

Urban Knitting – the Soft Side of Street Art

Minna Haveri

minna.haveri@aalto.fi

Aalto University

School of Art, Design and Architecture

Hämeentie 135 C

FI-00560 Helsinki

Abstract

This article focuses on the craft-oriented forms of urban art. The new craft movements have moved crafts from the home environment to public Internet blogs, to art worlds and to street art. The ties of tradition have given way to free creativity in contemporary crafts, which allows the expression of thoughts and feelings, and can be political or critical as well.

Urban knitting is one form of craft-based artistic expression. It formulates its own particular area where amateurs and professionals, traditions and the contemporary culture cross. This soft urban art is based on handicraft skills, but it operates using strategies familiar from both fine arts and street art.

This article is based on my current research on Finnish soft art, in which I examine the use of craft techniques in artistic expression, and on interviews and photo material related to that purpose.

KEYWORDS: street art, graffiti, knitting, craft

Re-crafting the past

Making handicrafts is very popular at the moment. The Internet is brimming with knit blogs, and young people are gathering to knit in public or at special knit cafes. Crafts are not a trend, because trends are related to the sense of transience. Handicrafts are something permanent with a long history. Without the slightest doubt, crafts will also be made in the future.

Craft-oriented art is an interesting area of research. Crafts are strongly related to traditions, and techniques carry a long history. Crafts are something that connects different generations. They are loaded with tacit knowledge that speaks to us through our hands and touches us. I believe that crafts have a special ability to reach our personal thoughts, our emotional memory.

In the Western culture, males have traditionally dominated the art world. By contrast, the crafts culture is markedly feminine. It is associated with women so self-evidently that it is often left unquestioned. (Parker & Pollock, 1987; Parker, 2011) Women have traditionally been responsible for the household and clothing. Female textile crafts became an extension of that everyday work. Handicrafts have always been associated with care and maintenance. Craft products are human-sized and they come close, even on the skin, like domestic textiles, such as bedding, towels and clothes. Traditional handicraft products are used and touched, but not necessarily paid particular attention to. (Ihatsu, 2005)

Despite the long tradition, crafts and especially knitting are being renewed and converted all the time. (Strawn, 2007) Nowadays crafts have a new role in our society. Betsy Greer (2008), the founder of the website Craftivism.com, says that before the year 2000 the term *knitting* evoked many thoughts about grandmothers, the home district and all pastoral and definitely non-radical things. Thanks to the recent resurgence of crafts, the new generation of knitters have redefined crafts and the homemade in a way that better reflects the current view of feminism and domesticity.

The ties of tradition and utility have loosened and given way to art and free creativity. These new articulations have brought handicrafts from private homes to the public areas of the Internet and for example to city spaces. Even in a new environment crafts are still a medium with a meaning. They are so strongly related to traditions, maintenance, care and womanhood that the new use of crafts cannot completely silence the old messages rising from techniques. According to Karen Searle (2008) the versatility of knitting appeals to artists who may use the craft to honour the history and tradition of women's work or to raise questions about gender and domesticity. Knitting can evoke associations with adornment and the body, and memories of comfort, warmth and caring. It can also raise questions about time and productivity and how these are valued in our society.



Figure. 1-2. Knit graffiti has been a great influence on the artistic works by Kaija Papu and her working partner Aino Louhi. *Pitsihilli* (2009) is a public sculpture, Mauno Oittinen's *Hitsaajat* (Welders), covered with hand-knitted cloth. The monument is situated in the centre of the City of Hyvinkää, Finland. The objective of the knitted work is to bring together the history of the Finnish elevator company KONE and a local, closed down woolfactory Villatehdas both of which have been important contributors to the well-being and growth of Hyvinkää. The artwork is softly criticising the fact that only the masculine working culture has been honoured in local public art. Photos by Kaija Papu.

Creating a connection

Learning handicraft skills has traditionally been part of Finnish school education (Simpanen, 2003; Marjanen, 2003). Another important learning environment for these skills has been the home, where skills have been passed on from the mother to the daughter and from the father to the son, from the older generation to the younger ones. This home learning has ensured the continuity of tradition and the constancy of folk aesthetics. (Haveri, 2010; Heikkinen, 1997) The Internet, however, has revolutionised the learning of these inherited skills. Instructions and patterns can be found on the Internet, and cultural influences do not follow national borders. Partly caused by the new communication strategies of the social media on the Internet, the status of hobbyist handicrafts has changed. Instead of being associated with diligence and utility, handicrafts have become an instrument of self-expression.

I see the Internet as a place where everyday creativity has been flourishing in recent years. It has opened up a world of imagination and participation where users create content and messages. There are many forums like YouTube, Facebook, Flickr and Wikipedia that only exist because people use them and produce material for the sites. Present-day users are not just followers; they are publishers and participators as well. The Internet is a format where crafts have had the opportunity to renew their nature and attitudes towards them. (See Gauntlett, 2011)

It is not surprising that crafters have been so keen to communicate and share their knowledge and creations via new social networks. For centuries ordinary people have been denied the ability to share their art-like works with the public. I think that it indicates ignorance or a lack of knowledge and understanding from art professionals to think that people are satisfied doing their art just for themselves. Sharing is the basic nature of all kinds of artistic actions, regardless of education or art world connections. Art cannot be a monopoly of those who are the educated insiders of art.

An important channel of expression for today's crafters are web blogs, where they can share images and stories about their own aesthetic activities with the public in a large online community. The core of craft blogging is the same as with all aesthetic actions, that is to make something special (Dissanayake, 1995). It is a way to make one's life and oneself more "visible". In addition to self-expression, the aim of blogging is the social status, although an anonymous award. Social recognition is shown as the number of visitors. Bloggers want to show that they have a special skill. Even in the middle of everyday life they can crystallise their ideas and skills to something special and noteworthy.

Crafters are actively seeking contact with other people. Making handicrafts creates social interaction when crafters are developing skills by co-operating with others. In the contemporary craft culture, the global Internet networks, sharing the same interests, have replaced locality, which was typical for earlier folk crafts. Despite the distances, the Internet has made the existence of these communities possible. (Vartiainen, 2010) Crafters have set up online shops and Internet galleries to present their works to the public. In web blogs crafters can discuss the meanings of handicrafts, their experiences and share work instructions and patterns. Like Greer (2008) says, knitting is a common language. For craft makers the community and the whole international phenomenon of the new craft movement is inspiring and empowering (Greer, 2008; Waterhouse, 2010).

Finnish craft blogs are part of the do-it-yourself culture, so-called DIY crafts, which are spreading through the Internet as a global phenomenon and have increased the appreciation and popularity of handicrafts (Oakes, 2009). I see craft blogs as self-expression, but also as an aesthetic way to seek better life management. These blogs combine a sense of community and individualistic aesthetic experiences, with all meanings. Blogging is activity with a social premise and goal: it includes a communication impact, message and recipients. The blog world provides a democratic forum, an art-world-like construction, but without gatekeepers.

The blog culture has an independent nature. (Kilpi, 2006) It creates its own practices and is committed to sub-cultures, such as knit graffiti. The social media means a collaboratively produced culture that develops through imitation and borrowing, but also creates new forms of activity. It also gives folk aesthetics a channel to mutate and regenerate.

The Internet has played an important role in craft communities' off-line real-world activities. It has given a tool for communication and opportunities to create networks and organise happenings. Using Internet connections, craft makers are able to find other people sharing the same passion and interests. Many local, national and international events have been organised through the Internet. (Levine & Heimerl, 2008) These craft meetings can be regarded as the contemporary counterpart of sewing clubs.



Figure 3. Charity knitting has also found its way to urban art. In October 2011 the steps of the Helsinki Cathedral were covered with woollen baby blankets made of hand-crocheted “granny squares”. The steps were overlaid with 152 000 crochet squares, i.e. 3 800 blankets, a total coverage of 35x60 metres. It was proposed for the *Guinness Book of Records* as the world record of the biggest blanket. The work was knitted by volunteers and the whole project was organised by the Martha Organization, Textile Teachers’ Association and Novita company. After the world record attempt all the blankets were donated to charity. Photo by Minna Haveri.

Craft means connection on many levels. According to David Gauntlett (2011), making is connecting in at least three different ways:

- You have to connect things, like materials and ideas, to make something new.
- It usually involves a social dimension.
- Through making things and sharing them, we increase our engagement and connection with our social and physical environments.

I see crafting as a lifestyle. It is a way to belong to a tradition and community. It is an active form of existence. Gauntlett (2011) suggests that the rise of the craft culture could be one step from the "sit back and be told" culture towards a more active "making and doing" culture. In our institutionalised schooling system, learning has been a process directed by the teacher. Our media and consumer culture has also supported passive receiving. It is a pity that so many people have learnt to spend their leisure time lodged on the sofa instead of going out and doing things. A growing engagement with making crafts rejects the passivity and seeks outlets for creativity, social connections and personal growth.

Soft side of street art

Our urban landscapes are filled with public sculptures and monumental architecture, the embodiments of power and cultural memory. By contrast, there is also street art – the term usually refers to informal art, as opposed to city or government-sponsored initiatives. Contemporary street artists do not aspire to change the definition of an artwork, but rather to question the existing environment. (See Blackshaw & Farrelly, 2008; Nguyen & Mackenzie, 2010)

For many people street art is almost a synonym for sprayed graffiti. For example, when the Pori Art Museum in Finland organised an extensive Street Art – New Generation exhibition (Feb. 10–May 27, 2012), most of the works were sprayed and painted graffiti. The graffiti culture is a very complex subculture. Graffiti is an urban and artistic way of influencing the visual surroundings, but on the other hand it could be seen as vandalism. Art museum exhibitions tell us that we could consider graffiti as "real art", but at the same time news are telling us that Finnish cities have paid enormous sums to clean very similar paintings from public spaces (MTV3,

2012). So, some adore graffiti and others say that it makes the city feel insecure, violent and ghetto-like. Anyway, despite its aesthetic value, real street art, graffiti, is illegal in Finland.



Figure 4–7. Graffiti and vandalism in public transport is a big issue for cities. *The Crochet Line* (2008) installation by textile artist Virpi Vesanen-Laukkanen provides a softer alternative to the problem. The buss the seats of which were covered with crocheted tablecloths was driving on bus line 55 in Vantaa, Finland in September 2008. The artist explains the idea on her website: "The Crochet Line creates positive feelings that connect to everyday life. Travelling by bus is a smart climate choice and millions of people each day use this form of travel. The aim is to elucidate joy, colour and humour that are so often lost in daily travel. With playfulness and nostalgia, passengers can be activated and enticed to communicate with one another or get in touch with their memories." Photos by Jari Laukkanen.

Contrary to spray can art, the new urban art forms visualise and increase the attractiveness of the city space without leaving permanent marks on property. In recent years these kinds of urban art forms, for example guerrilla gardening, reverse graffiti and knit graffiti, have gained favourable attention. The main idea of this alternative graffiti genre, raised in the 2000s, is to make a statement with positive activism, not with disobedience and anarchism. Guerrilla gardening is about planting flowers and plants or growing moss in such public areas like road banks, traffic dividers in need of beautification or to remind us of dangerous intersections and places where accidents frequently happen. (Tracey, 2007; Reynolds, 2009) Reverse graffiti is basically cleaning work, where pictures are made on dirty wall surfaces, blackened by urban dust, by washing the dirt away (see Reversegraffiti, 2012).

Knitting, with a traditionally feminine material and technique, is also presented as a much-needed antidote to traditionally masculine street art, especially graffiti art, and its rebellious and destructive undertones. Urban knitting is still quite a new phenomenon, but it has already become an impressive part of the street art genre. Graffiti knitting began in 2005 with Austin-based self-taught knitter Magda Sayeg. She got an idea to knit a cosy doorpull to warm up the storefront of her Houston boutique. It was just a tiny rectangular strip out of blue and pink acrylic yarn, but the response was surprisingly strong. People came inside the shop to ask what it was and were stopping their cars to take photos. So, Sayeg invited her friend to join her and they started to tag the city with knitted items. Together they, using pseudonyms PolyCotN and A Krylik, formed the first knit graffiti crew called Knitta. In few years, knit graffiti became a widespread international phenomenon, mostly because of the Internet. (Moore & Prain 2009)

Knit graffiti, also called yarn bombing, takes many forms. It generally involves the act of attaching a hand knitted or crocheted item to a street fixture or the like. The result is softly wrapped poles, fences and street signs. It can be very complex and huge enough to cover a public monument, or it can be small and simple like a covered door handle. For some knitters this graffiti is political, for some it is only humorous. Like all street artists also knit graffiti artists are acting on their own right and leaving a personal mark on the city space without asking permission or approval. (Werle, 2011; Moore & Prain, 2009) Like all forms of street art also knit graffiti is related to social action, being creative and daring and getting in touch with environmental experiences. (See Malinen, 2008; Malinen, 2011)

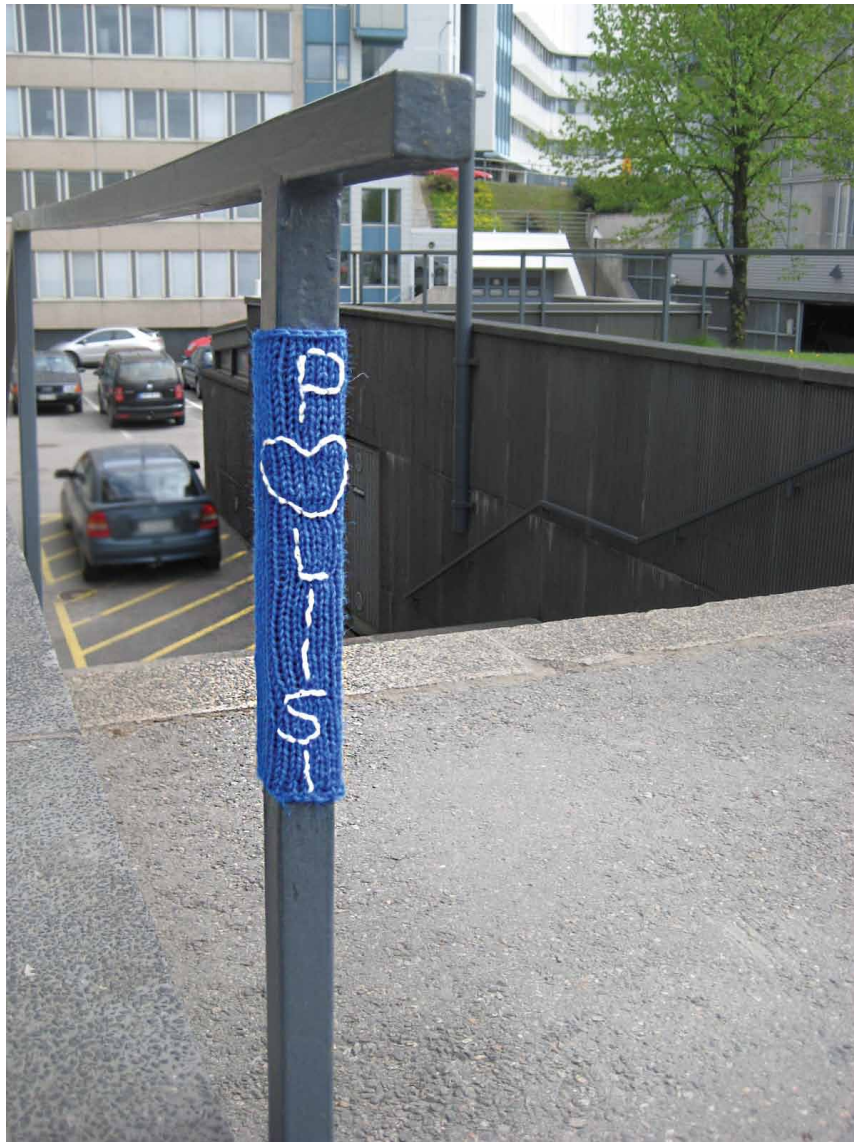


Figure 8. The police are the knitters' friend. Since knitted graffiti is easily removed, it is not perceived as illegal, and therefore it may remain in place. This piece of knit graffiti called *Police* (2009) has been placed at the corner of the police station in Tampere. After two years, the maker Elina Arpiainen aka Knit Sea replaced it with a new one because the original one became shabby and dirty. Photo by Elina Arpiainen.

Knit graffiti is not usually considered as vandalism. The woollen version of graffiti is gentler than its hard counterpart. It is also easier to remove, because a pair of scissors or even a firm tug is enough to remove these artworks without a trace. Its impermanent nature allows to produce eye-catching street art without damaging public property or breaking the law. This is one of the most important differences between knitted and sprayed graffiti. The removal of ordinary graffiti is expensive and fraught with obstacles, and that is the reason why graffiti is illegal and will be removed immediately. The paradox is that, since knitted graffiti is easily removed, it

is not perceived as illegal, and therefore it may remain in place. Although the yarn sculpted personal statements are not illegal, they still entail excitement—not because of breaking the law, but breaking invisible and non-verbal norms.



Figure 9. Blue Sea writes in her blog that she made the work called *I'll protect you* (2012) because the idea for this piece lingered long in her mind. A tiny baby sock with ladybug decoration, found from a recycling centre, needed protection. When she found a black and industrially produced mitten from the roadside, she noticed that it was a suitable guardian. This work, situated in a signpost in Helsinki, shows that knit graffiti is not restricted to the act of knitting. It can be industrial product based readymade or recycled handicraft as well. Photo by Blue Sea.

However, like traditional graffiti, knit graffiti can be considered as a political and subversive medium of communication. The concept of urban knitting is far more complex than the innocent appearance of these street knits might at first suggest. (Moore & Prain, 2009) Street art is usually made by self-

taught street artists, but in recent years the label has been adopted by art world artists who wish to keep their work unaffiliated and reach different audiences. Knit graffiti and urban knitting are not always political in content, but they are politicising space by their exciting shape and location. Knit graffiti challenges us to ask what our rights are in public spaces, and who should decide for us what we see in the city. It can be seen as a soft way to make a silent protest against the masculine culture and city environment which is mostly covered with visual messages sponsored by commercial entities.

Towards a softer world

Mandy Moore and Leanne Prain (2009) interviewed the members of the international community of knit graffiti makers for their Yarn Bombing guidebook. They listed some reasons why people do knit graffiti:

- It is fun.
- It is portable, so you can do it where and whenever you want.
- It provides opportunities for self-expression.
- It challenges social conversations.
- It challenges the pre-conception about what crafts can do.
- Small projects do not require a lot of time or money.
- It is a good way to experiment with new patterns and techniques.

These reasons seem to be valid also with Finnish knitters. People have the need to make something with their hands. There is enjoyment in making and creating something new. (Dissaynake, 1995) That does not mean that crafting is just entertainment. Making handicrafts, even as a hobby, can be an important content of life, even a way of life management. Authorship is strongly bound with personality, which leads to a desire to develop skills and one's own creativity. Creative activities increase the mental and even physical well-being. Crafting can be a tool for a better life and greater self-appreciation. (Pöllänen & Kröger, 2000) By making crafts one can get a firmer grip of the surrounding world.

According to Eija Vähälä (2003), who has studied the health effects of knitting, the process of crafting combines skills, meditation and emotions. The colours, materials and knitting motion give the feeling of pleasure. She investigated the connection between well-being and making things

with one's hands by doing physiological tests during the crafting work. She argues that the creative craft process can be used to achieve a relaxed and meditative state. This well-being slows the heart rate and provides an intense feeling of happiness.

Crafts are usually made in the middle of daily routines. They are engaged with everyday life. (Mäkelä, 2010) Even when they move to the worlds of art or urban art, they still have that humble nature. Soft art offers a contrast to the masculine and massive public art. The impermanence of crocheted and knitted artworks set against the infinity of these art monuments.



Figure 10. Sometimes a piece of knit graffiti obviously comments on the surrounding environment. The work of Elina Arpiainen aka Knit Sea called *Need support?* (2009) is attached to the banister of Kela, the Social Insurance Institution of Finland building in Tampere. Photo by Elina Arpiainen.

Because of the softness, it may be difficult to see a connection between knitting and anarchy, but actually yarn craft and activism have a long history. Some crafters see knitting as a way to change the world. (Moore & Prain, 2009; Parker & Pollock, 1987) Betsy Greer (2008) has created the term *craftivism* for that point where crafts and activism meet. Nowadays many crafters regard the act of creating something with their hands as a stance against mass-production, the consumer culture and corporate values. Crafts people are making something themselves rather than just consuming what has been given by the big suppliers. And when they do something, they usually choose something to recycle, renew and reuse. (Greer, 2008; Lukkarinen, 2008)

Knit graffiti is anonymous, non-commercial and unauthorised. It is something that has born to communicate with the living and changing environment. With handicrafts the medium is the message. Urban knitting brings soft human values and an ecological approach to replace the hard technologies of our time. The hectic rhythm of everyday life has given rise to cultural phenomena that emphasise slowness. There are new concepts, such as *slow food*, *slow design*, *slow cities* and, of course, the super-ordinate term *slow life*. The growing popularity of crafts is related to this phenomenon. It challenges us to ask what good life is and what is valuable, real and enduring.

Handicrafts have always been associated with care, maintenance and beauty. New craft movements and urban knitting are continuing this tradition, but causing a special kind of resonance. Urban knitters are using their time and money (yarns are expensive) and sparing no effort to do something they do not get any profit for. They are not after fame either because in many cases they stay anonymous. They do their art entirely on their own good will or because they have an acute need to express themselves. Traffic signs do not necessarily need legwarmers, but the knitted piece of art could warm the heart of someone passing by.

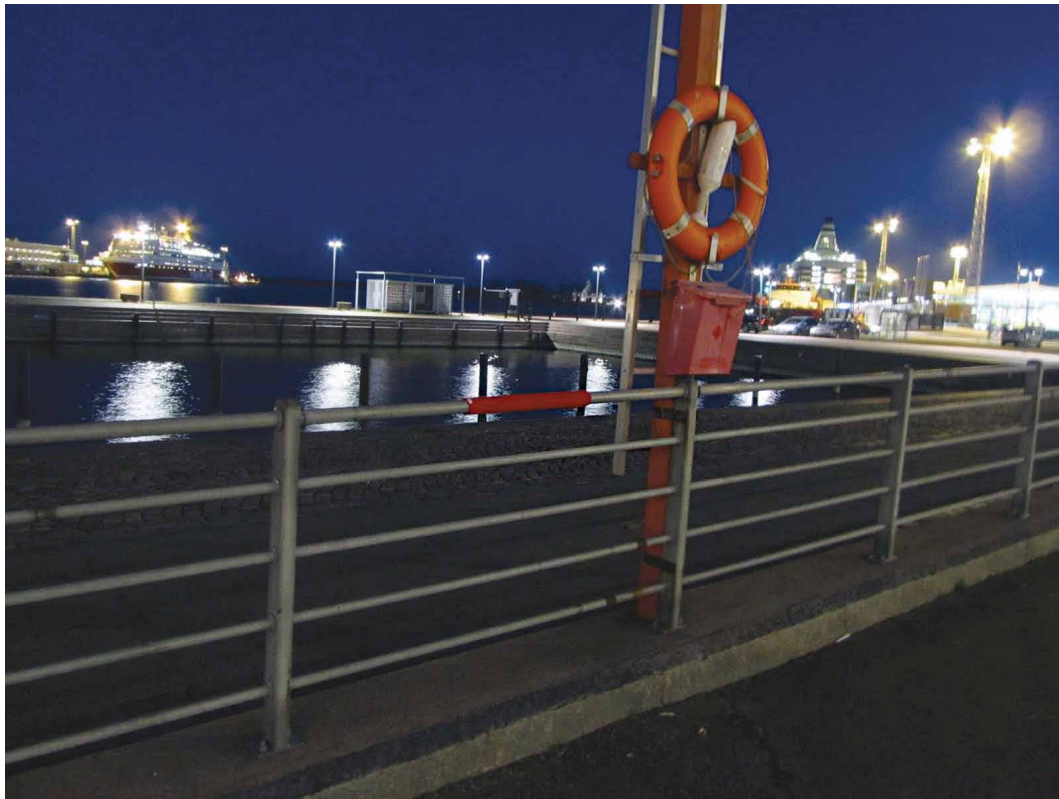


Figure 11. Knit graffiti is not always loaded with meanings and strong messages. They can quietly add a soft and warm element to the urban landscape. *The Red Line* (2012) is an artwork by Blue Sea. It is situated next to the Helsinki Channel Terminal and facing the harbour mirroring the red boats going over the sea to Sweden. Photo by Blue Sea.

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Papu, Kaija: <http://www.kaijapapu.com/>
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