logic” that defines women in univocal terms through ironic appropriations of these hegemonic representations. Owing to these ironic appropriations, Kimberly Devlin reasons, mimics are able to garner knowledge from an “internal critical distance,” which allows them to parse out the meaningful or efficacious characteristics of said trope, while discarding and reworking those that are exploitative (71). Employing mimicry as a form of feminist subversion, yarnstormers embrace the moral mother’s advocacy for public nurturance and philanthropy, while rejecting the patriarchal stipulations positioning her as self-sacrificing, utilitarian, and anhedonic extension of men.

## **Performative Transformation of the Moral Mother Trope**

In what follows I overview two distinct continuums that yarnstorming mimics tensively negotiate. The first pole moderates a tension between the moral mother's nurturant and domestically inflected virtue, versus textile graffiti artists' physical and public promiscuity. The second pole moderates a tension between the moral mother's selfless and charitable good deeds and yarnstormers' ostensibly "useless," non-functional, and selfish acts. I argue that yarnbombers-as-mimics leverage the persuasive power of the moral mother trope in order to forward their relational values; however, by defying the moral mother's patriarchal imperatives, textile graffiti practitioners also work to "expose the incongruity of a normative [patriarchal] standard without being reduced to it" (Demo 246).

### *Tension 1: Virtue vs. Promiscuity*

Correspondence with the Moral Mother Ideal: Heightened Virtue through Nurturance, Domestication, and Rehabilitation

Mirroring the moral mother ideal, yarnstormers' elevated moral esteem is constituted through their tender dispositions and evidenced by the nurturing environments they cultivate. According to Ruth Bloch, the virtuousness associated with the moral mother emanates from Victorian era ideals surrounding maternal femininity—specifically, the cultivation of a nurturing and communal home (116). Jennifer Johnson and Megan Johnson expand on this matter, explaining how popular literature and periodicals sold Victorian women an image of their home as a "spiritual center where women's work was most valued as the primary source of [familial] happiness and fulfillment" (495). Within this homeplace as communal hearth, and through women's nurturing and domestic efforts, children were to be physically, intellectually, and emotionally nourished, and men were able to "escape from the competition and brutality of the urban marketplace. . . . [finding] spiritual renewal in the bosom of the[ir] family" and their home

(*ibid.*). Textile graffiti artists similarly work to cultivate a congenial environment, mirroring the nurturant and virtuous sentiments that characterize their moral mother predecessors.

As modern day embodiment of the moral mother trope, textile graffiti artists cultivate a welcoming, domesticated environment. The Fine Craft guild underscores this point, reasoning that “yarn-bombs inject the cozy [and] *homey* . . . nature of yarn into . . . the harsh industrial design . . . of a city” (par. 1, emphasis added). First recognizing the urban outdoors as “gray, and steel, and cold and inanimate” (Sayeg), yarnbombers use their colorful knit tags to “bring . . . brightness to drab, cement landscapes” (Schwartzman, par. 2). It is in this sense that yarnstormers speak frequently of “beautifying” neglected locations with colorful yarn and knitted displays. Moore and Prain, for example, suggest to prospective yarnstormers that they “Brighten a dingy corner” (49), “Beautify Something Ugly” (107), and “Pick a location that has personal meaning. Is there a piece of urban architecture that everyone agrees is ugly? Your knitting could probably improve it” (*ibid.*). Recognizing acts of rehabilitation as historical component of women’s domestic work (Eichler and Albanese 237), yarnbombers reveal themselves as modern day moral mothers through these restorative gestures.

Feminist art critic Lucy Lippard links this art of rehabilitation to women’s physical and affective labor. She reasons, “On an emotional and practical level, rehabilitation has always been women’s work. Patching, turning collars and cuffs, remaking old clothes, changing buttons, refinishing or recovering old furniture are all traditionally private resorts of . . . [a] woman to give her family public dignity” (*Pink* 136). Textile graffiti artists similarly carry out such voluntary acts of rehabilitation. Working to restore, enhance, and ornament their public surroundings, yarnbombers help to bolster their audiences’ emotional morale by “soften[ing] the edges of an otherwise cruel, harsh environment” (Moore and Prain 106). Through their acts of

rehabilitations, textile graffiti practitioners—much like their moral mother predecessors—enact their caregiving labor as a means to provide dignity, compassion, and care to the people and spaces they hold dear.

In addition to their acts of domestication and rehabilitation, yarnstormers reveal themselves as modern day moral mothers through the nurturant and virtuous sentiments embedded within the medium and content of their works. According to Ruth Bloch, the piety and rectitude conferred onto the moral mother issued from her displays of tenderness and benevolence—qualities believed “most essential to the cultivation of morality in children” and men (117). Textile graffiti artists reflect this tenderness through the woven media that constitutes their art. Joanne Turney underscores this point, situating textiles as nurturant signifiers: “[F]rom traditional forms of swaddling [babies] to wrapping children up tight as [a form of] protection against the elements . . . The notion of security through textiles is manifest” (109). Nina Schwartzman echoes Turney, reasoning that “[L]ike a baby blanket or an afghan your grandmother made for you . . . Yarn has symbolic connotations of warmth, love and comfort” (par. 5). Detailed by Turney and corroborated by Schwartzman, textile graffiti artists reflect the domestic and decorative efforts of their moral mother predecessors—imbuing their environments with images of nurturance and beauty through the woven media of their art.

Textile graffiti practitioners also forward their virtuous sentiments through the content of their work. New York based yarnbomber London Kaye, for example, uses her public knitting to construct communal spaces of love. For Valentine’s Day of 2014, Kaye covered the inside of a subway car in pink and white fuzzy crochet, replete with flowers and hearts. Reasoning that “This subway is my Valentine tonight,” Kaye’s crochet tag functions as communal Valentine—eliciting smiles, pictures, and compliments from subway riders, many of them thanking Kaye for

her unsolicited expression of love (Lynch). Other yarnstormers wield the virtues of love and nurturance to protest war and other material enactments of violence. For example, in May 2006, textile artist Marian Jøergensen, and five volunteers covered a World War II tank in Copenhagen’s main square with more than four thousand pink knit squares. Collected from knitters in the United States, the United Kingdom, and other European countries, this symbolic work functioned as an act of protest pitted against the brutality of war generally and Denmark’s involvement in the Iraq war specifically (Wallace, par. 3). This non-violent sentiment is echoed by the large textile banners of the Knitted Landscape collective, which encourage audience members to “Knit your hearts with an unslipping knot,” and to “Knit our powers to the arms of peace” (ter Heide and Verkerk). Evidenced by the above, textile graffiti practitioners function as modern day embodiments of the moral mother trope—conveying a similar tenderness and humanitarian virtue through the content and medium of their art.



**Figure 3.6: Artist London Kaye tags the New York City L Train.  
Photo: Courtesy of Aymann Ismail/ANIMALNewYork.**

## Performative Transformation of the Moral Mother Trope: Yarnbombing as Public, Political, and Permissive

Substantiated by the above and similar to the moral mother ideal, yarnstormers' elevated moral esteem is constituted through their tender dispositions and evidenced by the nurturant and domestically inflected environments they cultivate. However, unlike their Victorian era predecessors—whose virtue was contingent upon their strict adherence to the gendered standards of cloistered modesty—yarnbombers' content and installation processes are public, permissive, and highly physical. Stated differently, yarnstormers mimic the moral mother—leveraging her domestic imagery and elevated virtue, while simultaneously defying her presumed piety and sexual purity through physical and symbolic publications of the female body.

In its strictest and most pious sense, the moral mother's caretaking and control was limited to the privacy of her own home and family (Wolf 276-7). This rigidity stems from pervasive Victorian viewpoints, wherein women's autonomous and/or public presentation of self carried consequent charges of immodesty, sexual depravity, and moral spoil (Bell "Performance Studies" 355). Elizabeth Wilson underscores this point, reasoning that "the [public] presence of unattended, and un-owned women constitute[d] a threat to male power/patriarchy" (2). As a result of these patriarchal restrictions, longstanding linkages were formed between public and autonomous expressions of the female body and feminine willfulness, promiscuity, and moral permissiveness. In contemporary Western society, women are granted much more access to and acceptance within public life; however, a resilient patriarchal imaginary still exists—persistently policing women's behavior, dress, and perceptions within public spaces.

Textile graffiti artists challenge these pervasive patriarchal restrictions that are placed on the female body. Yarnbombers interact with the city in a rigorous, corporeal manner—climbing walls, navigating crowds, and maneuvering back alleys, all the while on public display. Street

artist Stephanie Rond underscores this point, explaining,

[As a woman,] I was raised to fear certain types of confrontation, to fear being a disappointment or displeasing to anyone. Working on the street has definitely become a method through which I can conquer those old lessons... Be polite, be patient, smile pretty, sit quietly, wait your turn, be accommodating, don't ask for anything, don't draw attention to yourself—these are all things that were instilled in me. Street art can absolutely be interpreted as spitting in the face of all that.

(Stine, par 18.)

Reasoned by Rond, “Graffiti is speaking before being spoken to, writing your opinions—loudly and openly—when you weren’t even asked” (par. 19). Much like traditional graffiti artists, yarnstormers engage with the public realm in a highly physical and technically illegal manner. In so doing, they exceed the patriarchal imperatives of the Victorian moral mother as cloistered, pious, and restricted to the domestic.

In addition to their physical actions publicizing the female body, textile graffiti artists also make symbolic declarations of the female body through the content of their work. The Snatchel Project, for example, is a yarnbombing protest effort formed in 2012, following a slew of right-wing attacks on women’s reproductive rights (see “War on Women”). The project encourages craftswomen to knit or crochet bags and satchels in the shape and likeness of women’s reproductive organs, and then mail these handmade creations to Congress and the Senate. The Snatchel Project urges its craftivist followers, “Tell your male government representatives: ‘Hands off my uterus! Here’s one of your own!’” Its official website asks, “Men in Congress: If we knit you a uterus, will you stay out of ours?” (ibid.). The Snatchel Project includes a spreadsheet for tracking which government representatives have and have not yet



received their own hand-made uterus, along with links to tutorials and patterns for crafting a crocheted uterus, a felt cervix, and a knitted vulva. Exemplified by the Snatchel Project, textile graffiti artists politicize reproductive freedoms through symbolic publications of the female body.

Yarnstormers' emboldened physicality and visual publications of the female body juxtapose the nurturant, rehabilitative, and virtuous sentiments also forwarded through the form and content of their work. By conflating the abject and virtuous associations attached to hegemonic femininity, yarnstormers interrupt the patriarchal imperatives attached to the moral mother trope, while also moderating the tensions and false distinctions posed between public and private spheres of culture. In what follows I detail yarnbombers' additional restructuring of the moral mother trope. I argue that textile graffiti artists enact ostensibly "useless," non-functional, and self-directed actions to interrupt the moral mother's self-abnegation as requirement of patriarchal femininity.

### *Tension 2: Selflessness versus Uselessness*

#### Correspondence with the Moral Mother Trope: Yarnbombing as Charitable Production of Other-Oriented Pleasure

Textile graffiti artists and the moral mother align in their charitable production of emotional pleasures. As prototype for the moral mother trope, the proper Victorian woman was to provide a home environment that promoted her husband and children's well-being (Peterson 677). Through her sound household management, extensive domestic skills, and sweetness of temperament, the moral mother was to create a home space that would nurture and promote the emotional health of loved ones (ibid.). Ruth Bloch underscores this point, explaining that "Women came to be perceived as . . . 'moral mothers' . . . in relation to their children" and through their "supportive roles . . . [as] charity workers" (120). Moreover, Bloch reasons, "the

personality traits associated with these nineteenth century women, [that is] emotionalism (over reason), selflessness, and empathy[,] . . . characteristically contrasted to male rationalism, competitiveness, and individualism” (ibid). Through this contrast, women were granted strong moral authority and the private “woman’s sphere” as important fields of special expertise.

Textile graffiti artists align with their moral mother predecessors’ charitable efforts, similarly interested in the production of pleasure for others. The Montreal Guerilla Knitting collective underscores this point, explaining that, “Yarn bombing is about making people stop on their tracks and smile” (“Yarn Bombing Montreal” par. 1). Moore and Prain echo the Montreal Guerilla Knitters, reasoning that yarnstorming is “heart-warming, and . . . funny. . . . it resonates with almost everyone who encounters it . . . . [I]t inspires joy and surprise in others” (18, 20). Corroborating accounts provided by the Montreal Guerilla Knitters, as well as Moore and Prain, yarnbomber Jackie Kuhn argues that, “The public receives psychological benefits when they happen upon a yarn bomb. It brightens the day of passers-by . . . . [it] makes people smile and makes their day a little more joyful” (par. 8). Evidenced by the above accounts, textile graffiti artists mimic the moral mother trope through their charitable production of emotional pleasures.

For middle and upper middle class women of the Victorian era, this production of other-oriented pleasure extended to women’s charity circles and church-sponsored relief works (Wolf 168). In alignment with the piety and self-abdication of the moral mother trope, these Victorian women were expected to garner “good works” and “good deeds” through charitable efforts (ibid.). Textile graffiti practitioners resemble their moral mother predecessors by mirroring this benevolent ethos. Yarnbomber Jan ter Heide corroborates this point, underlining the altruistic dimensions of yarnbombing:

Last year I [yarnbombed] . . . some small stones on the beach in Connemara, and I came back one hour later and they were all gone. I don't mind, even it's taken away after five minutes, as long as people like it and have fun with it. . . . [T]he idea that someone takes [a tag] home or takes it in his car or her car, that's really the exciting idea for me. (cited in Moore and Prain 86)

Moore and Prain echo ter Heide's sentiment, reasoning that "You really can't predict how long a piece will stay where you place it. . . . Be prepared to see your target bare again the next time you pass by it. . . . [But] That's the fun of textile graffiti. . . . [realizing] that the piece may have been taken home by a new fan of your work" (51). Hand-making and gifting items to the streets and individuals, textile graffiti practitioners mirror the moral mother trope through their charitable attitudes and actions.

Performative Transformation of the Moral Mother: Yarnbombing as Pleasurable and Non-Utilitarian

*Self-Directed Pleasure*

Evidenced by the above and similar to their moral mother predecessors, yarnstormers are invested in cultivating emotional pleasure for others. However, unlike the moral mother—whose selfless nurturing infringed on her own autonomy and delight—yarnbombers additionally centralize their own self-directed pleasures within and through their creative endeavors.

Kathryn Abrams warns against the patriarchal ramifications of the moral mother trope, linking its selfless characteristics to women's victim status. Within historical and contemporary contexts, Abrams explains, women activists deploying the moral trope frequently foreground "the personal sacrifices they have made as mothers" in order to petition for political and economic actions as just form of recompense (855). Naomi Wolf argues that appeals centralizing women's selfless sacrifice function to naturalize patriarchal notions of a womanly morality,

which emanates from women's asymmetrical service to men (168). Stated differently, appeals to martyrdom function to perpetuate women's disempowered status in relationship to men's, because women must deny their own wants, aspirations, and pleasures in order to garner the moral authority and compensation that accompany those sacrificial claims. Textile graffiti artists mimic the moral mother trope—drawing on maternal imagery and producing pleasure for others—while confounding and denaturalizing the trope's victim status. Cultivating and flaunting their own pleasures through knit and installation processes, yarnstormers reject the moral mother's patriarchal appeal to martyrdom and its disempowering effects.

Answering the question “Why yarnbomb?” Moore and Prain foreground the pleasure of the creator, reasoning that, “it's fun [and] it provides opportunities for self-expression” (20). Echoing Moore and Prain in his ethnographic study of contemporary knitting circles, Corey Fields similarly centralizes “the intrinsic pleasures of knitting and the communal aspects of the knitting circle as motivations for joining the group” (154). Joanne Turney also underscores these personal and “intrinsic pleasures” of contemporary knitting. Set against the backdrop of a fast-paced modern world, Turney reasons that “Knitting is rhythmic, involving the repetition of bodily and tactile actions in the formation of stitches. . . . The rocking motion and repetition of knitting provokes a state of introversion . . . [that] can induce states of calm, release tension and anxiety, and act as a means of catharsis” (123). Evidenced by the above, knitters cultivate autonomous delights through the communal and individual pleasures of crafting.

The autonomous delights produced through yarnbombing extend past the act of crafting, also manifesting through ludic installations and ostentatious practitioner displays. While many yarnbombs contain deeply serious political messages, practitioners regularly create silly or playful ones, as well. Transforming parking meters and street benches into colorful crochet

monsters, turning stop signs into woven red roses, and adorning waterfronts with knitted ducks—yarnstormers produce ludic combinations as humorous interruptions of everyday monotony. This lighthearted spirit is further evidenced through the monikers or “code names” that many that yarnbombers chose—for example, PolyCotN, Incogknito, AKrylik, and Son-of-a-Stitch. Yarnstormers’ ludic play is additionally exhibited within practitioner manifestos and mainstream media coverage, both of which frequently invoke rhetorical puns playing off the ‘cutesy’, the ‘cozy’, and quotidian associations of knitting (i.e.: “Their guerilla knitting will have you in stitches!” or “Yarnbombers make graffiti seem all warm and fuzzy.”).



**Figure 3.7: Yarnbomb Meter Monster.**  
 Created by Hanasaurusrex.  
 Photo Courtesy of: Hanasaurusrex



**Figure 3.8: Knitted ducks.** Created by Yarndale.  
 Skipton Canal. Photo: Courtesy of Anna Fazakerley

Evidenced by the above, textile graffiti artists cultivate both self-directed and other-oriented delights. By centralizing first their own autonomous gratification, yarnstormers undermine the self-abdicating imperatives of the moral mother trope and evidence a pleasure-centered performance practice. Elizabeth Bell advocates for a performance-based politic of feminist aesthetics, wherein agents empower themselves by centralizing their own pleasures in and through performance practice. According to Bell, this feminist practice functions first to empower the performer, who cultivates her own self-directed pleasures. These autonomous delights are then gifted to audience members who absorb and re-experience potent performer joy in a relational manner (“Toward” 110). Textile graffiti practitioners simultaneously enact Bell’s feminist aesthetics of performance and undermine the moral mother trope—first centralizing their own pleasures, and then presenting them to their audience as nurturant gift.

Yarnbombers mimic the moral mother trope—retaining her *caregiving* appeal, while subverting her sacrificial and self-abdicating status. Through their ludic and humorous displays, yarnstormers leverage and evidence a self-directed and pleasure-centered ethos. Moreover, textile graffiti artists stake political claims on the reciprocal and empowering benefits emanating from a performer’s sovereign delights.

#### *Non-Utilitarian*

Entwined with the patriarchal self-sacrifice detailed above is the requisite “usefulness” that characterizes the moral mother ideal. According to Ruth Bloch, the moral mother’s vaunted morality is produced, not only through her self-sacrificing emotional service, but also through her unpaid physical service to men (103). This exploited physical service would include her industrious and utilitarian management of the domestic environment—up to and including the tasks of cooking, cleaning, mending, grocery shopping, and home scheduling (*ibid.*). Both the

emotional and physical imperatives of the moral mother ideal—while valuable and necessary skill-sets in their own right—can and have functioned on a representational level to position women’s elevated morality as a product of her inequitable service to men. Stated differently, hegemonic representations of maternal femininity do not present women with autonomous morality or individual worth in any organic sense. More accurately, their worth is based on their use value and potential for exploitation within a patriarchal and capitalist society. Yarnstormers mimic the moral mother ideal by transfiguring the traditionally “useful” and charitable action of knitting into a presumably useless, selfish, and profitless endeavor.

This rejection of knitting’s utilitarian purposes is key to yarnstormers’ mimicry of the moral mother trope. Joanne Turney highlights the useful conceptions that surround knitting, underscoring its thrifty and other-oriented status (27). As a cost-saving practice, knitting aligns with other needle and domestic arts used historically to decorate the home and provide inexpensive gifts. “‘Usefulness’ is significant [to knitting practice,]” Turney reasons, because it helps to negate threats of selfishness, leisure, or pleasure for its maker, and “ultimately reaffirms the maker’s position . . . within a group, family, community or wider world” (28). Lucy Lippard echoes Turney, similarly noting that the utility of knitting and other domestic crafts “inspire less fear in their makers of being ‘selfish’ or ‘self-indulgent’” (*Pink* 130).

Textile graffiti artists defy the utility that characterizes the moral mother trope. Highlighting the presumed uselessness of this nascent art form, detractors frequently denigrate yarnstorming for its lack of utilitarian purposes. Such critics argue that: “[P]eople should be making stuff for the homeless instead of making ‘useless’ yarn bombs (KidArtemis, par. 1); “Why don’t you spend all that time, effort and yarn knitting for charities instead of wasting it on yarn bombs?” (cited in Stevens, par. 5); and “[W]ouldn’t it be better if these people would use

their skills to knit blankets for homeless babies or something like that instead of making something that's just going to get trashed?" (Foster, par. 2). In response, practitioners argue that the textile graffiti's lack of direct import or "usefulness" is the very point of this feminist form. Magda Sayeg, for example, argues that textile graffiti is "inspiring the household knitter to do something beyond function" (Gonzales). Echoing Sayeg, Davina Jakobi concludes that "[Y]arnbombing has challenged audiences to reevaluate gender and age stereotypes . . . [by] inspiring a new generation of knitters who no longer view function as the sole purpose for knitting" (par. 6) Leanne Prain makes a similar point, highlighting the devaluation of women's craft as a legitimate art form: "We often do not criticize performance or installation or landscape artists who work in other mediums for 'waste.' Why is yarn [any] different?" (par. 2). Evidenced by the above, yarnstorming practitioners centralize their sovereign pleasures, privileging the creativity of their knit artifacts over their usefulness to others.

If, as Devlin argues, the point of mimicry is to reveal "the terms in which . . . [woman] is produced and circulated as commodity" for male benefit (71), then yarnstormers do this by interrupting patriarchal stipulations that a) foreground the moral mother's (male) use value over and above her own intrinsic value, and b) deny her own self-directed pleasures in favor of others' emotional and physical needs. Deploying knitting as domestic and maternal signifier, yarnstormers invoke the charitable and selfless characteristics of the moral mother in order to forward their own relational and caretaking values. However, as clever mimics, yarnbombers simultaneously publicize their own sovereign delights. In so doing, they politically leverage the moral mother trope, while denaturalizing her patriarchal imperatives toward martyrdom and victim status.



Performance scholar Kirk Fuoss argues that cultural performances often dramatize multiple axes of domination. In this sense, they may be understood as “ideological along one axis”—that is, perpetuating existing power asymmetries and patterns of domination—yet resistant, or challenging existing patterns of domination, along another (“Performance as Contestation” 332). Evidenced throughout the second half of this chapter, the cultural performance of yarnbombing can be understood as enacting both ideological and resistant directional effectivities: within the context of an ever-decreasing welfare state and the undue financial burdens that paucity places on women and/as caregivers, yarnbombing can be viewed as resistant of the hegemonic mindsets produced through neoliberal policy recommendations; however, by wielding the moral mother political trope—that is, her public nurturance and communal values—yarnbombing may very well contribute to ideological readings that reinforce women’s socially constructed and economically disadvantageous role as primary caregivers. It is my belief, however, that even this second reading of yarnbombing as an ideological enactment of gender requires a more nuanced interpretation.

Judith Butler explains how we do not choose the norms that constitute our genders, but rather, those gendered norms are determined through much larger historical and structural forces. Articulating her concept of gender performativity, Butler explains, “The performance of gender is compelled by norms that I do not choose. I work within the norms that constitute me. I do something with them. Those norms are the condition of my agency, and they also limit my agency” (Olson and Worsham 752). The moral mother ideal is one such example of a gender performance that is constituted through patriarchy, capitalist industrialization, and Victorian era cultural norms as external, hegemonic forces. However, for over two centuries and as enactments of gender performativity, Western women have drawn upon the restrictive moral mother ideal

and re-articulated it toward personal and political ends. Textile graffiti artists contribute to this trajectory—leveraging the piety, purity, and morality associated with the moral mother ideal, while defying and reworking her anhedonic, sacrificial, and utilitarian imperatives. Within a Western context where most legal barriers prohibiting women’s full participation in public and political life have been lifted, but perceptual, performative, and economic barriers still remain, re-mixtures of gender expression can be especially productive. Through their clever, joyful, and refreshing mixture of the moral mother’s conventionally effeminate characteristics with less familiar and more discordant ways of articulating the female gender, yarnbombers contribute to these more complex and much needed non-binary images of gendered subjectivity.

### **Conclusion**

For forty-plus years, neoliberal policy recommendations have slowly dismantled a once robust welfare state. Rather than subsidizing the costs and responsibilities associated with domestic care work practices through social welfare programs, the neoliberal state re-directs those costs and responsibilities onto private individuals and families. Taken in conjunction with shifting but still present patriarchal gender scripts, this re-routing of caregiving responsibilities falls unevenly along gendered lines—saddling single, married, and working women with the second-shift responsibility and often the financial burden of caring for children and elders.

In this chapter, I have positioned the cultural performance of textile graffiti as an enactment of a counterpublic of women, feminists, and caregivers who support the public valuation of caregiving and advocate for social welfare programs that subsidize family maintenance and human-to-human care. Recognizing the non-traditional, non-spoken, creative discourses that often constitute cultural performances, I have argued that yarnstorming

practitioners deploy visual and medium-based strategies, as well as feminist rhetorical strategies in order to symbolically forward their marginalized relational values.

## CHAPTER 4

## A TEXTILE GRAFFITI CASE STUDY:

*KNIT THE BRIDGE AS ENACTMENT OF FEMINIST PEDAGOGY*

In this chapter I use Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania's city-sanctioned Knit the Bridge project as a yarnbombing case study. Drawing on Kirk Fuoss's argument that cultural performances function to dramatize and negotiate community formations ("Community" 93), I detail the ways in which the Knit the Bridge project reconfigures community boundaries by reducing status quo hierarchies amongst racial, classed, aged, and ability divides.

In the August of 2013, a Pittsburgh community arts project yarnbombed the Andy Warhol Bridge. Called *Knit the Bridge* [KtB], over 1,870 participant-volunteers helped to cover the structure's towers and pedestrian walkways with 588 vibrant knit and crochet panels—each one measuring 3 feet by 6 feet in length. While on display for only four weeks, the large-scale installation required fourteen months of prior organizing, fundraising, and needle work, and enlisted the help of 128 community partners (Oliver, par. 20). Official project descriptions detail Knit the Bridge as using "the accessible and widespread craft traditions of knit and crochet as a catalyst to create strong, healthy, resourceful community networks that will last beyond the project itself. Knit the Bridge connects communities by bringing people together in new ways to knit, crochet, design, install, and collaborate" (Ujamaa Collective). Elsewhere, KtB coordinators have similarly underscored the installation's communal intentions, outlining the project as "a vision for grassroots, community-led arts project that would bring the many diverse communities of Pittsburgh and Southwestern Pennsylvania together to create a large-scale, aesthetically stunning, fiberarts installation on a bridge in Pittsburgh" (Gross "About" par. 1). Recognizing

yarnbombing as a contemporary cultural performance, in this chapter I look to KtB as a yarnbombing case study.

Performance scholar Kirk Fuoss argues that the role of cultural performances is to dramatize, inscribe, and/or re-articulate communities by highlighting, securing, and/or negotiating their contestations and divides (“Community” 93). KtB’s lead artist Amanda Gross recognizes Pittsburgh’s connections and divides, reasoning that “Bridges are such an awesome symbol of bringing communities together; unfortunately, in Southwestern Pennsylvania, bridges often divide us as much as they connect us” (Sandberg). By yarnbombing the Andy Warhol Bridge, “Knit the Bridge seeks to bring as many Southwestern Pennsylvania communities together as possible to create this work of art. Our goal is to have participation from every city neighborhood, every township and borough in Allegheny County, and every county in the southwestern PA region” (ibid.). Evidenced by the above, KtB wields the power of cultural performances to dramatize and re-articulate community bounds.



**Figure 4.1: Knit the Bridge installation. Pittsburgh. Photo: Courtesy of Annette C. Sandberg**

In this chapter, I approach Knit the Bridge as a women-led cultural performance and citywide enactment of yarnbombing. More specifically, I detail the ways in which KtB uses feminist pedagogical strategies to cultivate and (re-)articulate Pittsburgh's community bounds throughout its creation and installation process. Sylvia Federici positions women as historical and contemporary shepherds of community ("Politics of the Commons" par. 18). Ann Manicom echoes this sentiment. Situating the cultivation of community as key tenet of feminist pedagogy, Manicom isolates *experience*, *collaboration*, and *authority* as pivotal concepts guiding feminist pedagogical approaches (366, 370). In what follows, I explicate KtB's cultivation and renegotiation of community within the city of Pittsburgh—using experience, collaboration, and authority as feminist methodological framework. Before detailing KtB's engagement with these three feminist and communal themes, I first prove a brief overview of feminist pedagogy and its relationship to community building.

### **Community Building and/as Feminist Pedagogy**

According to Ann Manicom, feminist pedagogues seek to interrupt and transform oppressive power relations Centralizing gender issues, feminist pedagogues draw on women's histories and subjectivities as a springboard for recognizing race, class, and sexuality as intertwined layers of systemic inequalities (369). Manicom argues that all feminist pedagogues—despite their diverse standpoints and applications—seek to “engage in action for social change . . . [by] making connections to the world beyond the classroom[,] not just in theory but also in practice” (368). In other words, feminist teachers see classrooms and local communities as fecund microcosms, which then constitute and flower into our larger social world (Briskin 23). Working methodically from root to branch, feminist teachers seek to produce macro-level

changes by modeling and molding egalitarian relationships and interactions within their micro worlds.

Knit the Bridge aligns with these feminist pedagogical aims. Just as feminist teachers seek “To change the world” (Manicom 383), KtB project descriptions similarly situate the citywide yarnbomb as “a tool for. . . creating positive change in the world” (Sciullo, par. 26). Feminist pedagogues and Knit the Bridge further ally themselves through “community building and community organizing” as common foci (ibid.). Manicom highlights this shared focus, characterizing feminist pedagogues as attentive to community; more specifically, she explains how feminist pedagogues recognize community cultivation as integral prerequisite for critical analysis, worldly action, and personal empowerment (368). Manicom argues that feminist instructors are best able to create and strengthen community by triangulating: the expression of women’s experience, the practice of collaboration, and the concept/critique of authority relations.

*Experience, Collaboration, and Authority Relations*

Attention toward and validation of women’s historical, contemporary, and subjective *experience* is a cornerstone of feminist pedagogy. In patriarchal cultures women have been taught to devalue and distrust their experiences; as a result, their unique viewpoints, individual leadership, and collective voices are frequently diminished within public spaces and community structures (Fraser “Rethinking” 63-4). Within feminist learning spaces then, women’s autonomous expression of experience serves a) to correct for this diminution of women’s voice and leadership, and b) to counteract the distorted narratives about women that are propagated within and constitutive of hegemonic culture (Manicom 370-1). Strengthening this foundation of women’s experience is the feminist pedagogical practice of *collaboration*. Through sharing, attentive listening, and mutual support, these collaborative learning practices guard against

competitive, individualistic, and exclusionary modes that diminish community within the classroom and our larger social worlds (Manicom 375). The feminist pedagogue's cultivation of community through collaboration and shared experiences then lends itself to the concept/critique of *authority relations*. Seeking ultimately to interrupt oppressive power relations, feminist pedagogues' nourish a community of pupils that will a) recognize and analyze the power relations operating within society, and b) engage actions that are meant to dismantle or reconfigure those relations within and outside the classroom.

Evidenced by the above, the feminist pedagogue approaches community building as a means to interrupt alienating or disenfranchising social structures. In order to cultivate community, the feminist instructor sees valuing women's experiences, encouraging collaboration, and questioning authority relations as intertwined and mutually reinforcing themes (Manicom 380). Having overviewed feminist pedagogues' and KtB project organizers' mutual commitment to community building, in what follows, I detail KtB's engagement with women's experience, collaboration, and authority relations as feminist mechanisms for strengthening and re-articulating community within the wider Pittsburgh area.

## **Experience**

The publication of women's historical and contemporary experience is key to the community building that fosters feminist analyses and actions on our larger social worlds. As feminist pedagogues, KtB project coordinators centralize and publicize women's historical experience by engaging the gendered art of fiber craft as aesthetic medium. In so doing, they empower volunteers—helping them a) to transform the distorted narratives written *about* women by patriarchal culture and b) to build expansive community networks.



### *Disrupting Patriarchal Narratives*

Both nurturing and spinster stereotypes surround the practice and person who knits. The former positively frames the knitter as a self-sacrificing and other-oriented maternal figure who holds together the family and home, as the latter transfigures the maternal knitter into negative “spinster” or “old lady” stereotypes. According to Elizabeth Grosz, this false splintering of the effeminate into the culturally desirable and culturally abject is a commonplace mechanism of patriarchal control (149). Feminist pedagogues seek to rectify these patriarchal machinations by centralizing, enacting, and honoring women’s authentic histories and subjective experiences. In what follows, I situate these mutually competing conceptions surrounding the effeminate knitter within the context of KtB. Next, I explain how KtB project organizers centralize and honor women’s authentic historical narratives by facilitating the gendered and embodied practice of knitting. Recognizing this facilitation, I situate KtB project coordinators as feminist pedagogues who work to alter the hegemonic associations surrounding knitting practice and/as gendered history.

#### Positive Characterizations of the Gendered Knitter

Positive characterizations of the gendered knitter situate her as a nurturing and maternal figure that provides comfort and safety to others within the familial home. Ricia Chansky underscores these associations, reckoning that needlework “carries associations to the home, [and] older generations of female relatives” (682). KtB participants and project organizers echo these gendered sentiments, similarly noting knit and crochet’s links to women’s history and experience. Participant Cindy Carroll, for example, describes herself as “a longtime knitter” and “all-around fiber arts appreciator,” who “learned at my mother’s knee” (Gross “Cindy Carroll” par. 5). In a video documenting KtB’s installation process, a volunteer named Bonnie is shown

reminiscing while weaving a vibrant panel: “I am going back to my childhood,” Bonnie says, “sitting at my mother's feet, crocheting” (Red House). In that same video an unnamed female volunteer explains, “My grandmother taught me when I was four to knit, and then I taught my grandchildren” (ibid.). KtB volunteer David Troyer similarly explains how he “was introduced to Fiber Arts through my grandmothers’ doilies, quilts and blankets” (Gross “David Troyer” par. 5). Represented by the above four examples, the gendered linkage between knitting and women’s historical experience are recognized and centralized by KtB volunteers, project coordinators, and media correspondents. Such linkages are consistent with feminist pedagogical tenets that seek to “mak[e] visible women’s actions, achievements, and concerns” as well as the “historical experiences of women” (Manicom 368, 369).

#### Negative Characterizations of the Gendered Knitter

The above examples evidence the positive cultural associations that situate knitting practitioners as nurtures. However, patriarchal culture frequently transfigures these positive characterizations of the maternal knitter into the equally prevalent stereotype of the “spinster” weaver. In his ethnographic study of the contemporary knitting circle, Corey Fields identifies the prevalence of this negative stereotype. Fields argues that young knitters today are acutely aware of pervasive cultural clichés that characterize knitters as aged, lonely, gossipy, as well as sexually or socially irrelevant. This portrayal, Fields reasons, is “consistent with [larger cultural] portrayals of older women that ‘suggests that with age comes a loss of happiness, [desirability, and] social utility’” (Fields citing Bauman and de Laat 155). Evidenced above, the knitter as effeminate figure is simultaneously understood as both positive maternal figure and a negative spinster trope.

## Unifying the Effeminate Through Embodied Practice

Feminist pedagogues recognize this false splintering of the effeminate into desirable and abject characterizations as a function of hegemonic culture. Moreover, they seek to rectify these patriarchal machinations by centralizing, enacting, and honoring women's *authentic* histories and subjective experiences. Manicom underscores this point, explaining, "In many disciplines, feminist critiques have shown that what is taken to be official and sanctioned knowledge about women and their relations to the world is in fact riddled with distortions and omissions. One reason, therefore, for beginning in women's experience is to transform [hegemonic] knowledge production" (370-1).

The negative cultural associations that surround knitters as unhappy and irrelevant spinsters are one example of the patriarchal knowledge production that Manicom refers. As feminist pedagogues, KtB project organizers help to alter the hegemonic associations that surround the gendered practice of knitting by enacting it as embodied practice. Through this embodiment, negative cultural stereotypes are reconciled and communities are produced. This concomitant transformation of gendered stereotypes and community cultivation are exemplified through KtB's involvement with the Allegheny Youth Development program, located on the North Side of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

The Allegheny Youth Development [AYD] program is a non-profit organization designed to "help highly at-risk adolescent boys grow into responsible, productive men" ("About AYD" par. 1). The basis of the program is to shepherd at-risk youth into activities they would not normally have opportunities to partake in, "like judo and golf, sculpting with clay, hiking in the woods, and knitting" (Beras). According to AYD director Brian Foltz, "What we've found, is that if you teach . . . [these boys] something unusual, . . . something that they haven't

experienced before . . . it's a lot easier to work in life's lessons and lessons on things like self-control" (ibid.). Seeing the Knit the Bridge project as a unique opportunity, several AYD participants were taught how to finger knit in order to contribute a panel and represent their North Side community.

Initially, the boys were resistant to the idea of knitting. Buying into negative patriarchal stereotypes, thirteen-year-old Isaiah Thompson admits, "At first, I thought it was kind of girly" (Beras). Shar Harris—an AYD program coordinator and mother to youth knitter Diondre Harris—helps to interpret Thompson's perspective, reasoning that "Boys and knitting, they're not used to it. . . [but, eventually] they found it interesting. It got to be relaxing . . . that's what they started to say it was" (ibid.). Brian Foltz echoes Harris, explaining how, for these boys, the thought of knitting initially conjured up "stereotyp[es of] . . . little old ladies . . . [who] sit around and gossip" (ibid). Over time, Foltz continues, "Despite the eye-rolling and bravado boy talk, 'these guys [find that they] are doing something interesting . . . they're talking to each other, and they're visiting with one another" (ibid). Consistent with feminist pedagogical tenets, by authentically encountering women's historical experience through the embodied action of knitting, these young male knitters were able to transform their erroneous and previously held beliefs about knitting practice and its female practitioners.

Sixteen-year old Diondre Harris highlights this transformation, recognizing that knitting is "just positive . . . I like it so much; I just love it. . . . If you need . . . something to do to take your mind off of something, like if somebody bashes my family or my friend or something . . . . [then] you can knit . . . [and] it helps you express yourself, without havin' to be violent or criminal-minded, or anything bad. Like, [through knitting] you can express yourself in a positive way" (ibid). Shar Harris corroborates her son's reasoning, explaining, "You have children in an

intercity community where it's very violent . . . . [I]f you give them something [like knitting] to take their mind off of their problems—even for a minute—if it's a school problem, or an at-home problem—give 'em a little leeway, just a little something, and it gives them a chance to breathe” (ibid.) By experiencing knitting through their own bodies, rather than pre-existing cultural myths, the AYD knitters were able to recognize its positive, productive, and community-building aspects.

Jack Bratich and Heidi Brush lend a scholarly voice to the embodied recognition experienced by the AYD knitters. According to Bratich and Brush, “the knitting circle or sewing circle”—often noted for being women-only spaces—historically “have function[ed] to provide a different kind of subject formation” (240). These spaces, Bratich and Brush explain,

allow[ed] women to swap stories, skills, knowledge, and strategies and generally speak about the more oppressive aspects of the[ir] social home[s and lives]. It is no wonder, then, that these “tightly knit groups” had to be ridiculed as “gossiping circles” and otherwise managed semiotically. Seen as idle work, a waste of time, and unproductive activity from the perspective of capital and masculinized value, these forms of craft-work . . . get marginalized [by hegemonic and patriarchal forces]. (240)

Evidenced by the narratives of the AYD youth knitters, and corroborated by Bratich and Brush, knitting is a physical act linked to women's histories and experiences; as such, it has been misunderstood and misrepresented by hegemonic forces. For KtB volunteers like the AYD knitters, such hegemonic knowledge was transformed as they became subject to women's experience and practice via the knitting circle. Through feminist pedagogical process, AYD knitters were able to recognize the social and emotional functions of the sewer's circle as binding

and bonding community members together—providing a physical act to focus on and relax with, as well as a communicative space to verbalize hardships and process difficult experience amongst equally vulnerable peers.

### *Expanding Community Networks*

While feminist pedagogues centralize the sharing of *women's* histories and personal experience, they also recognize that men *and* women can benefit emotionally and interpersonally from this relational method of learning (Manicom 376). Stated differently, in its most ideal form, the feminist learning space will *begin* in women's experience and then expand outwardly to include the narratives, history, and experiences of *all* community members. Through this process, the feminist pedagogue helps not only to cultivate community through intimate methodologies, but also to block out essentializing narratives—about women, men, and any other cultural identities— by forming a pluralized foundation of historical and subjective experiences. KtB emulates this feminist practice of relational sharing. Beginning first in women's historical experience of knitting, then moving outward to include the experiences of other marginalized groups—for example, the at-risk and underserved boys of Pittsburgh's Allegheny Youth Development program— KtB ultimately attempts to honor and document the personal narratives and histories of *all* its crafters and volunteers, despite gender or degree of personal hardship.

Amanda Gross underscores this attempt, highlighting KtB's laborious documentation of each contributor's community membership and back-story:

[W]e've really taken pains to make sure that each panel or piece of a panel . . . has been tracked, so we know who made it and where they're from, what community they represent, so that once its on the bridge, people can search for their panel and

find it. And then also we're keeping track of the back stories behind them, because I think that's a big part of the project. So that people can also . . . read some of those stories that go along with [each panel]. (R. Carter)

KtB volunteer Cindy Carrol remarks similarly, explaining how,

So many of the bits and pieces and panels for KtB came with [back-]stories . . . . I've loved hearing the stories, and knowing that each and every one is cherished and recorded as part of the project. . . . [In this sense,] The best part for me has been witnessing the grassroots activity of "knitting communities together" that is at the heart of Knit the Bridge. (Gross "Cindy Carroll" par. 7)

Evidenced by the above, KtB project coordinators align with feminist pedagogical tenets, recognizing that hearing others' and "speaking one's experiences . . . [is a] routine good practice, for both psychological and political reasons" (Manicom 375). As feminist pupils continue to "share their knowledge and experiences" they will see how their experiences are linked, thus forming a broader sense of community, developing broader social analyses, and constructing more and more possibilities for collective action (ibid.).

In addition to sharing and witnessing historical narratives and subjective experiences, KtB further models feminist pedagogical approaches through its collaborative mode of organizing. In what follows, I detail this mode, evidencing the ways it contributes to community cultivation and renegotiation.

### **Collaboration**

Manicom explains that within feminist pedagogy literature "it is argued that collaborative learning practices allow women to recognize and build connections with one another" (Manicom 375). Through these collaborative practices, pupils "will build a sense of community and

sisterhood, and will construct possibilities for collective action” (ibid.). Rory Dicker defines feminist “sisterhood” in opposition to competitive individualism. According to Dicker, competitive individualism sees the individual as inherently separate from others, and therefore privileges her/his needs and wants over those of the collective; whereas, the concept of “sisterhood” privileges the collective over the individual, and sees the individual’s actions as always in relationship to the larger community whole (16). Feminist pedagogy extends from the relational, collaborative, and collectivist standpoint of the former—viewing competition, exclusivity, and individualism as impediments to democratic learning processes and inclusive outcomes (Manicom 367, 375; Schniedewind 271). In what follows, I explain how feminist pedagogues work to foster collaboration and community by eschewing competitive individualism and elitism. Situating KtB project coordinators as feminist pedagogues, I explain how they cultivate collaboration amongst volunteers by a) modeling relational understandings of the individual and b) utilizing accessible and democratic media.

#### *Towards a Relational Model of the Individual*

Feminist pedagogues understand collaborative learning in relationship to competitive and individualized modes of instruction. As Linda Briskin explains, “Feminism is a world view . . . that pulls us away from individualism” and toward an understanding of the systemic character of our individual experience (19); feminism “moves us from a dependence and reliance on individual solutions . . . to collective strategies and social and political solutions” (ibid.). The collaborative approaches that characterize feminist pedagogy, however, do not deny the individual. More accurately and following women’s consciousness raising traditions, they “help us to make sense of our individual experience[s]” (ibid.) by situating them within a systemic or mosaic understanding. In other words, feminist pedagogical approaches recognize the individual



as a worthwhile and constituent part of a systemic social structure (Manicom 371). KtB emulates this mosaic approach—viewing and valuing the subjective/individual as comprising a much larger community whole. Volunteer Jenny Tabrum underscores this point, explaining that because “KtB is just so big, we all need each other in order to make it happen. Each individual . . . add[s] to the larger mosaic [installation that] . . . will be given to the city as a whole” (Gross “Jenny Tabrum” par. 8). Volunteer Kitty Spangler similarly highlights the systemic approach modeled in and through KtB’s instructional process. Reflecting on her lessons learned through KtB, Spangler has come to recognize and identify with the motto “to each one teach one”—meaning that “for everyone taught, there will be an opportunity for the them to teach in turn” (Lessner, par. 23). Consistent with feminist pedagogical tenets, this relational motto values the talents of each individual, while framing them as gifts that can and should be given to others.

At the Greater Pittsburgh’s Arts Council annual meeting in 2014, lead artist Amanda Gross further underscores the deep-rooted integrity of KtB’s relational process. Accepting the Mayor’s Public Art Award on behalf of Knit the Bridge, Gross explains how,

Knit the Bridge grew from the ground up, one stitch at a time, hundreds of stitchers stitching together. Each individual stitcher had confidence that thousands of others would hold up their end of the deal. Knitting groups at libraries, in classrooms, and in yarn shops believed that there were other groups out there, committed to the same cause. . . . Trust, cooperation, sharing, *recognizing our interdependence*, and relying on the ability, knowledge, and competence of others are all things Knit the Bridge taught me. (Gross “Knit the Bridge Wins” pars. 4, 6, emphasis added)

Leveraging collaborative methodologies, KtB holds in tension the feminist pedagogue’s valuing

of the subjective/individual experience in relationship to systemic understandings and larger communal concerns. Fostered through this relational understanding of the individual are democratic relations that allow individuals “to recognize and build connections with one another, forging the solidarity required for collective struggle” (375).

### *Accessible and Democratic Media*

To ensure collaborative relations, through which a plurality of voices and bodies can speak out over the competitive individual, feminist pedagogues seek out democratic processes (Schniedewind 13). Lead artist Amanda Gross helps to situate this collaborative and democratic ethos within the context of KtB, reasoning that, “Being inclusive means that anyone can come along and shape the [KtB] project” (Sandberg). Utilizing knitting and the Internet as accessible media of creation and organization, KtB embeds democratic and collaborative structures within its production process.

### Knitting

Democratic participation and collaborative modes of instruction are dependent upon equal access to resources and opportunities. Integral to this notion of collaboration, which feminist pedagogues and Gross mutually underscore, was the selection of knit and crochet as KtB’s primary aesthetic media. “A lot of people knit and crochet,” Gross said. “It’s . . . a very accessible medium and it cuts across all different ethnicities, ages, gender” (Nath, par. 7). Unlike much of fine art, which can involve expensive supplies and years of training, “you can knit with two sticks and some kind of fiber” says Gross (Hamilton, par. 3). Gross reasons that the accessibility of knitting, weaving, and crocheting as aesthetic media is partially what “has made it really easy for people to get excited about [KtB] and feel like they can be a part of it. A lot of people are missing that . . . . They just want an opportunity to participate” (Jenner, par. 15).

Project coordinators underscore Gross's reasoning, explaining that "Here at KtB we love knit and crochet because it's accessible, it's simple (at it's most basic), the tools are affordable (think thrift store yarn and two pencils)" (Gross "Pittsburgh Knit and Crochet Festival!" par. 2).

Moreover, the medium of knitting and its historical links to sociality help KtB volunteers toward their goal of cultivating community. One KtB volunteer underscores this point, explaining that "[Knitting is] a very communal thing . . . . You can sit and talk to people or listen to music, or do other things" (Red House). Volunteer Debbie Goldberg similarly highlights the social aspects of knitting. Remarking on a KtB knitting meet-up, Goldberg explains how "[It] was a really special experience to be sitting among other knitters and we were all talking about any topic that came to mind," Goldberg said. "It was nice to sit and knit and be together" (Goldstein, par. 12). Utilizing the "accessible and widespread craft traditions of knit and crochet as a catalyst to create strong, healthy, resourceful community networks" (Ujamaa Collective), KtB enacts feminist pedagogues' interrelated concerns for access, collaboration, and democratic inclusion.

### The Internet

In addition to KtB's selection of knitting as accessible aesthetic medium, this community project also utilizes the Internet as an inclusive organizational mechanism that strengthens collaborative outcomes. KtB utilized a variety of (mostly free) online platforms throughout its creation process, including: Facebook and a Wordpress blog for information dissemination; Youtube and Vimeo for promotional videos; an Indiegogo campaign for crowd-sourced fundraising; and an online database to track and provide back-stories on all community participants. Leveraging the inexpensive and open-access of the Internet, KtB project organizers posted frequent updates and reminders for volunteers regarding project deadlines, and community meet-ups. Additionally, project coordinators regularly updated the KtB process

documentation online, while also presenting reoccurring profiles on various community participants—including their history with the city of Pittsburgh and the fiber arts.

According to Jeffrey Ayres (135) as well as Jerry Berman and Daniel Weitzner (1315), the Internet lends itself to more democratic and inclusive participation due to its rapid speed of diffusion, affordable cost, and de-centralized architecture. Elaborating on this point, Berman and Weitzner explain,

Th[e] highly constricted access to the mass media has all but strangled democratic discourse in the United States. In sharp contrast, the Internet has opened up new opportunities for grass-roots discourse. . . . A user can [inexpensively] create a new Web site . . . that will be publicly accessible to millions of Internet users around the world . . . without obtaining permission in advance from any central authority. (1314)

Given the low cost and decentralized structure characterizing the World Wide Web, Berman and Weitzner see the Internet as an accessible option for community organizers who are committed to a particular cause, and needing to organize and spread information efficiently and inexpensively.

KtB volunteers recognize the grassroots organizing facilitated by the Internet and detailed by Berman and Weitzner. This recognition is made clear as KtB project organizers promote the bottom-up ethos that characterizes KtB and the Internet as organizational mechanism. For example, on their official Wordpress blog, project organizers write, “Knit the Bridge has officially launched our Indiegogo campaign . . . Indiegogo is an online fundraising campaign . . . that uses a fundraising strategy called crowd sourcing. It’s a way for us to raise funds just like we’ve created Knit the Bridge. Everyone pitches in a few stitches (or a few dollars) and we end

up with a community-made and community-funded piece of public art” (Gross “Support Knit the Bridge” par. 1, 2). Elsewhere, Gross produces similar sentiments. Speaking on KtB’s largely crowd-sourced funding, she explains how “[I]t would be great if we could fund this project the way we’ve been creating it. From the ground up” (Sandberg).

Describing her trajectory as KtB’ lead artist, Amanda Gross explains “I was looking for different ways to connect people and connect different communities” (Jenner, par. 4). Facilitated through her educational study of arts and peace building, Gross has come to recognize that “process is just as important as the final product” (ibid.). Stated differently, KtB project coordinators recognize the constitutive relationship between creative process and creative outcomes. Seeking ultimately to cultivate community and engender collaborative relations among Pittsburgh citizens, KtB organizers as feminist pedagogues engaged knitting and the Internet as democratic and collaborative media of creation and organization.

### **Authority**

The feminist pedagogue’s cultivation of community through collaboration and shared experiences lends itself to the concept and critique of *authority relations*. Seeking ultimately to interrupt oppressive and exclusionary power relations, feminist pedagogues work to nourish a community of pupils that will a) recognize and analyze the power relations operating within society, and b) engage actions that are meant to dismantle or reconfigure those relations within and outside the classroom. Situated within the context of KtB, in what follows, I detail the ways in which volunteers as feminist pedagogues help to track and reconfigure hierarchies, exclusivities, and power relations within KtB leadership contexts, Pittsburgh’s larger community contexts, and in gendered contexts.

### *Leadership Contexts*

Nancy Schniedewind explains that feminist values replace hierarchical authority with participatory inclusion (13). Manicom echoes this point, reasoning that a “basic theme in feminist pedagogy literature orients us to the precept that hierarchical relations should be minimized between teacher and student” (379). As an enactment of feminist pedagogy, KtB reduces power relations between project organizers and community volunteers.

Amanda Gross highlights this diminishing of authority relations between pupil and students, reasoning that “[T]o really do grassroots community organizing or community-based public art, it’s . . . about building a really widespread, very horizontal . . . team . . . [thereby] giving over a lot of the project . . . and letting them take it where they want it to go” (Sandberg). KtB evidences this lateral organizing by minimizing the authority vested in Gross’s *lead* artist role, and through open and ongoing invitations to project leadership positions. The latter is highlighted within KtB’s official blog, as project coordinators remind prospective volunteers that “Any one can attend” their community leaders meeting, in order to help “organize information, ideas, and share community contacts. . . . We would love to see you there!” (Gross “Community Leaders—Take Three!” par. 3). This open call to *any* interested community organizer goes beyond lip service, with one of KtB’s youngest community leaders joining as only a high school student. Attending Pittsburgh’s Neighborhood Academy—a “college preparatory independent school whose mission is to break the generational cycle of poverty by preparing low-income youth for college and citizenship” (“Mission Statement”)—this student leader helped to “spread the Knit the Bridge word at her school” (Gross “KtB Artist in Residence” par. 4).

Other community leaders, Kitty Spangler for example, detail the egalitarian lessons furnished to them through their leadership role. Describing the challenges she’s encountered

during her time with KtB, Spangler explains, “I have a tendency to want to be in control and to do all of the work. So I have been learning to sit back, a bit, share tasks, and yarn, and try to do what I can without being totally consumed by the project. I am learning to listen and to collaborate” (Knit the Bridge “Kitty Spangler” par. 11). Individuals outside of the KtB project also recognize its “distributed authorship.” For example, Alexandra Oliver—an arts commentator for the *Pittsburgh Articulate*—views Knit the Bridge as “socially progressive because . . . [it] reposition[s] the artist as one maker among many and engage communities in dialogue with an emphasis on social inclusion” (par. 23).

Consistent with the feminist pedagogical imperative to model egalitarian social relationships by reducing hierarchical relations between teacher and student, KtB project leaders seek a similar “reorganization of social relationships” through “collaborative methodolog[ies]” and “listening versus speaking” (Gross “Knit the Bridge Capstone”). Evidenced by the above, KtB functions as an enactment of feminist pedagogy by reducing power relations between project organizers and community volunteers. In what follows, I overview the ways that KtB mitigates and renegotiates hierarchies within the Pittsburgh arts community.

#### *Pittsburgh Art’s Community Context*

Feminist pedagogues view the classroom as fecund microcosms that constitute and flower into our larger social worlds (Briskin 23). In this regard, enacting egalitarian relationships at a micro or instructional level functions to produce tangible alterations to social relationships within larger community structures. As enactment of feminist pedagogy, KtB’s distributed authorship expands outwardly—crossing boundaries and fostering inclusivity within the wider Pittsburgh arts community.

Sponsored in part by the Fiberarts Guild of Pittsburgh, the Pittsburgh Filmmakers, and the Pittsburgh Center for the Arts, KtB is endowed by Pittsburgh's robust arts community. "[T]here is a strong tradition here. . . . [of] Pittsburgh artists [who] are community-minded," states Kirsten Ervin, a KtB volunteer and accessible arts instructor. "They see arts as a way that community can be engaged" (cited in Oliver, par. 18). However, despite its apparent strength, Pittsburgh's arts community is not without its contestations and limitations. Clarifying these communal divides, local artist and academic Ayanah Moor points out that "Pittsburgh suffers from having a poor public transit system . . . . [and is] still very segregated . . . . So when you ask about 'community' you have to ask, [if and] how can people move around . . . [to] and see [and create] things?" (Oliver, par. 14). KtB project coordinators echo Moor, similarly recognizing the ways in which "Pittsburgh neighborhoods and surrounding townships tend to be segregated by race, class, and ethnicity" (Gross "82% of Allegheny County" par. 4).

Pittsburgh's history and geography have coalesced to create a vibrant community of artists, nonetheless stratified along raced, classed, and gentrified lines; however, performance scholar Kirk Fuoss argues that—contrary to popular belief—division and contestation do not negate community, but more accurately, they function to create it. Fuoss asserts, "[Often times] community is thought to involve sharing, similarity, cohesion, and camaraderie, while contestation is thought to involve conflict, difference, divisiveness, and enmity. . . . Far from being oppositional social forces, [however,] community and contestation are . . . intimate bedfellows, with each one incessantly producing and reproducing the other" ("Community" 94). Stated differently, community and contestation are mutually informing cultural processes. Moreover, Fuoss reasons, the role of cultural performances is to dramatize, inscribe, and/or re-



articulate communities by highlighting, securing, and/or negotiating their contestations and divides (“Community” 93).

Knit the Bridge project organizers recognize the co-constitutive relationship circulating among the Pittsburgh arts community, its geographical boundaries, and classed divides: “Bridges,” Amanda Gross reasons, “are such an awesome symbol of bringing communities together; unfortunately, in Southwestern Pennsylvania, bridges often divide us as much as they connect us” (Sandberg). Seeking participation from every Pittsburgh neighborhood and Allegheny County municipality, the cultural performance of KtB is “about bringing people together. Knitting stronger communities and bridging different ones” (ibid.). Ultimately achieving their intended goal, KtB leverages feminist methodologies to reconfigure community boundaries by reducing status quo hierarchies and divides amongst racial, classed, aged, and ability divides.

#### Race and Class

Using the power of public and community engaged art, KtB project coordinators sought to mitigate raced and classed divisions within Pittsburgh. Utilizing start-up donation funding from the Sprout Fund—a Pittsburgh based organization awarding grants to creative ideas that “inspire a diverse group of participants to be more active, involved, and civically-engaged” (“Sprout Seed Award”)—KtB hired Laverne Kemp as Diversity Coordinator. Kemp’s job responsibilities were focused on “getting word out and following up with folk in many Pittsburgh communities with a specific focus on communities of color” (Gross “Laverne Kemp” par. 1). Examples of KtB’s diversity efforts include participation from both the Allegheny Youth Development Program and the Neighborhood Academy—two schools representing underserved students of color within the Pittsburgh area. Garnering participation from communities of color,

KtB additionally focused on bridging class divides. Among these efforts, project organizers dispersed knitting meet-ups and panel drop-off points across poor, middleclass, and wealthy Pittsburgh neighborhoods, and donated many of 588 knit panels to homeless shelters throughout the region upon de-installation. Moving beyond charity relations, Amanda Gross helps to highlight the homeless community's participatory role within the city-wide yarnbomb: "A lot of the homeless folks that hang out on the bridge helped keep an eye on it," she said. "So often we think of folks who are homeless as people who need things, but I feel like in this project they were able to be an important part in contributing to making the project a success" (Garcia, par. 7). Evidenced by the above and as an enactment of feminist pedagogy, KtB project organizers made concerted efforts to reduce status quo hierarchies within the Pittsburgh arts community by bridging raced and classed divides.

#### Age

In addition to race and class, KtB worked to reconfigure Pittsburgh community boundaries and to mitigate social hierarchies by including a variety of ages in this community project. KtB counts at least 286 youth volunteers among its community participants—boasting representation from various kindergarten classrooms, elementary and high schools, Girl Scout troops, as well as the Shuman Juvenile Detention Center (Gross "Kids Help Stitch"). Additionally, KtB's diversity coordinator also targeted Pittsburgh's senior centers and senior homes within her recruitment efforts (Gross "Laverne Kemp" par. 1). In her newspaper feature on KtB's senior knitters, Maria Sciallo profiled seventy-one year-old Ms. Deaniello. Sciallo writes about how KtB was "so therapeutic for [Deaniello]. She had a few hospital stays and every time she went in, people would say 'What are you [knitting]?' She'd pull out the little [KtB promotional] card and tell them proudly what it was all about" (pars. 17, 18). Amanda

Gross underscores the diversity of ages represented by KtB at a Pittsburgh City Council meeting, stating that, “This project literally sews the work of many people throughout the region together. . . . From our youngest knitter at the children’s museum to our most elder crocheter at the senior center” (Gross “Knit the Bridge Ordinance Passes”). Mitigating ageist hierarchies and rearticulating community bounds, “Since [KtB] began, people have been crossing bridges, both literally and metaphorically” (ibid.).

### Ability

Along with race, class, and age, the creation and installation of KtB’s citywide yarnbomb functioned to mitigate ableist hierarchies within the Pittsburgh arts community. Making an earnest effort to bridge ableist divides, KtB appointed Kirsten Ervin— an accessible art instructor and consultant —as KtB’s Accessibility Coordinator. Ervin explains, “What I love about Knit the Bridge is how truly democratic and inclusive it is. Unlike many art projects, it reaches out to people who are usually overlooked. My focus has been on reaching out to the blind and deaf communities, as well as other disabilities” (Gross “Kirsten Ervin” par. 7).

Ervin spread her well-cultivated knowledge of disability and the arts to the KtB team by drawing on her background in special education and job history as co-creator of Creative Citizen Studios—a local studio environment for adult artists with intellectual and/or developmental disabilities. Highlighting this knowledge, Ervin asserts,

[P]eople with disabilities. . . are creative and want to be included. It’s not “amazing” that someone who is deaf or blind would be able to knit or crochet or would want to be part of KtB; why wouldn’t they? I think KtB brings visibility to the contributions and talents people we think about as “other,” and far outside our experience. But again, the KtB team has developed this warm and inclusive

atmosphere where everyone is welcome and invited to participate. (Gross “Kirsten Ervin” par. 11)

In addition to recruiting individuals from Pittsburgh’s Blind Outdoor Leisure Development (BOLD) and Golden Triangle Council of the Blind (GTCB) to create and contribute bridge panels, KtB worked to accommodate a spectrum of physical abilities during its culminating community celebration on the Andy Warhol Bridge. Making it “one of the only truly accessible public art projects,” during the festivities KtB provided: “accommodations for wheelchair users and other community members with limited mobility”; “An ASL interpreter . . . for public announcements and speeches”; as well as sighted guides for “members of the blind and visually impaired community” to a) assist them in locating their contributed panels, and b) “to explore Knit the Bridge through touch” (“Knit the Bridge Party” par. 3). Remarking on the latter component, Ervin points out that KtB panels are “texturally interesting and varied, and embody tactile aesthetics. . . . People who are blind and visually impaired are going to be able to touch this art once it’s installed, which almost never happens in museums and galleries. . . . It’s unique in that KtB is truly accessible, hands-on art” (Gross “Kirsten Ervin” par. 7).



**Figure 4.2: Toddlers touching Knit the Bridge panels. Photo: Courtesy of Erica Ziak**

KtB's process of creation, installation, and celebration functioned to unite "Teenagers, seniors, children, people with disabilities, people of every gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, nationality and race, [each] finding common ground in something they made, together" ("Knit the Bridge Party" par. 1). As both a cultural performance and an enactment of feminist pedagogy, KtB functioned—at least temporarily—to reconfigure community bounds by reducing status quo hierarchies embedded within racial, classed, aged, and ability divides.

### Gendered Contexts

Stated above, feminist pedagogues advocate for the recognition and deconstruction of power relations. Equally important to feminist teachers is learning to trace to the effects of power—that is, "to see how authority is constituted and constituting" (Lather 144). For many feminist pedagogues, this means a) fostering recognition of the ways in which women's lack of social and cultural power constitutes their oppression, confidence, and thought patterns, and then b) helping to shift women's passive and marginalized standpoints to that of *active* empowerment (Bunch 256). Many feminist educators argue that, by "furnish[ing] girls and young women with the skills and knowledge to take on the male system" (Weiner 10), women will gain the confidence, experience, and credibility required to restructure social institutions in ways that mitigate pervasive gender hierarchies through advocacy of women's interests, viewpoints, and concerns. KtB's large base of female organizers and volunteers model this feminist pedagogical strategy—encountering civic obstacles and maneuvering institutional complications in order to successfully render this awesome aesthetic feat.

The vast majority of KtB project organizers, coordinators, and lead volunteers were women (Gross "Empowering Women"). As a publicly fundraised community art project, this largely female organizational base had to carefully maneuver the monetary, structural, and

municipal complications of the public, commercial, and political realm. Rich Fitzgerald, the Chief Executive of Allegheny County, underscores these challenges, recognizing the labor and scope of Knit the Bridge as “a massive logistical undertaking” (Carpenter, par. 12). On KtB’s official blog, Gross elaborated further on the complexities involved in planning for such an ambitious project:

Since Knit the Bridge is committed to a legal, transparent, and collaborative public art installation, it’s been important to do our homework and we’ve been learning so much along the way... It turns out this is critical knowledge for figuring out permitting, engineering considerations, and safety codes. For Knit the Bridge to be successful moving forward it is important that we work through local officials and the Office of Public Art to ensure that the fiberart installation meets fire code, doesn’t pose any safety hazards, and contributes to the community in only positive ways. (“Behind the Scenes” par. 3)

The obstacles listed above were made additionally difficult as such an endeavor had yet to be mounted in Pittsburgh or anywhere else. As one KtB project organizer explains, “Because nobody has ever done anything like this, we had to build the procedure from scratch” (Disare “Andy Warhol” par. 9). Gross echoes this point, stating that, “the biggest challenge of the project [has been] . . . the task of shepherding [this] unusual and never-before-attempted idea through the bureaucracy of local government” (Jenner, par. 17).

Outside of local government, the KtB’s largely female team also had to maneuver relatively foreign terrain of bridge-based engineering and structural design. To pass approval from the Allegheny County Council, certain structural and safety concerns needed to be addressed (Disare, “Allegheny County Council” par. 11). For such matters, KtB organizers

recruited Pittsburgh locals Norman Beck, a fabrication and design artist who helped devise a batten system for securing the larger panels to the towers (Sciullo, par. 11), and Delbert Rockwell, a structural engineer who determined the safety and durability of the bridge holding nearly 600 fabric panels (Sandberg). Elaborating on KtB's collaboration with Beck and Rockwell, Gross explains how "We've learned *a lot* about bridges. . . . Everything has been load-tested on the towers, to make sure that the weight or wind won't affect the bridge . . . . [Additionally,] all the yarn is acrylic . . . and that doesn't absorb water like cotton, and it doesn't attract pests like wool, so it should be able to withstand some rain and wind" (Mauro). Outside of structural concerns, KtB's largely female organizational team also fundraised roughly \$100,000 to cover the necessary costs of supplies, materials, insurance, rigging, and installation, while securing additional needed services like copyrighting, police patrol, and transport, and insurance coverage through their ingenuity, word of mouth, volunteer networks, and pro-bono generosities.

The intimate and lateral relations advocated by feminist pedagogues and displayed at many levels of the KtB creation process are a necessary component of the feminist agenda—especially as such relations are increasingly absent from public life. Particularly for women, however, such relations must also be metered with the cultivation of confidence, experience, and credibility that is required to maneuver within and alter the gendered hierarchies that constitute public, economic, and political life (Manicom 369; Wolf 297-302). Evidenced by the above, KtB's largely female organizational team modeled this balance. Led by a group of committed women with a shared community vision, KtB's project organizers modeled the approach of many feminist pedagogues—weighing prudently the grace of lateral organizing and distributed authorship with the confidence and authority needed to maneuver the economic and political structures that constitute public life.

According to Charlotte Bunch, feminist pedagogical strategies help to cultivate “an active, not a passive, relationship to the world . . . [by instilling] confidence that your thoughts are worth pursuing and that you can make a difference” (256). KtB organizers enacted this confidence throughout the duration of the project, and especially in the face of initial skepticism. KtB co-director Penny Mateer underscores the project’s early stage difficulties, explaining that “One of the challenges . . . was finding funding and people who would believe in what we were doing and thought we could” (Sandberg). Volunteer engineer Delbert Rockwell corroborates Mateer, admitting his own early-stage incredulity regarding the installation concept: “[At first, I thought] We're gonna cover this bridge, give it some color, make it a focal point for a month? We're gonna tear it down, [and then] we're gonna leave? Back in February, that sounded like a really stupid idea” (ibid.). Instilled with confidence for their grassroots community vision, however, KtB organizers persevered and made it a reality. One project supporter helps to up the KtB project with a sense of feminist world making, asserting that “If anyone ever says to you that a community cannot make a difference, [KtB] is an excellent example of how a dream can become a beautiful reality. The project brought diverse people together with varied skills and backgrounds to create something that made a difference. Thank you!” (Falk). Evidenced by the above, KtB organizers and participants helped to cultivate and renegotiate community bounds by actively recognizing and renegotiating various power structures, obstacles, and divides throughout the inception and creation of this unique art project.

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter, I have looked to Knit the Bridge as a women-led cultural performance and citywide enactment of yarnbombing. More specifically, I have detailed the ways that KtB



strengthens and (re-)articulates Pittsburgh's community bounds by utilizing experience, collaboration, and authority as feminist pedagogical strategies.

Feminist pedagogues and KtB organizers alike recognize the power and necessity of community in taking collective action for political change and/or positive growth. Situating this point within the context of KtB, Amanda Gross argues that, "People want to be a part of something bigger. Folks are so excited about contributing, seeing their work on the bridge, being able to tell their friends and family members that they were a part of something awesome" (Sandberg). A KtB participant named Joanne corroborates Gross, explaining how "[When] I walked across the [yarnbombed] bridge . . . I was very proud the beautiful work displayed so grandly. I contributed a small part, and I am glad it did. But I want to thank the many people who worked on this project. One person can only do so much, but LOOK what the work of many people can do! . . . This is ART to be proud of!" (Gross "How We Finished" web log comment). And finally, Barry Hart echoes Gross and Joanne, asserting that, "The power of community and beauty is in this creation! All the hard work has more than paid off and will not be forgotten—Knit the Bridge, its patterns and colors, are now part of us. We have been changed by your effort and creativity" (Gross "The Bridge Goes Up!" web log comment). Evidenced above and throughout this chapter, the import of communal structures and communicative strategies associated with the private sphere (i.e. nurturance, inclusivity, and immediacy) are recognized and centralized by feminist pedagogues, and celebrated and renegotiated by Knit the Bridge. "[C]ommunities [are] . . . what define us and connect us," Gross explains (Nath, par. 5). In this regard, Knit the Bridge is a placard of how feminist pedagogues and/as performers can use the arts to build bridges—both literally and metaphorically.

CHAPTER 5  
 TEXTILE GRAFFITI AND PUBLIC/PRIVATE DICHOTOMIES:  
 AN ENDURING SOCIAL DRAMA

Throughout the previous chapters I have looked at yarnbombing as an aesthetic and symbolic rendering of public/private dichotomies. In chapter one, I overviewed the history of textile craft and its gendered relationship to public/private divisions of labor. In chapter two, I looked to feminist and graffiti artists of the 1960s and 70s as performative predecessors who—similar to their yarnbombing contemporaries—publicize and politicize the “privatized” issues of commerce, home life, family, and/or reproduction. In chapter three, I detailed the ways in which yarnstormers publicly re-deploy the moral mother—a trope historically associated with the private sphere—in order to politicize contemporary feminist issues like globalization, unbridled capitalism, and the feminization of poverty. Finally, in chapter four, I overviewed *Knit the Bridge* as a feminist art installation that consciously leverages the characteristics and communicative styles associated with the private sphere—i.e.: communalism, relationality, and inclusion—in order to cultivate community and produce art within wider public life. Each of these four previous chapters present a specific treatment of yarnbombing and its relationship to the various public/private tensions that women—in both historical and contemporary contexts—have experienced, resisted, and/or re-imagined. Evidenced across each of these chapters is the enduring feminist struggle to publicize the values, artifacts, and communicative practices that are associated with the private sphere of the home, yet devalued within or missing from the public sphere of commerce, politics, and high culture.

This concluding chapter serves to ground the previous chapters, then, by sketching a broader image of yarnbombing as a cultural performance that is both a product of and contributor

to an *ongoing social drama* involving a) the women living within a liberal democracy and b) the public/private divisions which constitute that democracy. In this enduring social drama, feminist activists and arbiters of liberal democracies are posed as agonistic social groups—with feminist activists recurrently articulating the various ways that public/private dichotomies disadvantage women, and staunch proponents of liberalism disregarding those feminist critiques and upholding public/private divisions.

Despite the impressive legal/institutional reformations garnered by feminist activists over two centuries, the reintegration proffered through those feminist redressive actions is rife with indeterminacy. Produced through this indeterminacy are: a) women's unstable reorientation toward public/private divisions as shared liberal democratic value; b) their recurrent state of crisis within a liberal democracy; and c) creative schisms that involve various feminist factions. Cultural performances, yarnbombing among them, are the product of these recurrent crises and creative schisms. Created by women and feminists living within a liberal democracy, these cultural performances function to clarify and dramatize the problems that public/private divisions pose for women, and/or to re-imagine those divisions as inventive possibilities for what future relations could be.

By using the social drama model in this chapter, I better clarify the larger and unfinished drama of which yarnbombing is a part. Using Victor Turner's notion of the social drama, I first detail the liberal-feminist contention surrounding public/private divisions. Next, I situate yarnbombing as a cultural performance and contemporary product of that ongoing drama. Finally, by framing yarnbombing within its larger historical trajectory, I can more clearly answer the research questions raised in chapter one regarding the political import and efficacy of textile graffiti.

## The Social Dramatic Sequence

The social dramatic sequence is one that a specific group or community engages to change or negotiate roles within a culture (Lockford 294). First articulated by Victor Turner, the social drama involves two distinct factions engaged in a processual unfolding of events that are “conflictive, competitive, or agonistic [in] type” (*Anthropology of Performance* 33). Through these unfolding social interactions, the four stages of the social drama are carried out—specifically, breach, crisis, redress, and reintegration or schism: 1) the social drama begins with a *breach*, when a member or members of a community break an implicit or explicit rule; 2) next, a *crisis* occurs, as antagonisms are exposed, tensions mount, and sides are taken for or against the rule breaker(s); 3) following the crisis, a *redressive* stage ensues, as repairs—either formal or informal—are enacted in order to repair social harmony or to demarcate the limits of mutual exclusion; (4) if the repairs work, then *reintegration* occurs and the group returns to shared values and understandings, but if the repairs fail and contentious factions cannot reconcile, then a *schism* takes hold and the two groups break apart (Turner *From Ritual to Theatre* 69; Bell “Social Dramas” par. 1; Lockford 294).

Many scholars have engaged Turner’s social drama as a useful model for explicating varied communicative events (Farrell; Berg; Warren). However, others have critiqued the model for its tendency to provide a false sense of closure to complex and ongoing communicative phenomena. Elizabeth Bell (“Social Dramas”) and Lesa Lockford have each leveraged this critique. More specifically, Bell and Lockford reason that the social drama model—by offering clearly beginning and ending stages, rather than fluid interactions, which extend and regress over long periods of time—does not sufficiently account for the dynamic and enduring nature of feminist struggle.

Recognizing Bell and Lockford's critiques, in what follows, I situate feminist activists and arbiters of liberal democratic governments as factions engaged in an *ongoing* social drama regarding the efficacy of public/private divisions and the parity of individual rights that said divisions purportedly uphold. More specifically, I clarify public/private divisions as *both* the bedrock of liberal democracies and the ongoing catalyst that drives feminist activists and produces their various cultural performances. By situating the activism and theorizing of nineteenth, twentieth, and twenty-first century feminists as part and parcel of this larger social drama, I present their legal, quotidian, and aesthetic cultural performances—yarnbombing among them—as mechanisms that dramatize, critique, and re-imagine public/private divides.

### **Breach**

The breach phase of a social drama is a “breach of a norm, the infraction of a rule of morality, law, custom, or etiquette” (Turner *From Ritual to Theatre* 70). Feminists highlight inconsistencies or a breach of promise made by our liberal democratic government, regarding its equal provision and protection of the rights, liberties, and political freedoms of all persons under the law (Pateman). Feminists argue that the creation and implementation of the laws and policies that are generated within a liberal democracy—and resulting from its public/private divisions—have and will continue to protect the private rights, interests, and autonomy of men, over and above those of women (*ibid.*). To understand this breach, an understanding of public/private divisions within a liberal democracy is necessary.

### *Public/Private Divides As Liberal Democratic Tenet*

A liberal democracy is constituted through strict separation of public and private life. Within a liberal democracy, *public* representatives function as ostensibly neutral and impartial overseers of civic life. These elected representatives serve to uphold the *private* interests of its

electorate through the creation and enforcement of policies and laws (Purcell 43; Musgrave 217). Public sphere representatives also serve to protect private citizens' liberal freedoms, which—according to liberal tenets—depend on state non-interference with the private sphere (Musgrave 217). In this protected sphere, “personal privacy” is constituted through spatial and decisional definitions—the former relating to the sanctity of the home and the family, and the latter referring to personal autonomy (Higgins “Reviving” 847-9). Feminists argue that within a liberal democracy, women experience a breach of both legally protected privacy forms.

### Spatial Privacy

The Fourteenth Amendment of the United States Constitution endorses a fairly broad right to privacy—prohibiting the state's intrusion in the home, and its interference in relations of marriage, religion, procreation, and childrearing. Feminists clarify how these spatial privacy protections do not extend to women in the same ways as men. More specifically, feminist legal scholars argue that, rather than upholding women's basic rights, the liberal democratic protection of the private realm from government regulation has actually functioned inadvertently to perpetuate sexist laws and practices that deny women the basic liberal rights—such as bodily integrity, consent, and the right to private property—which are readily extended to men.

Longstanding marital rape exemptions and laws of coverture help to evidence women as victims of men's privacy: the former precluding spousal coercion of sexual intercourse from legal definitions of rape until 1993 (Steiner, par. 1-2), and the latter, subordinating a woman's civil identity to her husband until 1979 (Gardbaum 453). Despite evolving perspectives on women's roles in society, these antiquated and sexist laws endured for centuries, due to public/private divisions that discourage state interference into private marital relationships (England, par. 5). Outside of antiquated laws, and even in contemporary contexts, there exist a

wide variety of popular religious faiths that still designate women as subservient to their husbands (J. Carter, par. 2), and/or preclude women from making autonomous choices about their health and reproduction. Despite the material damages caused to women, these religious ideologies are safeguarded by spatial privacy protections within a liberal democracy.

Regarding women's subjugation to men within a liberal democracy, feminist legal scholars and women's rights activists recognize the private spatial sphere as one where women are overrepresented, physically vulnerable, and have unequal power in relation to men (Higgins "Reviving" 851). Paradoxically, the patriarchal violence so common to this spatial sphere is restricted from government regulation or interference (ibid.). Robin West encapsulates this gendered dilemma regarding public law and the private autonomy it ostensibly protects, reasoning that "If patriarchal control of women's choices and patriarchal domination of women's inner and public lives occur in the very private realm of home life—then the Constitution, above all else, protects the very system of power and control that constrains us" (119). Recognizing how the protection of familial privacy has served to undermine women's liberty, feminist critics of liberal democracies understand that state intrusion within the home and family are sometimes reasonably and morally required to ensure women's security and equality as guaranteed liberal rights.

### Decisional Privacy

In addition to spatial privacy, women experience a breach in relation to the "decisional privacy" or personal autonomy, that constitutes the basic rights promised to all voting citizens within a liberal democracy (Higgins "Reviving" 851). Decisional privacy correlates onto the liberal tenet of self-interest. Marc Purcell details this concept of self-interest, explaining that,

There is a strong sense in liberal democracy that individual preferences should be properly self-interested. That is, the individual should prefer political outcomes that are in [his or] her own best interest, not ones that are in the interest of the polity as a whole . . . . [or] the greater good. . . . [Proponents] argue that in a democracy it is right for individuals to prefer their self-interest, because those preferences will be aggregated by the democratic process and thereby ensure the general interest of the polity as a whole (43).

Clarified by Purcell, liberal democracies—by virtue of voting rights—purport to vest all citizens with decisional autonomy. This decisional autonomy constitutes a sense of *personal privacy*, in that a) voting decisions are *private* matters, free from government coercion and interference, and b) the individual voter is expected to elevate his or her own *personal* interests above those potential interests of the collective. However, feminist legal scholars argue that this latter presumption of decisional privacy/autonomy is overstated and does not take into account the gendered and sociological factor of caregiving.

Women's decisional autonomy is interrupted by their overrepresentation as paid and unpaid status as caregivers to children and the elderly (Oliker 111-2). Such gendered imbalances in caregiving roles are the product of entrenched gender scripts and socialization processes. Originally stemming from the biological realities that surround childbirth and infant care, these gender scripts are then exacerbated and further naturalized through deep-seated patriarchal beliefs about women's "proper" roles in society. Gender socialization processes reflect these patriarchal beliefs and begin at a very young age—ultimately producing a plurality of women who are well-versed in and socially rewarded for their selfless and caregiving qualities, but



economically and politically disadvantaged by the burden of caregiving and its restriction of personal choice (Higgins “Reviving” 852).

If women are socially produced to care for and consider the needs of others over and above the needs of their own, then the liberal democratic concept of decisional privacy does not service or apply equally to them as men. Tracy Higgins underscores this point, reasoning that, “If women [as caregivers] are socially constructed in ways that afford them less [individual] agency relative to men, then liberalism’s tendency to regard liberty as the absence of external constraints (or even more narrowly the absence of state-sponsored external constraints) leaves women less free than men in ways that are not legally cognizable” (“Reviving” 852). Indeed, as part of the voting electorate, contemporary women are *legally* vested with the same decisional privacy as are men; however, the unencumbered mindset which complements that legal privacy—as well as the free time and space required to cultivate autonomous value systems—are more difficult for women-as-caregivers to cultivate, and often are often accompanied by painful social consequences (West 119).

Liberal democracies disadvantage women through public/private divisions that preclude government interference within the private realm, as well as facile treatments of decisional autonomy as the voting right. Carol Pateman underscores the gendered inequality of public/private divisions, explaining that, “the separation of the private and the public is presented in liberal theory as if it applied to all individuals in the same way. . . . [however, this dichotomy actually serves to] obscure the subjection of women to men within [liberal democracy, as a supposedly] universal, egalitarian, and individualist order” (157). Evidenced above and corroborated by Pateman, the failure of liberal democratic governments to equally protect and uphold women’s basic rights functions as a breach of the liberal democratic promise and a

breach of equal freedoms under the law. Consistent with the social dramatic sequence, this breach of freedoms then escalates toward a crisis state.

### **Crisis**

According to Turner, crisis results from the mounting tensions created by a breach. During crisis, “covert antagonisms become visible” and competing sides are chosen (*From Ritual to Theatre* 69). Regarding public/private divisions, feminists and proponents of liberalism face off as opposing sides. On one end, liberals uphold public/private divisions—specifically, the state’s non-interference into familial life, and an uncomplicated understanding of decisional autonomy. On the other end, feminists continually question, refine, or outright reject these clean definitions and divisions in hopes one day of securing women’s equal freedom.

In contemporary contexts, this crisis surrounds women’s unequal representation as both elected public officials and opinion leaders: today, women make up forty-seven percent of the United States workforce (U.S. Dept. of Labor), and also comprise the majority of college graduates (CEA 3); however, they earn only seventy-eight percent of what men make (U.S. Census Bureau 7), comprise just fifteen percent of Fortune 500 corporate boards (Steen, par. 1), hold only twenty-nine percent of the highest paid jobs (Bidwell, par. 6), and make up just seventeen percent of Congress and twenty-four percent of state legislatures (Gillibrand, par. 1). Within a liberal democracy, public officials and opinion leaders are said to *represent* a voting electorate; therefore, if half of an electorate is comprised of women, then—in theory—half of its public officials should also be women. However, as evidenced by the above statistics, this is not actually the case. Despite one hundred years of voting rights and over thirty years of legally mandated access to and equality within work place and educational settings, women’s equal

representation as elected officials and opinion leaders within the public sphere still remains greatly out of reach.

Consistent with Turner's description of the crisis state, women recognizing their disparity in public representation will "choose sides," by aligning themselves with one of two opposing ideologies. The first of these two ideologies views gendered disparities of public representation as emanating from an *internal* locus of control—that is, as a reflection of women's private, autonomous choices (e.g.: "Women are underrepresented in the public sphere because they *choose* to remain in private/domestic roles"). This stance reinforces a liberal ideology, which upholds public/private divisions by viewing them as mutually exclusive categories. The second of these two ideologies views gendered disparities as emanating from an *external* locus of control—that is, as a reflection of dominant and patriarchally inflected socialization processes, of which the average woman is not cognizant or easily capable of defying. This second stance undermines liberal democratic ideologies by pointing to the complex and interrelated nature of public and private sphere relations, and how these interrelations limit women's personal choices within a liberal democracy.

Women identifying as feminists frequently align themselves with the second stance. Vested with a nuanced understanding of gender formation and gender inequalities, contemporary feminists argue that the uneven and gendered distribution of reproductive burdens—that is, pregnancy, caregiving, and domestic labor—foreclose on women's democratic access and expression in public life, as well as their equality of individual choice in private life (Higgins "Gender" 1640). In other words, contemporary feminists argue that the public access and private choice that are ostensibly guaranteed to all citizens within a liberal democracy are still, in fact, androcentric concepts resting on the presumption of a male citizen who is free of caregiving

responsibilities. Produced through an unfair distribution of private/domestic burdens, Amy Baehr reasons, women are endowed with less free time to: participate in public deliberation and articulate women’s unique burdens; inform themselves on complex political issues; or cultivate and work toward positions of public power—as politicians and lawmakers themselves, or as opinion leaders of the churches, universities, and think tanks that influence political discussions (par. 12).

Gendered disparities in public representation are one of the many ways that public/private divisions have and continue to foreclose on women’s equal rights and opportunities within a liberal democracy. Carole Pateman underscores the continuity of this ongoing feminist struggle, reasoning that “[F]eminist criticism is primarily directed at the separation and opposition between the public and private spheres in liberal theory and practice. . . . This dichotomy . . . is central to almost *two centuries of feminist writing and political struggle*” (155, emphasis added). Diverging from Turner’s model—which posits clear beginning and endpoints for each stage of the social drama—Pateman’s statement helps to better clarify the ongoing nature of the feminist social drama, and to underscore women’s continued crisis state within a liberal democracy. Within their crisis state and over two hundred years, feminists have “chosen sides,” as Turner would say, by publicly articulating—through theoretical manuscripts, public protest, and aesthetic forms—the ways that public/private dichotomies disadvantage women. The historical and contemporary women who continue to suffer and articulate these disadvantages also nourish the continual redressive action required for better calibrating our liberal democracy.

### **Redress**

Following the crisis stage of the social drama, a redressive stage ensues, as repairs—either formal or informal—are enacted to repair social harmony or to demarcate the limits of

mutual exclusion (Turner *From Ritual to Theatre* 70; Castle 145). This machinery of repair can take a wide variety of forms, “rang[ing] from personal advice and informal arbitration, to formal juridical and legal machinery, . . . to the performance of public ritual” (Turner *From Ritual to Theatre* 70). Within the context of this ongoing feminist social drama, the various legal gains made by and for women can be understood as forms of redressive action. Such “formal juridical” redressive action is evidenced across two centuries of feminist legal activism and gains regarding public/private lines—including, but not limited to: women’s voting and landowner rights, greater equality of opportunity in employment and hiring practices, greater pay equity, family leave, greater reproductive freedoms, and greater equality in educational contexts (Musgrave 218).

### **Reintegration or Schism**

The final phase of Turner’s social drama involves two possible outcomes: reintegration or schism. Reintegration may occur if the redressive action successfully pacifies the breach and its resulting crisis by redirecting a disturbed group toward shared values and understanding (Turner *From Ritual To Theatre* 75). However, if the redressive action fails and contentious factions cannot reconcile, then a schism takes hold—in which case the process may revert back to crisis (Schechner 626).

As discussed in the above section and within the context of the feminist social drama, formal redressive action is evidenced through legal/institutional measures that help to secure women the freedoms, autonomy, and privacy protections that are extended to men: from suffrage, to Title IX, to court decisions prohibiting domestic violence and sexual harassment—following each of these feminist legal victories, the breach is ostensibly quelled as women are led to believe, once again, in the legitimacy of a liberal democratic system that serves and protects them equally to men. Stated differently, feminist legal victories—from a social dramatic

perspective—function to reintegrate aggrieved women back into the legal/democratic system they had previously doubted and critiqued. Despite these important victories, however, *the reintegration experienced by women within a liberal democracy is always marked by a recurrent conflict*. This recurrent conflict is evidenced by the continued revival of gendered activism as different “waves” of feminism, wherein new generations of women recast the various ways that public/private divisions still disadvantage them. In other words, despite legislative redressive action towards women’s equality, the gendered issue over public/private divisions continues to fester, as women in a liberal democracy remain locked in an enduring crisis state.

Feminists respond to this crisis state by forming their own alliances, values, and creative artifacts—therein enacting a schism. Richard Schechner underscores the creative potential of social dramatic schisms, reasoning that, “This schism can be creative, as when dissident groups or individuals set out for themselves—whether physically or conceptually—to found new settlements, . . . art movements, or whatever” (626). Radical, cultural, and liberal feminists evidence this creativity and cope with an enduring crisis through their inventive ideologies, novel cultural forms, and institutional renovations.

*Radical feminists* employ confrontational tactics and separatist tendencies as creative coping mechanism. Radical feminists see mainstream institutions and practices—including marriage, capitalism, heterosexuality, and liberal democratic governance—as constituted through and perpetuating of patriarchal control of women (Dicker 95). This totalizing view of male dominance accounts for their aggressive protest strategies and—what some people consider—extreme ideologies that are lacking in practical value. *Cultural feminists* cope with an enduring crisis state by valuing and producing “women-centered” pleasure (see Bell “Toward”). Cultural feminists view women’s subjective pleasure as a powerful vehicle of empowerment and respond

to a society that devalues the feminine by publicizing and embracing the pleasurable aspects of women's history, women's music/art, and women's culture—up to and including the maternal/private sphere values of nurturance and cooperation (Dicker 95-6). This focus on women's subjective pleasures accounts for the critiques of apoliticism and solipsism that are frequently levied against cultural feminists. *Liberal feminists* cope with perpetual crisis through protracted reformation of existing institutions. With regard to liberal democracies, liberal feminists work to highlight how public/private divisions disadvantage women, and to advocate for laws that would mitigate those disadvantages (Musgrave 218). Liberal feminists are unlike cultural feminists who reject direct political activism in favor of immediate quotidian empowerment, and unlike radical feminists who view reformation as unacceptable compromise. Diverging from cultural and radical feminists, liberal feminists seek to slowly improve extant institutions through direct legal/governmental activism.

Evidenced through their inventive ideologies, novel cultural forms, and institutional renovations—radical, cultural, and liberal feminists highlight the creative potential of a social dramatic schism. Slowly over time, their feminist insights, analyses, and creative contributions are tested and absorbed by the mainstream women who still trust in and identify with the liberal democratic promise to protect citizen's rights equally. At key moments in U.S. history—and in conjunction with larger cultural/political conditions—both feminists *and* mainstream women will jointly recognize women's state of crises, and mutually demand alterations to the interpretation and application of public/private divides within a liberal democracy.

Having clarified the larger social drama regarding public/private dichotomies and the feminist coping strategies produced through its schismatic effects, I now go on to situate yarnbombing within this ongoing drama. More specifically, I detail yarnbombing as a cultural

performance and enactment of cultural feminism, which symbolically stages and re-imagines public/private divisions, while simultaneously producing pleasure for its women participants. It is in this following section that I more clearly answer the research questions raised in chapter one regarding the political import and efficacy of textile graffiti.

### **The Cultural Performance of Yarnbombing**

Elizabeth Bell underscores the productive relationship between cultural performances and the social drama, explaining that social dramas provide the “raw material” for cultural performances, which reflect critically on the community (*Theories* 110). “The social drama,” Bell continues, “gives rise to performances; the performances themselves are integral parts of the social drama. Through these performances, communities reflect on, critique, and participate in the unfolding of actual events” (*Theories* 112). Cultural performances project imaginative possibilities for what social relations could be or should be (Turner *Anthropology* 41); in so doing, they reflect and shape public opinion, as well as the overall outcome of the social dramatic sequence. With respect to this description, each protest, theoretical treatise, and cultural artifact created by various feminist factions can be understood as a cultural performance that is produced by and constitutive of the enduring social drama regarding public/private divides. Yarnbombing exists among these various cultural performances—reflecting the contemporary social crisis regarding public/private dichotomies, while also re-imagining the private distribution of caregiving labor, as well as neoliberal conceptions of public good.

#### *Caregiving Labor*

Kristin Rowe-Finkbeiner situates legislation around caregiving as integral to feminist’s future agendas and women’s equal representation. Rowe-Finkbeiner writes that, “Motherhood, particularly, the social and economic burden facing women with children is perhaps the principal



feminist issue for today's young women" (10). Elaborating on this concern, Rowe-Finkbeiner positions "paid family leave; affordable, safe, and educational child care; the maternal wage gap; managing the varied roles of women and parents; and counting the unpaid work of parents in places like the U.S. Census" as "new feminist issues" (110). Amy Baehr echoes Rowe-Finkbeiner, recognizing unequal distributions of caregiving labor as a threat to liberal autonomy. "The state," Baehr explains, "must ensure that the socially essential work of providing care to dependents does not unreasonably interfere with the personal autonomy of caregivers. Policies proposed to ensure sufficient personal autonomy for caregivers include parental leave, state-subsidized [and] high quality day care, and flexible work schedules" (par. 19). Evidenced by Baehr and Rowe-Finkbeiner, there is a heightened feminist concern toward the needed politicization of care work and a movement toward more formal/legal redressive action—for example, state-subsidized childcare and mandated paid maternity leave, that would help to equalize the hardships of caregiving across gendered lines.

As a cultural performance, yarnbombing uses aesthetic and symbolic mechanisms to politicize caregiving and re-imagine the public/private divisions that inform it. Throughout each chapter I have detailed the symbolism, associations, and textual content of yarnbombing that dramatizes a history of domestic caregiving; additionally, I have pointed out how yarnbombing removes that history from its traditional private sphere location and juxtaposes it against a public, political sphere. Thomas Rosteck and Michael Leff explain how such juxtaposition or "planned incongruity" can raise consciousness by "alter[ing] the stable frames of reference which . . . determine our judgments about what is proper to a given circumstance" (329). Amy Kilgard echoes this perspective, arguing that radical juxtaposition can serve to break down conceptual barriers by inducing audience members' recognition of alternative perspectives (15-

6). Through the lens of planned incongruity or radical juxtaposition, yarnbombing can be seen as an aesthetic effort to loosen a stable liberal frame that divorces familial matters of caregiving and childrearing from public interest and jurisdiction. By placing signifiers of domesticity and caregiving onto the public streets—while often adorning them with political and/or feminist messages—yarnbombing functions to politicize caregiving, to highlight its gendered dimensions, and to remind city-goers of caregiving as a *public* issues that, when left wholly unchecked by the legislature, impedes the autonomy that is protected by and necessary to the overall health of a functioning liberal democracy.

### *Public Good*

The politicization of caregiving that yarnbombing furnishes extends beyond the specified issues of gender and towards influencing a more generalized conception of the public good. In chapter three I detailed the various textual messages woven into yarnbombs that critique an unbridled capitalism and accompanying austerity mindsets. These interrelated phenomena can be understood as yet another negative consequence of the liberal democratic separation of public and the private, wherein economic markets are considered a privatized matter outside the bounds of government/legislative control.

This strict separation of private markets from public regulation—a function of neo-liberal policy recommendations beginning in the 1970s (Kotz 64)—is coming under increased criticism by the everyday citizens who are struggling through its sobering economic effects (Fraser “Democracy’s Crisis” par. 28). In response to this staunch governmental separation of private interests and public jurisdiction, leftwing politicians have even begun calling for the return to the government-regulated economic markets (Sanders; Warren), which characterized the United States from the 1930-1970s following the Great Depression. Textile graffiti, then, can be

understood as a cultural performance that not only dramatizes these contemporary economic, political, and social circumstances, but also one that reflexively re-imagines the public/private divisions which enable them. This re-imagination is illustrated textually through the anti-capitalist and anti-austerity messages woven into the various textile tags detailed in chapter three. It is also illustrated practically and processually through the communal, cooperative, and inclusive ethos that characterizes the Knit the Bridge public installation detailed in chapter four. By conflating public, private, and caregiving signifiers, yarnbombing furnishes for viewers an association between public and private life—one which classical liberal theory denies and future legislative action regarding economic regulations and caregiving subsidies relies.

### **Findings: The Political Efficacy/Import of Yarnbombing**

Throughout this dissertation, but particularly in chapter one, I have touched on various questions regarding the political and feminist efficacy of yarnbombing. Many of these questions stem from yarnbombing critics who characterize the aesthetic form as either lacking in direct political activism, or as a frivolous activity that diminishes more serious political (art)forms, and/or reifies retrograde ideologies about women as homemakers and caretakers. Throughout my investigation of yarnbombing, I have taken these criticisms seriously and attempted to resolve them from historical, feminist, and applied angles. For the purpose of rhetorical clarity, in what follows, I succinctly overview my responses to those larger criticisms and frame them as the research findings of this larger study.

#### *Yarnbombing as Indirect Political Activism*

Yarnbombing is a feminist enactment of indirect political activism and the critiques surrounding it can be framed within mainstream audience's recurrent tendency to diminish the necessity of indirect activism. Suzanne Staggenborg and Verta Taylor corroborate this tendency,

arguing that within mainstream narratives of the Women's Movement, the legal and institutional redress proffered by liberal feminists frequently overshadows the important groundwork laid by smaller scale and often indirect feminist activism. The authors explain that, "Thinking more broadly about the role that social movements play as major producers and distributors of new ideologies, cultural codes, and practices . . . . [requires recognition of] *the myriad of tactics . . . that feminists have used to create solidarity between women and to challenge gender subordination*" (48, emphasis added). While these myriad tactics are commonly omitted from mainstream historical accounts, social movements consistently and necessarily "advance their goals through cultural performances, discursive politics, self-help activities, . . . identity transformations, and forms of transgression that come out of the submerged networks of everyday life" (ibid.). Staggenborg and Taylor's expansive view of social movements and social protest is helpful in addressing the political efficacy or import of yarnbombing. Within the larger context of the Women's Movement and its enduring battle over public/private divides, textile graffiti obviously does not carry the same material consequence as legal redressive maneuvers. This lack of immediate or material consequence, however, does not necessitate the outright rejection of an activity's activist status, or its larger contribution to an enduring movement.

The historical trajectory of the Family Medical Leave Act [FMLA] is useful to yarnbombing practitioners and enthusiasts, particularly as it underscores the need for *indirect activist forms* of which yarnbombing contributes. Passed at the federal level in 1993, FMLA is a United States law that requires employers to provide its full-time associates with job-protected and unpaid leave for qualified medical and family reasons. The creation and passage of this law, Deborah Anthony explains, is commonly credited to liberal feminists and their direct legal activism (460); however, the larger historical pathway leading up to the FMLA's passage is

clearly indebted to both radical and cultural feminists—the former, for its 1970s socialist strand and their early prioritization of poor and working class women (Dicker 95), and the latter, for their indirect and joyful activism, which functioned to recuperate caring and maternal values from our competitive-individualistic business culture (1285). Argued by Staggenborg and Taylor and corroborated through the FMLA’s historical trajectory, *both direct and indirect forms of activism are needed for the long-term success of social movements and their discrete goals*. While yarnbombing does not offer a direct route to more equitable legislation of public/private divides, it does publicize and refresh the enduring feminist issue in both implicit and explicit ways. By dramatizing public/private divisions in creative, symbolic, and novel ways, textile graffiti rejuvenates this critical issue for future feminists activism.

#### *Yarnbombing As Cultural Feminism*

The pleasure-centered rationale undergirding cultural feminism helps to clarify the political import and efficacy of yarnbombing. As explained previously, cultural feminists cope with an enduring state of crisis by cultivating and politicizing self-directed pleasure. In order to elevate effeminate culture from its degraded social and cultural position, culture feminists frequently derive their pleasures from activities or groups that are associated with women and women’s history (Dicker 95-6). Yarnbombing can be seen as an enactment of cultural feminism, in that practitioners have revived knitting as a historically women-centered practice, in order to a) re-valorize communalism and nurturance within a competitive and individualistic frame that devalues those maternal characteristics as “weak” or “ineffective,” and b) empower its practitioners by way of self-directed pleasure.



**Figure 5.1: Yarnbombed outdoor furniture. Costa Mesa.  
Photo: Courtesy of Andrea Woodhouse Hanigan.**

The concept of resilience helps to clarify the import of self-directed pleasure in constituting and maintaining a larger political movement. Inhabiting a marginalized identity is difficult. It frequently involves an internalized sense of worthlessness or shame surrounding your home culture and identity. For these reasons, self-care and the cultivation of self-worth and joy are vital to marginalized individuals who are fighting the slow and painful battle to secure their political rights, and to believe in their own personal worth. Yarnbombers-as-women and yarnbombers-as-nurtures are struggling within a society that devalues their identity. However, rather than submit to this degradation, yarnbombers mirror the aesthetic impulses of their

performative predecessors—specifically, the 1970s women artists and graffiti artists detailed in chapter two—by a) valorizing, projecting, and publicizing the artifacts and signifiers of their home culture, and b) deriving pleasure and cultivating resilience from that self-directed action.

### **Concluding Remarks**

The scholarly purpose of this dissertation was to investigate yarnbombing as dramatizing public/private divisions and their gendered effects. However, the initial impetus for beginning this project was quite selfish: to understand why textile graffiti art stirred something so strong within me. Recognizing the subjective nature of beauty and the subjective value of art, I reasoned that I could learn something about myself by learning more about yarnbombing, its history, and its practitioner intentions. By writing this dissertation and exploring textile graffiti from various political, aesthetic, and historical angles, I have come to realize how public/private divisions are extremely personal to my own identity and deeply informing of my own communicative struggles.

As a woman living in America, I embody the tension of public/private divides—that is, their correlative divisions of masculine and feminine, as well as autonomy and communalism. Like so many women of my generation, I grew up with contradictory social messages. On one hand, it was overtly communicated—by my parents, by my teachers—that I could be or achieve whatever I wanted, and that I *should* be a strong, independent, and accomplished woman. On a covert level, however, this message was constantly subverted through gender socialization processes that rewarded my female body for nurturance, selflessness, and cooperation. Confusing matters even further were liberal and capitalist scripts that denigrated communalism and other-oriented care—positioning them as surefire impediments to economic success.

To borrow the term from Tami Spry, my body functions as a “sociopolitical billboard” (84), advertising and enacting entrenched gender scripts, as well as an economically minded feminist ethos that inadvertently denigrates cooperative femininity as a disempowering function of patriarchy. The constant tension of these internalized and contradictory messages made me to feel lacking in my autonomy, and simultaneously shameful in my compliance and cooperation. Unable to reconcile these conflicting self-identities, at some point during my feminist journey I chose—subconsciously, of course—to disparage my cooperative and communalist gifts, and to pursue confidence and autonomy as requirements for success within a competitive public sphere.

This journey was an empowering one: I learned to stand-up for myself, to assert my opinions, to speak without shaking, and to command attention without embarrassment. However, the journey was also a wounding one, which taught me the pain of loneliness, and the potential embarrassments of unyielding self-assurance. Regardless of the pain, I had made a decision: I would remain a strong, competitive, and independent woman. I would continue to disavow my weak and dependent former self, or else face my own subjective charges of fraudulent feminist. This new performance of unified autonomous self was exhausting, however. And despite my newfound confidence, I still felt the sadness of deficiency. I kept asking myself: How could this be?

\* \* \*

In chapter one of this dissertation, I asserted that “[T]hrough the public and private division of culture, a unified, fluid, and complex tapestry of human emotions, motivations, and performances are reductively split apart: men are socialized to develop competitive-individualistic values and autonomous communicative/emotional patterns, which corresponded to their prescribed legal, political, competitive, and independent roles in public life; and women



are narrowly socialized to develop nurturing-communal values and communicative/emotional patterns that correspond to their intimate, affective, and familial role in private or domestic quarters.” When I initially crafted this sentence, I understood it as a synthesis of feminist theorizing, rather than a personal reality. Through the investigative and writing process furnished through the dissertation process, however, I recognize the above statement as reflective of my own gendered subjectivity, as undergirding my own emotional attraction to yarnbombing, and as the crux of this larger project.

Concluding this dissertation, I’m convinced that the pleasure I experienced when viewing my first textile tag, was the opening of something I had tried to close up deep inside of myself: It was my cooperative, communalist, and nurturing self re-emerging. In that moment, I recognized what I had long-since tried to forget—the strength and beauty of a soft and nurturing canvas. Differing from previously recognized instantiations, however, the supple weave was now reinforced by the needed backbone of cultivated autonomy and/as “public” strength. Looking at that inaugural yarnbomb, I felt my own confusing and contradictory feminist journey coming into sharper focus; I felt a dialectical balance of self and other, of independence and cooperation. In that moment, I felt genuine, joyful, and whole.

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## APPENDICES

## APPENDIX A

## IMAGE CONSENT AND APPROVAL CORRESPONDENCE

**Item 1 [see Figure 2.2]:**

From: woodhousediana@gmail.com

To: press@oleknyc.com

Original message, sent on March 23, 2015:

Hello, my name is Diana Woodhouse. I am a Ph.D candidate at Southern Illinois University Carbondale, and am writing my dissertation of public textile art. I am writing to request permission to include within my doctoral dissertation an image of Olek's crochet installation piece that reads "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere." I first came across the image on the DesignBoom website (here is a link to the image: <http://www.designboom.com/art/olek-knitted-anti-slavery-graffiti-in-london/> )

Thank you for your response,

Diana Woodhouse

Response, sent on March 24, 2015:

thank you for asking

Good luck and you may use the image

Olek's studio

**Item 2 [see Figure 2.3]:**

From: woodhousediana@gmail.com

To: yarnbombin18@gmail.com

Original message, sent on March 7, 2015:

Hello. My name is Diana Woodhouse. I'm a PhD candidate at Southern Illinois University Carbondale, who is writing my dissertation on yarn bombing. I'm writing to request permission to include in the dissertation the image of your "Black Lives Matter" yarn bomb (currently featured on your home page). I appreciate your response. Thank you so much.

Response, sent on March 9, 2015:

Yes, you have our permission to use the image. Please credit it courtesy of Yarn Bombing Los Angeles [ . . . ]

Thank you,

Carol, YBLA

**Item 3 [see Figure 3.2]:**

From: woodhousediana@gmail.com

To: microscopic@gmail.com

Original message, sent on March 27th, 2015:

Hello. My name is Diana Woodhouse. I'm a PhD candidate at Southern Illinois University Carbondale, who is writing my dissertation on yarnbombing.

I'm writing to request permission to include in the dissertation—and potentially (not-for-profit) academic journal essays—the image on your Brooklyn Imbcile Wordpress blog titled "Love Greater than Money yarn bomb" (i've included a link to the image/ original post below). I could credit the image however you like.



I appreciate your response.

Thank you so much

Diana Woodhouse

( <http://brooklynimbecile.com/2013/10/07/love-greater-than-money-yarn-bomb/> )

Response, sent on March 27, 2015:

Go for it Diana!

**Item 4 [see Figure 3.3]:**

From: woodhousediana@gmail.com

To: catmazza@gmail.com

Original message, sent on March 29, 2015:

Hello. My name is Diana Woodhouse. I'm a PhD candidate at Southern Illinois University Carbondale, who is writing my dissertation on public textile art. I'm writing to request permission to include in the dissertation—and potentially (not-for-profit) academic journal essays—the image on your microRevolt website Nike protest blanket (I've included a link to the image/ original post below). I appreciate your response. Thank you so much.

Diana Woodhouse

Response, sent on April 1, 2015:

Dear Diana Woodhouse,

Thank you for your interest in my work and your research on women's public art. Yes I grant permission [. . .] Thanks again for contacting me

[ . . . ].

Cat

**Item 5 [see Figure 3.4]**

From: woodhousediana@facebook.com

To: Craftivist Collective, Facebook group

( <https://www.facebook.com/CraftivistCollective/> )

Original message, sent on April 5, 2015, via Facebook messenger:

Hello. My name is Diana Woodhouse. I'm a PhD candidate at Southern Illinois University Carbondale, who is writing my dissertation on yarnbombing. I'm writing to request permission to include in the dissertation—and potentially not-for-profit academic journal essays—the image on your website titled "Mini protest banner at Bank station, London, July 2009" (i've included a link to the image/ original post below). I appreciate your response. Thank you so much.

Diana Woodhouse

<http://craftivist-collective.com/all/mini-protest-banner-at-bank-station-london-july-2009/>

Response, sent on April 5, 2015:

Sure Diana [ . . . ]

**Item 6 [see Figure 3.5]:**

From: woodhousediana@facebook.com

To: Yarnbomb the Prom, Facebook group

( <https://www.facebook.com/pages/Yarnbomb-the-Prom-Newcastle-Co-Down> )

Original message, sent on April 5, 2015, via Facebook messenger:

Hello. My name is Diana Woodhouse. I'm a PhD candidate at Southern Illinois University Carbondale, who is writing my dissertation on yarnbombing. I'm writing to request permission to include in the dissertation--and potentially (not-for-profit) academic journal essays-- the image in your facebook album "YBG8" (Here is the link to the specific image:

<https://www.facebook.com/332054263551285/photos/pb.332054263551285.-2207520000.1427314893./460809350675775/?type=3&theater%20>

I appreciate your response. Thank you so much.

Diana Woodhouse

Response, sent on March 25, 2015:

Hi Diana. That's no problem at all, particularly as it's a photo of one of my pieces you've chosen!

All the best with your dissertation. Great subject

Kind regards

Purl Wun

Vive la yarn revolution

**Item 7 [see Figure 3.6]:**

From: woodhousediana@gmail.com

To: aymann@aymann.com

Original message, sent on April 5, 2015:

Hello. My name is Diana Woodhouse. I'm a PhD candidate at Southern Illinois University Carbondale, who is writing my dissertation on public textile art. I'm writing to request permission to include in the dissertation--and potentially (not-for-profit) academic journal essays—the image you took of yarnbomber London Kaye on a New York L train. (I've included the image below). I appreciate your response. Thank you so much.

Diana Woodhouse

Response, sent on April 5th, 2015:

Hi Diana. Absolutely, you can use the image. Just credit it to Aymann Ismail/ANIMALNewYork.

Thanks

- Aymann

**Item 8 [see Figure 3.7]:**

From: woodhousediana@gmail.com

To: Hanasaurusrex, Facebook page

(<https://www.facebook.com/shophanasaurusrex> )

Original message, sent on March 29, 2015, via Facebook messenger:

Hello. My name is Diana Woodhouse. I'm a PhD candidate at Southern Illinois University Carbondale, who is writing my dissertation on yarnbombing. I'm writing to request permission to include in the dissertation--and potentially (not-for-profit) academic journal essays—your image of the “Meter Monster” yarnbomb. I'd be happy to cite the

image and your name however you like. (I've included the image here). I really appreciate your response. Thank you so much!

Diana Woodhouse

Response, sent on March 29, 2015:

Hi Diana

Thank you for contacting me and asking for permission to use my image!

That sounds super cool, actually! [. . .] happy writing! ;D

**Item 9 [see Figure 3.8]:**

From: woodhousediana@gmail.com

To: dottydoilycraft@gmail.com

Original message, sent on June 5, 2015:

Hello. My name is Diana Woodhouse. I'm a PhD candidate at Southern Illinois University Carbondale, who is writing my dissertation on yarnbombing. I'm writing to request permission to include in the dissertation—and potentially (not-for-profit) academic journal essays—the image on your Wordpress blog of the Yarndale project knitted ducks (I've included a link to the image/ original post below, and also attached it as a jpg.). I would, of course, cite you for the image credit however you'd like your name to appear.

Link: [http://www.dottydoily.com/2013\\_10\\_01\\_archive.html](http://www.dottydoily.com/2013_10_01_archive.html)

I really appreciate your response.

Thank you so much.

Diana Woodhouse

Response, sent on June 12, 2015:

Reply: Hi Diana, I have no problem with you using my image with a credit on the post [. . .].

Best wishes,

Anna

**Item 10 [see Figure 4.1]:**

To: <http://annettesandberg.com/contact/>

Original message, sent on June 12, 2015:

Hello. My name is Diana Woodhouse. I'm a PhD candidate at Southern Illinois University Carbondale, who is writing my dissertation on yarnbombing. I'm writing to request permission to include in the dissertation—and potentially (not-for-profit) academic journal essays—the image of yours included in the Pittsburg Magazine showing an overview of the Andy Warhol Bridge covered in panels for Knit the Bridge (Here is the link to the article, yours is the last image at the bottom of the page: <http://www.pittsburghmagazine.com/Pittsburgh-Magazine/December-2014/Photo-Gallery-Andy-Warhol-Bridge-Yarn-Bombing-Wins-Public-Art-Award/> ). I would, of course, cite you for the image credit however you'd like your name to appear.

I really appreciate your response.

Thank you so much.

Diana Woodhouse

Response, sent on June 12, 2015:

Hey Diane,

You're welcome to use the image with attribution. The preferred attribution is: Annette C. Sandberg

Good luck, and enjoy the weekend.

Annette

**Item 11 [see Figure 4.2]:**

From: woodhousediana@gmail.com

To: midnightmindness@gmail.com

Original message, sent on June 12, 2015:

Hello. My name is Diana Woodhouse. I'm a PhD candidate at Southern Illinois University Carbondale, who is writing my dissertation on yarnbombing. I'm writing to request permission to include in the dissertation—and potentially (not-for-profit) academic journal essays—the image of yours included in your blog of two children in a stroller, reaching out to touch the Knit the Bridge installation panels. (Here is the link to the image; I've also attached it below:

[http://midnightmindness.blogspot.com/2013/08/pittsburgh-yarn-](http://midnightmindness.blogspot.com/2013/08/pittsburgh-yarn-bombing.html)

[bombing.html](http://midnightmindness.blogspot.com/2013/08/pittsburgh-yarn-bombing.html) ). I would, of course, cite you for the image credit however you'd like your name to appear.

I really appreciate your response.

Thank you so much.

Diana Woodhouse

Response, sent on June 16, 2015:

Hi. So glad you asked permission and enjoy my photos. I am going to give you permission to use that photo. Please credit me with my name (actual spelling is Erica Ziak) [. . .].

Thank you.

Erica Ziak



## VITA

Graduate School  
Southern Illinois University

Diana Woodhouse  
[woodhousediana@gmail.com](mailto:woodhousediana@gmail.com)

San Jose State University  
Bachelor of Arts, Communication Studies, August 2007

San Jose State University  
Master of Arts, Communication Studies, August 2009

## Special Honors and Awards:

Top Paper Panelist. Performance Studies Division. Central States Communication Association Annual Conference. Grand Rapids, MI (2016).

Top Paper Award Recipient. Performance Studies Division. National Communication Association Annual Convention. Las Vegas, NV (2015).

Debut Paper Panelist. Performance Studies Division. National Communication Association Annual Convention. Chicago, IL (2014).

Dissertation Research Award Recipient. The Graduate School. Southern Illinois University, Carbondale (Fall 2014 -Spring 2015).

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Top Paper Panelist. Performance Studies Division. Southern States Communication Association Annual Conference. New Orleans, LA (2014).

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## Dissertation Title:

Women's Textile Graffiti: An Aesthetic Staging Of Public/Private Dichotomies

Major Professor: Nathan Stucky

Publications:

Woodhouse, Diana, Lindsay Greer, and Olivia Perez-Langley. "The Leaky Architecture of Beehives and Boxes: Feminist Consciousness-Raising as Performance Methodology." *Liminalities: A Journal of Performance Studies* 11.2 (2015). Web.

Woodhouse, Diana. "Navigating Crisis and Desire: Pedagogies of Presence and Absence." *Liminalities: A Journal of Performance Studies* 8.5 (2012). Web.