

Yarn Bombing: The Women's Street Art

By Kathy McShane

This month's missive is a little more whimsical than last month's. Yarn Bombing. What is it? It is a form of urban street art akin to graffiti without the spray can. Yarn Bombs can be knitted, crocheted, latch hooked, cross stitched, or any other method of turning yarn into a piece of temporary public art. Other names for yarn bombing are graffiti knitting, guerilla knitting and yarn storming. Yarn Bombing even has its own International Day; in 2024, it will be on June 8 (the second Saturday in June).

The art of yarn bombing is relatively new, dating to around 2005. Credit for its origin is often given to a Houston woman, Magda Sayeg, who took yarn work into the urban outdoors. Her first foray into yarn bombing was a simple knit cozy for the door handle of her shop. Subsequently, Sayeg formed a yarn bombing collective called "Knitta Please," which, in its early stages, would don Mexican wrestling masks, sneak out, and knit over something like a stop sign. The masks became a thing of the past once the artists started doing interviews and were no longer anonymous. Since the collective's formation, the group has created numerous installations worldwide, including the Mexico City bus pictured below.



Sayeg said, "I love that, in some way, I have contributed to showing the strength of this craft—knitting and crocheting doesn't have to be functional; it can be subversive, renegade—even illegal in certain cases. It's badass! And it makes me proud, as a woman, to be a part of something so powerful. Taking this craft that is female dominated onto the streets graffiti style, which is male-dominated, is what is appealing (or not) about yarn bombing. As long as it evokes some emotion, I believe it is good."

A group named “Knit the City” began anonymous yarn storming in London in 2009. That group, whose knitting of the iconic London phone box appears below, popularized the term yarn storming, preferring it to the more violent-sounding term “yarn bombing.”



One of the group members, who goes by the handle Deadly Knitshade, hand-knit a 25-foot squid from 160 plastic bags and draped it over the statue of Charles Darwin at London’s Natural History Museum. According to Deadly Knitshade, “Our squishy street art does many things. It takes a woolly hold on forgotten public spaces and gives them soul. It treats the whole world as an art gallery. It encourages others to bring their city to life in ways only they can imagine.”



Perhaps the oldest yarn bomber and street artist was Grace Brett, who, at age 104, along with the Souter Stormers, helped yarn storm Selkirk, Scotland, as part of an arts festival. Here's one of their creations.



Yarn Bombing Los Angeles (YBLA), a self-styled group of “guerilla knitters,” orchestrated the CAFAM Granny Squared installation outside the city’s Craft and Folk Art Museum. The installation comprised some 7,500 crocheted granny squares created and donated by knitters from 49 states and 25 countries. YBLA then arranged the pieces in such a way as to challenge the notion that art and craft exist in entirely different spheres.

According to YBLA’s website, “In its seemingly odd juxtaposition of knitting and graffiti, often associated with opposing concepts such as female, granny, indoors, domestic, wholesome and soft vs. male, enfant terrible, outdoors, public, underground and edgy, the practice of yarn bombing redefines both genres. Yarn bombing transforms knitting from a domestic endeavor to public art, recontextualizing both knitting and graffiti, both of which are marginalized creative endeavors that fall outside ‘high art.’”



Perhaps one of the most significant yarn bombing projects of all time was the 2013 yarn bombing of the Andy Warhol Bridge in Pittsburgh. A group of crafters called “Knit the Bridge” created 580 knitted and crocheted blankets which they stitched together and draped over various parts of the bridge.



Sometimes yarn bombs are a bit rebellious. Consider, for example, street artist Jessie Hemmon’s (aka IshKnits) art bomb of the Wall Street Bull.



Sometimes, yarn bombs make a political statement. Such was the case for the yarn bombing of a tank before the military museum in Dresden, Germany.



And some are just fun! This is a yarn bomb of the statue of Albert Einstein at the Albert Einstein Memorial in Washington, D.C.

