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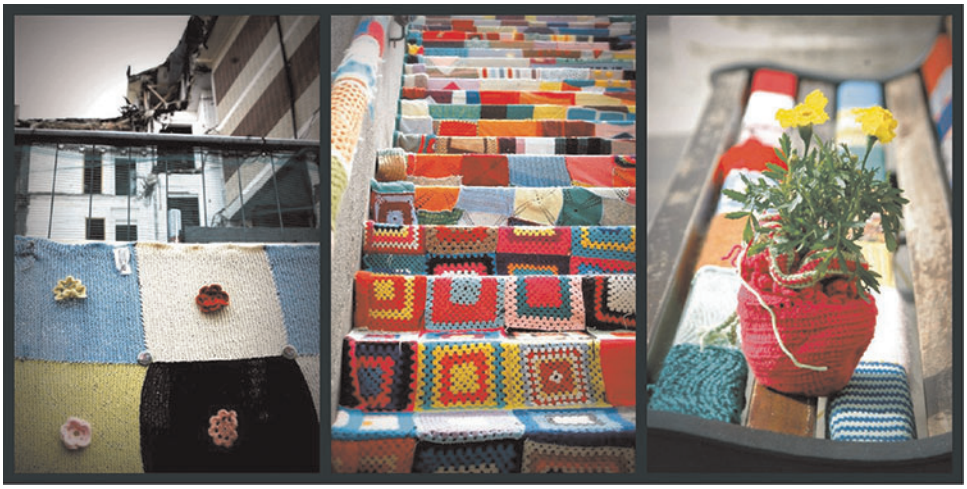
A New Fashion:
Dressing Up the Cities



Abstract

The aim of this article is to explore the urban knitting movement, a worldwide phenomenon that tries to combine a domestic activity, street or folk art, the reshaping of do-it-yourself culture, and peaceful forms of urban guerrilla protest. The activists employ colorful displays of knitted or crocheted cloth to enhance, beautify, personalize, and gentrify abandoned public places. Furthermore, they use the Internet to share knowledge on techniques and experiences, to organize collective actions, and to record and document their artistic installations. This article is focused on an urban knitting project realized in L'Aquila (Italy) three years after the 2009 earthquake. It was called "Mettiamoci una pezza" ("Let's Patch It"). The main aim of this project was to "dress up" the main square of the city, covering the gray metal barricades that still block off citizens from some areas of downtown and adding a sprinkle of color and warmth to the devastated city. We studied this movement in an ethnographic way, by applying a qualitative content analysis of the online materials and nonparticipatory observation of this event in L'Aquila in order to investigate what the collective action did both practically and symbolically. Our research shows how the movement was able to promote a very complex and meaningful political initiative.

Keywords: urban knitting, L'Aquila, "Mettiamoci una pezza," social movement, work in the home, art, handcraft, feminism, protest, disaster

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A New Fashion: Dressing Up the Cities[1]

Introduction

Up to now, the dressing experience has mainly involved human beings, but not exclusively, because such an activity has also involved the immediate sphere around human beings—that is, the house. In several cultural traditions, the house has been dressed up in various ways. However, the activity of dressing had never involved the city before the urban knitting movement, also known as “yarn bombing,” took off. The aim of this article is to analyze the movement, whose members are mainly women. The urban knitting movement represents a worldwide social phenomenon that tries to combine a domestic activity, street and folk art, the reshaping of do-it-yourself (DIY) culture, and peaceful forms of urban guerrilla protest. The Internet is a good point of observation for the movement, which is at the crossroads of domesticity, art and handicraft, and politics. Up until now, the movement has not been sufficiently studied, probably because of its intriguing complexity, which comes from the confluence of its different dimensions.

Hence we will try to fill this gap by focusing our attention on a particular case study: an urban knitting project realized by women in L’Aquila (Italy) three years after the earthquake that struck the city in 2009. The aim was to “dress up” the main square, covering the gray metal barricades that still prevent citizens accessing some areas of the city center and adding a sprinkle of color and warmth to the devastated city. The case study is an ethnographic study whose purpose was to investigate the social meaning of the movement, including the role of the Internet in this original and creative kind of collective action. In this case study, we applied a qualitative content analysis of the online materials produced by the movement and a grid of nonparticipatory observation of the event in L’Aquila.

The article is organized as follows. First, we provide an overview of the current literature about the distinctive characteristics of this social movement. In the following section, the research we carried out, its aims and the methods that have been adopted are illustrated. Next, we explore the original phenomenon of urban knitting by looking in particular at the political perspective of this collective action as well as to the social practices connected to it. Also, the social role of the Internet in the organization, circulation, and diffusion of the information about the organized events is studied. In the fourth section, we illustrate and discuss the findings of our research. Finally, we draw some conclusions.

The Four Dimensions of the Urban Knitting Phenomenon

The urban knitting movement is characterized by a considerable complexity since, as we mentioned above, it includes four main dimensions that converge in it: domestic activity, street and folk art, DIY culture, and protest. We will try to describe these dimensions one at a time, although in reality they often mingle inextricably.

Starting from the first element—domestic activity—it is not surprising to discover that women are the main protagonists of this movement. From the invention of the social role of the housewife, knitting and crocheting became an integral part of the domestic labor necessary to produce garments for family members as well as many items for the home such as blankets, pillowcases, curtains, pot holders, and so on. Obviously, in the second part of the last century, several factors—such as the resistance of women to housework, the more intense involvement of women in the labor market, the greater well-being enjoyed by the middle and lower classes—have pushed women to buy ready-made items. Hence, this kind of activity has lost its importance inside the domestic economy of families, and in many cases has remained in the area of amateur activities. Knitting and crocheting are work activities based on techniques that were generally handed down in families from mothers to daughters and which were part of the craft know-how and capabilities that were present in most families, at least until the 1950s.

Although knitting has been a female tradition for a long time, in ancient times it was practiced by men. Lucrezio in *De Rerum Natura* (2012: 103) writes that nature forced men rather than women to spin wool, since men were considered more capable and skilled in this art than women. But at a certain point men were induced to transfer this activity into feminine hands and go and do the hard work of agriculture. Also Macdonald (1990), talking about knitting as a social activity, reports that at one point in time knitted products were created by male knitting guilds and only after the Industrial Revolution was knitting definitively taken on as a woman's activity, when men were taking jobs involving machines. But men have continued to knit in particular circumstances. For example, men in jail often pass the time by crocheting and knitting; the same is true for men on military service.

In respect to the second dimension (the artistic one), although many of the knitting and crocheting works produced by women at home were very precious products and embodied an enormous amount of feminine work, their status rarely was recognized as art, even a minor art, by art critics. In fact, these kinds of product lacked the level of formalization needed to qualify them as "art." The necessary formalization succeeded when a series of women artists in the late 1970s and early 1980s—initially mostly in the United States—gave rise to a movement called "fiber art," choosing fibers and yarns as media for their artworks and using knitting, weaving, and crocheting as working techniques. These fiber works were exhibited in the halls of skyscrapers, banks, and public places, and these artists showed that they could "make art" also with materials belonging to women's domestic tradition. The early roots of this artistic movement could be found in the influence that research regarding Native American weaving and pre-Columbian basketry techniques—carried out from the 1940s at the Physical Anthropology Department of the University of California at Berkeley—had on the work that took place in the Department of Decorative Art of the same University: "In the forties, Berkeley was the only university offering a Master of Fine Arts degree in weaving. The Department … started a series of researches into non-production, non-utilitarian fabric" (Constantine and Lenor Larsen 1973: 31).

The American feminist movement of the 1960s found in this practice and culture the nursing ground for a new and specific art language. The idea of utilizing "materials" from the domestic sphere has also generated other artistic practices involving, for example, materials connected to cooking. ("Sweet sculptures," for example, are made by another group of women who create cakes that are true sculptures and which, after a while, are eaten.) But what is of interest here is the fact that women have begun to draw crocheting and knitting into the urban landscape—a maternal gesture, like wrapping someone in a warm cover. This peculiar approach by women has meant that sometimes these products have been called "grandma graffiti." In the urban context, however, the meaning of knitting and crocheting becomes completely different from the original: from activities belonging to the home and made for family members, they become social and political activities carried out to speak in public and to interact with the city.

The phenomenon can be interpreted as an alternative genre of graffiti art. The traditional spray can art is a contemporary art form which originated in New York City in the late 1960s and is characterized by a nonstandard presentation—colorful, illegal, and often provocative (Whitford 1992; Walsh 1996; Stowers 1997). According to some scholars (Cooper and Chalfant 1984; Chalfant and Prigoff 1987; Stowers 1997) the origin of graffiti is ancient and goes back to the beginnings of human life (see, for example, cave paintings). The spray-painted pieces are forms of self-expression in public contexts such as parks, subway trains or other public transportation vehicles, and state-owned buildings. Very often this form of art is not tolerated by the public authorities and is considered as vandalism, because usually the writers use public properties for expressing themselves regardless of the fact that in so doing they damage these properties permanently. Contrary to spray can art, urban knitting aims to increase the attractiveness of urban landscapes, promotes a positive activism that doesn't leave permanent marks on public property, and has nothing to do with violence and vandalism. Its main engine is the desire and willingness to beautify by washing away the dust and dirt of the city, utilizing traditionally feminine activity.

While women have generally always cared for the interior of the house, they have not been involved with the spaces around the house. Urban knitting is a way for women to go out of their houses and to interact with the city by applying the same caring strategies that they apply inside the home. Expanding these caring strategies to the city has the effect of giving a new visibility to the domestic sphere, to what happens within the four walls of the house. As Haveri notes, "The woolen 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 it 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" (2012: 10).

The third dimension that converges in this movement is the world of domestic handicraft. The resurgence of knitting grows out of the larger rediscovery of traditional handicrafts, and of the DIY movement, which involves not only the art of knitting or crocheting, but also activities like canning, producing natural cosmetics and bath products, and making jewelry or clothing at home, etc. (Levine and Heimerl 2008; Sennett 2009; Gauntlett 2011). For these new crafters the creation of goods and participation in DIY culture represents a way of subverting the dominion and control of the mass consumption of industrial goods, as well as a way to resist big corporations and the capitalist system (Ruland 2010). Paradoxically, in more recent time the persistence of knitting at a domestic level could be considered an act of critical opposition against mainstream consumer culture as well as an autarchic desire to be self-sufficient and to experiment with other forms of production and the circulation of goods.

The fourth dimension in this movement converges the social and political. As in all forms of street art, knit graffiti artists are used to leaving a personal mark on public spaces *without* asking approval (Moore and Prain 2009; Werle 2010), *breaking in this way nonverbal and invisible norms*. In this sense also, yarn bombing can be seen as a peaceful, but at the same time subversive medium of communication, strictly related to social actions, even if not always political in content (Moore and Prain 2009; Haveri 2012). Urban knitting is a soft way to realize a silent protest against the way in which the urban environment is managed, challenging common preconceptions about what handicrafts can do and realizing small but impressive projects which require little money and time (Moore and Prain 2009). For some artists, knitting represents a great tool for changing the world (Parker and Pollock 1987; Moore and Prain 2009) and in this respect Greer (2008) has coined the neologism "craftivism." The collective actions organized by craftivists have always a positive connotation and aim to draw attention toward certain urban problems. Over time this domestic activity also became, according to Wills, a tool of social engagement for women: "Knitting has long been a way for women to express passions, political stands, and individuality. Like the confines of a particular poetic form, constrain to the realm of domesticity motivated women in prior ages to find creative ways to contribute to the social discourse, and often they did so through the use of their knitting needle" (2007: 3). Others like Jackson have pointed out how, at various points in history, knitting also took on political implications: "In resistance to the Stamp Tax of 1765, colonial women boycotted English goods, resolving to clothe their families in 'naught but homespun'. Spinning and knitting bees became a mania, as women realized that their domestic pursuits had political implications" (2009: 9). The use of yarn as a medium of protest also characterizes the present adoption of knitting for street art creations and the resurgence of this traditional activity in the form of craft-based artistic expression (Gavin 2007; Greer 2008). It is only in the last decade that fiber has been considered a valid street and folk art material, and yarn bombing an increasingly widespread political trend in urban settings at international level. The activists (not only adults but also children of both sexes) employ colorful displays of knitted or crocheted "clothes" to enhance, beautify, personalize, and gentrify abandoned public places. They use fiber to knit covers or objects and install them in public spaces or on public buildings and infrastructures illegally and so usually at night. The street installations range from small, detailed additions to large, blanketed coverings and transform the meaning of the bombed space as well its function, changing the way people perceive the grammar and syntax of the city and the compositional elements of it. From buses to tanks, from benches to public stairs, the objects of the urban environments that can become "knitted" are many and very different from one another. Usually, urban knitters prepare the panels in advance and then tie them up when they are on site. The effect of the knit-graffiti realized by yarn-bombers is non-permanent and their installations can be easily removed without damaging the cityscape and the objects bombed (Moore and Prain 2009; Waterhouse 2010; Werle 2010). This lack of durability in urban knitting products references the lack of durability that characterizes the products of the domestic sphere, where everything is likely not to last, like the sweet sculptures destined to be eaten. What generally remains is the memory of the experience and the emotions connected to that.

The Original Profile of the Movement

The start of this movement has commonly been attributed to the textile artist Magda Sayeg from Houston, also known on the Internet as KnittaPlease,[2] who declares that she first got the idea in 2005 when she decorated the door handle of her boutique with a custom-made cozy. But, as Strawn

(2007) also acknowledges, surely she was not the first person to do this kind of fiber work. The movement of guerrilla knitters is predominantly made up of young women and gives them a voice in the domain of street art, which has been traditionally a man's world. As highlighted by Haveri (2012: 2), "In the Western culture, males have traditionally dominated the art world. By contrast, the crafts culture is markedly feminine." According to the founder of the website Craftivism.com, Betsy Greer (2008), until some years ago the term "knitting" evoked thoughts about grandmothers, but, thanks to the recent resurgence of crafts, nowadays it has been redefined "in a way that better reflects the current view of feminism and domesticity" (Haveri 2012: 2). Transforming traditional women's work into a tool of political expression and action makes this movement original compared to other social and political moments. In the urban knitting movement, the meaning of domesticity is no longer shaped by the material and immaterial features of the housewife figure who was so functional to Taylorism and post-Taylorism, but becomes a tool and a language made to function as the opposite of that meaning. Going out from the house, constructing a global movement, intervening in public affairs, and acting in public spaces means to reconnect to feminist practices of the redefinition of women's social identity, negotiation of new social roles for women, and the building of a new power of influence over the cities' management and shaping. To use Butler's words, in this movement a completely different performance of gender reflects the subversion of traditional feminine identity (1990).

Nowadays the urban knitting phenomenon is spread across the world, and its members have covered many different things, from the *Charging Bull* sculpture in Wall Street in New York[3] to a bus in Reykjavík[4] to the trunks of ninety-nine trees in the Blanton's Faulkner Plaza in Austin, Texas.[5] In particular, covering the Wall Street bull with a crocheted pink and purple camouflage blanket was a symbolically and metaphorically charged action. Covering the powerful symbol of global financial market meant to "contest and tame" the power of money—the typical tool of an economy managed mainly by men—in terms of instruments of "women's power," and to show that it was under the attention of feminist activists. This specific action can also be read as the precursor of the political movement "Occupy Wall Street," which would be started some months later with the purpose of contesting the logic of the current financial crisis.

The distinctive signs of the urban knitting movement are its collective, social, and political dimensions, and the fact that it involves members of every generation from children to the elderly; it intervenes in local social affairs and it uses as political messages tools from the traditional roots of women's work in the home. And it is these characteristics especially that have pushed members of the movement to intensive use of cell phones and blogs and social networks on the

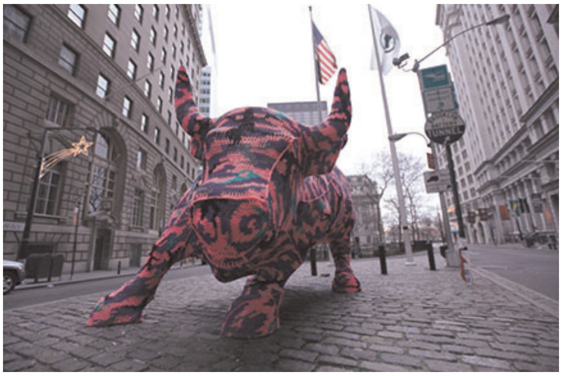

Figure 1
The *Charging Bull* sculpture near Wall Street blanketed in a pink and purple cozy. Photo: Olek (http://agataolek.com/blog/?p=50).

Internet. For organizing their collective actions, sharing the techniques, recording and documenting their creations, and uploading and spreading them, the Interet is revealed as a fundamental platform on which to rely.

The Research, Aim, and Methods

The aim of this research was to investigate the urban knitting movement by analyzing a specific case study of an urban knitting project called "Mettiamoci una pezza" ("Let's Patch It"), which took place in L'Aquila (Italy) three years after the 2009 earthquake. The earthquake had a magnitude of 6.3 M_w and the first earth tremor on April 6 was followed by two powerful aftershocks on April 7 (5.6 M_w) and April 9 (5.4 M_w). It was Italy's worst earthquake for thirty years. It caused severe damage to the city and surrounding villages, destroying many areas of the medieval center, killing more than 300 people and leaving around 65,000 homeless. Immediately after the earthquake, downtown L'Aquila was declared *zona rossa* (red zone) and police forces and numerous barricades permitted access to only a small portion of the historic city center, the traditional social and economic hearth of L'Aquila. Most alleys and squares were closed off, impeding entrance to citizens and the inhabitants of downtown (Farinosi and Treré 2010).

Three years later, the situation of the city was still complex. The reconstruction of the historic center had not started and in several areas downtown there were still barricades that blocked access to citizens. To protest against this situation of political paralysis, five actresses from Animammersa, the local actors' company, decided at the end of February 2012 to organize an urban knitting collective action and launched a blog and a page on Facebook in order to promote their initiative. The main aim of "Mettiamoci una pezza" was to "dress up" the central square, covering the gray metal barricades that blocked some areas of the city center. This action intended to draw public attention to the city and raise public awareness about the fact that the historic downtown area of L'Aquila had still not been rebuilt three years after the earthquake, and was still gray, half-deserted, affected by degradation, and partially closed to citizens. "Mettiamoci una pezza" wanted to show with this provocative and moving event that it was possible to bring the city back to life. In a few weeks, thousands of activists from all over the world responded positively to the call of this local committee and sent almost 5,000 knitted pieces accompanied by messages of support.

The research questions that inspired and guided our study were as follows:

- How do meanings around knitting happen in collective and personal contexts?
- What did this project do both practically and symbolically?

At a methodological level, this study is mainly based on a multi-method approach, analyzing both the online and the offline sphere. For the online constituent, we adopted an ethnographic approach (Hine 2000) and spent six months on the Internet systematically observing how activists use the different platforms of the Web 2.0 and for what purposes. Then we applied a qualitative content

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analysis of the online materials produced by the movement, such as posts published on the blog of the initiative from February to April 2012, status updates, links shared on the Facebook page "Mettiamoci una pezza," and photos uploaded to the official Flickr account for the event. We also took into account the textual content written on five personal blogs and four online knitting groups that spontaneously helped to promote and spread the initiative in L'Aquila. Through this analysis, mainly used in an inductive way, we obtained a sufficiently accurate representation of urban knitting.

Then, to further increase understanding of the urban knitting phenomenon, we conducted an offline analysis and employed nonparticipant observation of the event in L'Aquila. This method has a long tradition in human sciences and offers the possibility of looking at people's activities without taking part in them. In nonparticipant observation, the researcher simply observes without interacting with people and usually does so without their knowledge. Nonparticipant observation combined with qualitative content analysis allowed us to explore the under-studied social world (Lindesmith, Strauss, and Renzin 1975) of urban knitters and to shed light on this new and original phenomenon.

Results

"Mettiamoci una pezza" was one of the first urban knitting initiatives in Italy and was organized, as described earlier, by a group of five actresses from the local actors' company Animammersa. This project was sponsored by the Industria Italiana Filati from Prato and aimed to cover a surface of almost four square miles of the downtown area with colorful patches created by knitters and crocheters, and in this way commemorate the third anniversary of the quake on April 6, 2012, adding a sprinkle of color and warmth and bringing life to a place that before the disaster was the social, economic, and political heart of L'Aquila. In the official call for action the organizers wrote:

> *Pick one of many historic downtown areas. Remove its residents, those who go to the stores, those who work in offices, and those who shop daily at market kiosks. Remove stores, offices, banks … Remove and keep taking away; eventually you'll have nothing. This is L'Aquila … Gray is everywhere. The life is gone, the color is gone, and in this historic downtown, nothing is real any more. There is not much difference between the lives of its inhabitants and the life of the city. Because of this, we would like to launch a campaign called "Let's Patch It!"* (Animammersa 2012a)

In order to spread this collective action, at the end of February 2012 the five women created a blog on Wordpress[6] and opened a page[7] on the social networking site Facebook, asking anyone who wanted to collaborate in the project to produce a patch and send it to the address of one of them, Patrizia. From the first moment, activists exploited the Facebook page for promoting and disseminating the urban knitting initiative in L'Aquila, sharing videos with interviews with the organizers and articles about the artistic event of 6 April 2012, as well as other similar collective actions that had taken place in other cities of the world. Given that only few people in Italy at that time knew of the urban knitting movement, these articles had the fundamental role of explaining and giving the general public a sense of the kind of initiative that was intended for L'Aquila. Through the Internet the organizers put out a call for a specific type of work called "granny squares," or knitted flowers, to adorn the gray urban environment of the city center:

> *We would prefer to collect knitted patches measuring 50 × 50 cm, or 25 × 25 cm, or 40 × 40 cm, or 20 × 20 cm. The squares can be done using knitting or crocheting techniques in any sort of stitch, thread, or color. Same criteria for the flowers.* (Animammersa 2012a)

Thanks to viral circulation of the call, in a very short time the organizers received thousands of artistic creations from knitters and crocheters. The call achieved a high level of visibility in online knitting communities and several groups such as Social Crochet, La Banda della Maglia, and Patchwork Caffe decided to participate in the collective action, inviting their members to take part to the initiative. For example a woman known online as Crafteemom, wrote on her blog:

> *I'll be participating with the crochet group I am in on Facebook, but have decided to make this our class project in the two fifth grade classes I am teaching crochet to. The kids are really excited! If you can, please spread the word. The more we are, the more beautiful L'Aquila will be! Hopefully not just for one day:)* (Crafteemom 2012).

Bloggers also decided to contribute to spreading the call, sharing the initiative on their blogs or publishing a special banner on personal webpages.[8]

Over a few weeks, many knitted squares accompanied by greeting cards with messages of support and love for L'Aquila started arriving from all over the world. The organizers had created a template for the cards, which was downloadable from their blog in PDF format (Figure 3), so the majority of received pieces were accompanied by such a card, including the name and city of the artist and a short message of solidarity. With regard to this, the organizers stated:

> *The action of urban knitting we want to realize on April 6, 2012, the third anniversary of the 2009 earthquake, calls for an individual contribution that will produce a collective work, but we think it's important to keep track of the names of the authors of each piece or flower.* (Animammersa 2012b)

All the cards received were then attached to the barricades by colorful wool threads (Figure 4). In some aspects, this kind of collective action is reminiscent of the mechanisms that characterize crowdfunding initiatives, where the collective effort of several individuals is networked and used in support of a wide array of activities, from citizen journalism to disaster relief, from the publication of a book to free software development (Ordanini et al. 2011). However, in the case of urban

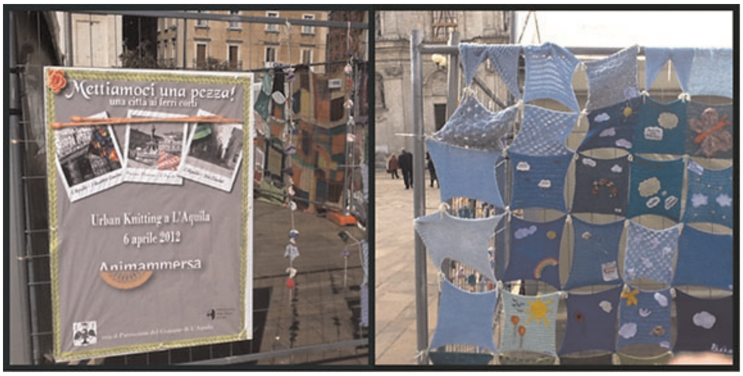

Figure 2
Barricades in L'Aquila "decorated" by knitters, and the official poster of the event promoted by Animammersa, the actors' company.

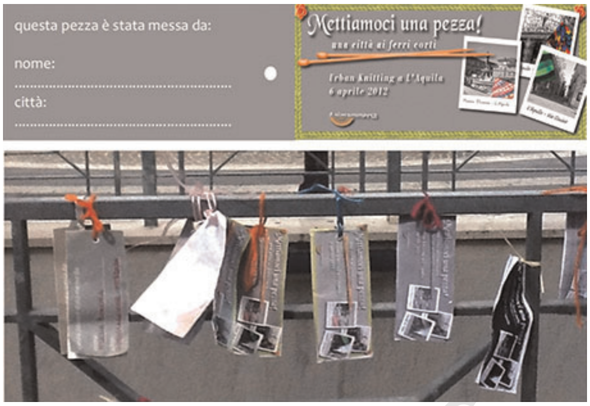

Figure 3
A barricade in the main square of L'Aquila "decorated" with the greeting cards received by the knitters.

knitting, crowdfunding does not refer to financial support but to the working hours that people donate to a project.

Participation in such projects is free (excluding shipping and packaging of the work) and open to everyone who wants to demonstrate his or her support and give vent to his or her creative activism. Widespread publicity for a project, both online and offline, is therefore fundamental in order to receive as many contributions as possible. But for "Mettiamoci una pezza" in particular, the Internet had a pivotal role not only in the organizational phase of spreading the word about the peaceful protest action, but also in what we define as the report phase (Figures 4, 5, and 6). Once the installation was completed, the urban knitters took many pictures of the final work and shared them online. The five actresses of Animammersa created a professional account on Flickr (flickr.com/photos/mettiamociuna pezza), Yahoo's platform where users can upload their photos. In addition to pictures of the installation, they also documented different phases of the collective action, from the donation of knitted squares in the International Museum of Ceramics in Faenza by the project "Knitting Relay"[9] to the "work in progress" phase, when the five actresses, with the collaboration of some volunteers, joined up the received pieces and made a big knitted square. Among the various photos shared on Flickr there is also one showing a young man who is knitting a piece for the installation (Figure 4), demonstrating that this kind of activity is not an exclusively feminine phenomenon.

All the pieces that Patrizia received were photographed and shared online in order to accurately document the entire collection, creating a sort of digital archive of the knitted pieces. In addition to Flickr, the page created on Facebook was also widely used.

Comments posted on the Facebook page and reactions offline revealed that people welcomed the initiative. Passersby were shocked and intrigued to see something new, colorful, and unexpected and their positive responses could be observed from the smiles on their faces and their

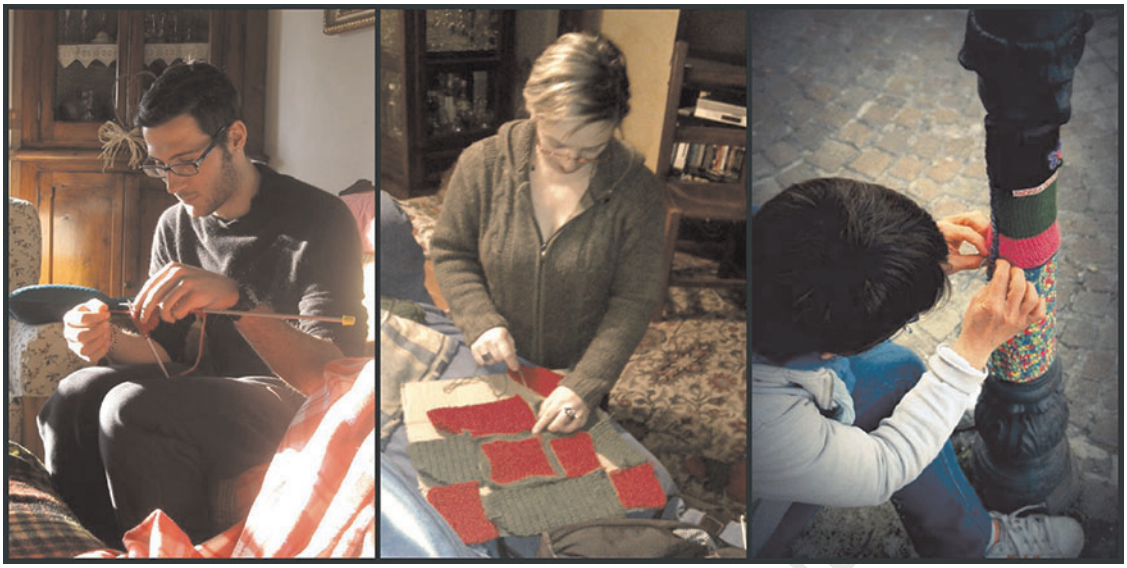

Figure 4
Images of the making of the knitted pieces. Photo: Animammersa. Available online: http://www.flickr.com/photos/mettiamociunapezza/.

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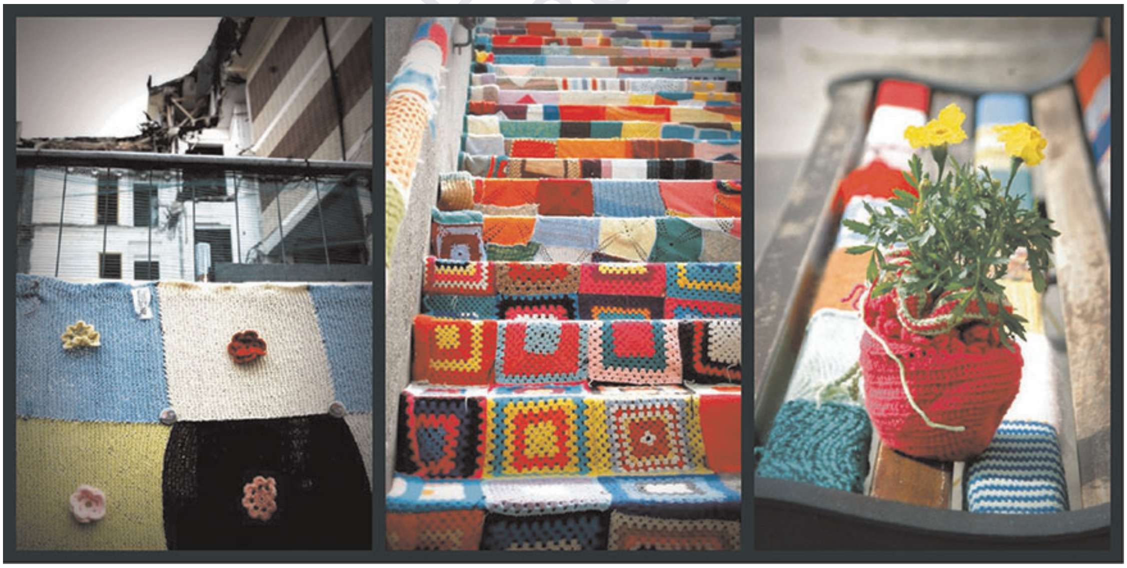

Figure 5
Installations in L'Aquila. Photos: Roberta Cresca, published on the Facebook page of "Mettiamoci una pezza."

words. Commenting on the urban knitting initiative, for example, a young woman, Silvia, said:

> *My first impression was joy: it was like a rainbow of colors on a gray background. Then this feeling was replaced by a sense of tenderness because it looked like someone had wanted to cover a sleepy town with a warm blanket.*

Talking about the emotions linked to the view of the artistic installation, Andrea, a man from L'Aquila said:

> *Those "objects" of wool immediately brought me back to an image of grandmothers who made clothes of wool for their loved ones, for those whom they did not want to feel chilly during the winter. It was like the people wanted to cover the city and keep it warm and so prevent it falling sick. But then, reflecting on the position of the pieces, my first thoughts of joy and warmth have been replaced by pain and a sense of something lacking … a lack of the physical reconstruction of the city! So if at first I felt joy and excitement perhaps for these new and unexpected objects in the city, I was then sad and discouraged because the patches represented a sort of Band-Aid on the dying city."*

On the whole, citizens' reactions confirmed the success of the collective action promoted by Animammersa in L'Aquila. The audience received the work in a very positive way; also, from their words it is possible to glimpse their sadness and melancholy for the destroyed city and the past, while in the main square there was life and joy.

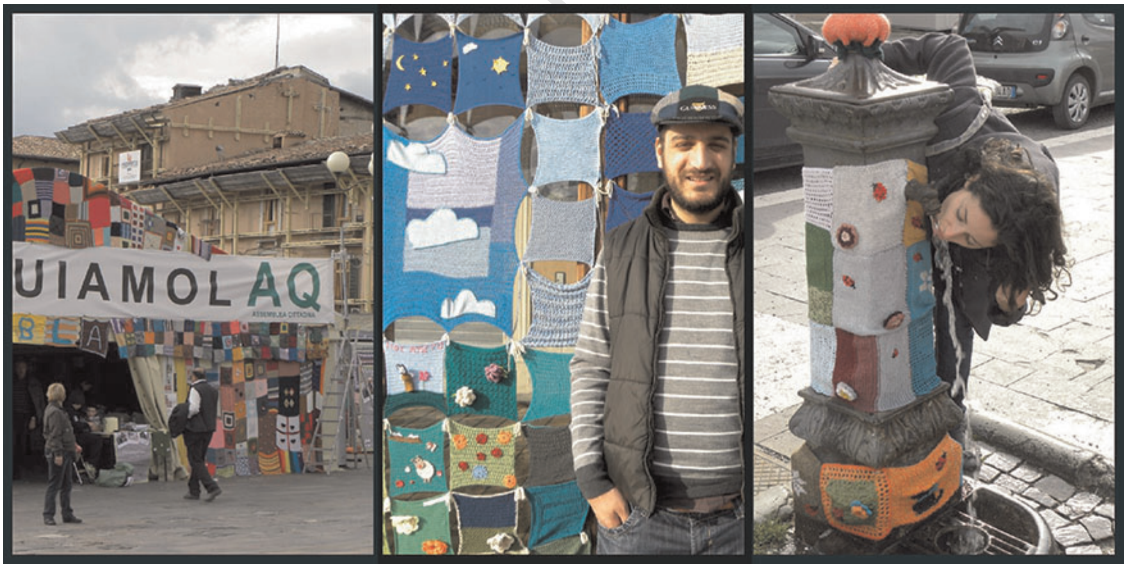

Figure 6
Some photos of participants shared on Facebook.

Discussion and Final Remarks

To answer our first research question, "How do meanings around knitting happen in collective and personal contexts?," "Mettiamoci una pezza," like the general urban knitting phenomenon, was characterized by a combination of different aspects: domesticity, art, protest, feminism, solidarity, handcraft, and digital media. These topics intersect each other uniquely and affect understanding of the phenomenon itself. Each of them contains several important characteristics and can represent a good point of departure for the study of yarn bombing. From our study it emerges clearly that domesticity is radically reinterpreted. A public, political meaning is attributed to an activity that was until yesterday "private," hidden inside the four walls of the house. Hence knitting changes its target from the home and the clothing of family members to the city, the urban environment. Dressing up the cities becomes a collective process that requires women to handle this peculiar production together. Moreover, it changes the meaning of knitting from being an expression of women's subalternity to being a tool of revolutionary social change in urban environments.

In this context, the Internet has been a powerful flywheel of lay knowledge production and of technique sharing, as well as of the elaboration of a feminine identity which is now able to build bridges according to its roots, work traditions, know-how, and so on. The break with the past that the explosion of the feminist movement of the 1960s made necessary can now be repaired and reworked. Women are now able to go ahead and be innovative by sewing up their past and their traditional culture and know-how. From domestic activities being a sign of social isolation, discipline, and control to which women were forced to submit, they have now become a new instrument of communication and struggle.

In a world that has become increasingly technological, a very traditional activity such as knitting cannot disregard the potential of the new ICT. The current resurgence in knitting among women both young and old, as well as children, and more generally in the creation of items made by hand, might appear to be inconsistent with a society that is increasingly consuming ready-made products and technology. But digital media, which have played a key role in aspects of this phenomenon, combined with the new communication strategies of the Web 2.0, have changed the status of amateur handicrafts (Gauntlett 2011; Haveri 2012). From this perspective, handcrafts are no more merely associated with utility but have become a form of self-expression, folk art, and public mobilization. According to Wills (2007), the Internet plays an important role in the current explosion and requalification of knitting. Studying the largest online knitting community, called Ravelry,[10] she wrote: "Young knitters are tremendous users of the Internet. It would be difficult to overstate the influence the Internet has on the popularity of knitting. A Google search on the word "knitting" … generated about 38.4 million hits" (2007: 85). Updating this data, if we now repeat the search, we find that it generates more than 123 million hits.

As emerged from our case study, the Internet represents an appropriate place for social connections among heterogeneous groups of people physically distant from each other. Online communities are a significant resource for women who don't know anyone who knits among their friends or relatives. Nowadays, the Web is brimming with knitting blogs and communities and, according to some authors, it has revolutionized the way in which people learn handicraft skills (Haveri 2012). Forums and comment areas allow Internet users to discuss fibers, yarns, patterns, tools, and techniques. Social media platforms enable people to communicate and share knitting knowledge. They offer an international space, allow global participation, and collapse time into an intense focus on the present. Feminism has been as much a part of this change in our habitual ways of relating as any other political or social practice. In particular, blogs represent an important channel of expression where people can talk about their experiences and upload pictures of their creative and artistic works, making them more "visible." Craft blogs have an important role in DIY culture and have contributed considerably to the increase in popularity of handicrafts and to the evolution of indie subculture (Oakes 2009). Today's crafters create content such as images or tutorials for YouTube, Flickr, or

Facebook, or publish them on their own blogs, transforming themselves from simple followers to active participants and publishers (Gauntlett 2011; Haveri 2012). On the Web, knitters can post photos and videos of their artistic installations and share them with people who have similar interests and often similar lifestyles. In this way, they can leave documentary traces of their temporary works and their art.

Some knitters have also set up their own online stores and sell their handicrafts on sites such as Etsy.com. As Wills points out, "Knitters are using their craft to carve out personal space and revive real, face to face interactions. Some do it through knitting circles and related organizations. Others make their communities online" (2007: 45). The intersection of craft and technology provides an excellent opportunity for building online communities where people can share mutual passions. Furthermore, the development of skills by cooperation with other crafters brings with it the creation and strengthening of social interactions (Haveri 2012). In this regard, given that knitting is conventionally a women's activity according to Minahan and Cox (2007: 9) and Ruland (2010: 73), some knitting groups might be read as prime examples of cyber-feminism, as virtual women-only spaces.

The findings of our study have pointed out how the Internet constitutes a focal point that facilitates contact between crafters worldwide and contributes to the international spread of the phenomenon. But, as emerged from offline observation, it also plays an important role in real-world activities (Minahan and Cox 2007; Moore and Prain 2009). Thanks to online communication and its opportunities for creating networks, crafters are in fact able to keep in touch with each other and contribute to the organization of installations and happenings (Levine and Heimerl 2008). Through DIY culture, people can increase their engagement and connection with their social and physical environment, giving rise to personal growth and social learning practices and—at the same time—to a sort of "social meaning of creativity" (Gauntlett 2011). Furthermore, through continued use of the Internet for organizing and coordinating future collective actions, knitters have attracted more activists, spreading their peaceful protest and complex subculture all over the world.

The project realized in L'Aquila constitutes a good example that has allowed us to assess not only the combination of traditional handcrafts and digital media, but also the role of Web 2.0 platforms in the organization and circulation of collective actions. In the last decade, several scholars have found that online spaces—thanks to their participatory and interactive characteristics—represent a new way of promoting civic and political participation (Kavanaugh and Patterson 2001; Bennett 2003; Kahn and Kellner 2004; Cammaerts and Van Audenhove 2005; Della Porta and Mosca 2005; Gil De Zúñiga, Puig-I-Abril, and Rojas 2009; Gil De Zúñiga and Valenzuela 2010). But it is important to keep in mind that: “The online participation is often about moving people to action offline” (Fenton 2008: 230). Therefore the collective action promoted in L’Aquila also represented an interesting initiative for studying the online/offline dimensions of the urban knitting movement and use of the Internet for breaking free from the four walls of the home.

The contemporary revival of knitting for purposes of peaceful protest represents an interesting lens through which the role of the Internet may be analyzed. By understanding, in fact, the social aspects of knitting and—at the same time—the social aspects linked to Web 2.0 platforms, it is possible to begin to look at today’s knitting revival and to explore the intersections between apparently distant worlds: art, handicraft, digital media, and social/political movements. The internationality of the yarn-bombing movement, based especially on the adoption of online social platforms by the activists, gives a transnational dimension to collective actions and political practices that movements usually struggle to reach. The Internet has in fact enlarged the political dimension of this movement to the world, allowing women who are territorially dispersed to know each other and to connect with the purpose of action.

There is, in the urban knitting movement, a completely different political logic from that used in politics in the past and which was based on persuasion, manipulation, and power. This one is an affective and viral logic, which does not need to convince and to dominate anybody, which does not have any adversary to destroy but which conveys warmth and joy. Unfortunately, this peaceful dimension also constitutes, in our opinion, a limitation for urban knitting collective actions, given that the artistic installations do not seem to lead to significant change in political dynamics both at a local and national level of public institutions. In particular, to answer our second research question—“What did this project do both practically and symbolically?”—we can say that the event in L’Aquila chimed with an emotional and political chord, and gave people a vehicle by which they could express the affect of urban injury through natural disaster, and the civic and national failure to rebuild a devastated medieval town. Initiatives such as “Mettiamoci una pezza” can be very useful for shining a spotlight on a reality such as that of post-earthquake L’Aquila, often forgotten by national mainstream media.

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Notes

1. An earlier version of this article was published in L. Stillman, T. Denison, A. Sabiescu, and N. Memarovic (eds), (2012), “Proceedings of CIRN 2012 Community Informatics Conference: ‘Ideals meet Reality’, Monash Center, Prato, Italy, November 7–9, 2012.”
2. Available online: http://knittaporfavor.wordpress.com/ and http://www.magdasayeg.com/home.php.
3. Available online: http://www.nytimes.com/slideshow/2011/05/19/fashion/19Yarnbomb_ss-6.html.
4. Available online: http://reykjavikundergroundyarnstormers.wordpress.com/2012/08/18/bus-yarnstorming/.
5. Available online: http://www.apartmenttherapy.com/99-yarn-bombed-trees-by-knitta-142211.
6. Available online: http://mettiamociunapezza.wordpress.com/.
7. Available online: https://www.facebook.com/pages/Mettiamoci-Una-Pezza/253958188011352.
8. Among the others we can cite http://giardinoindiretta.blogspot.it/2012/02/mettiamoci-una-pezza.html#axzz25nB6AVWD; or http://www.pianetamamma.it/network/eco-mamma/mamme-mettiamoci-una-pezza.html; or http://leideedisusy.wordpress.com/2012/02/20/mettiamoci-una-pezza-tutte-unite-per-laquila/; or http://madebykate.wordpress.com/2012/02/10/mettiamoci-una-pezza/.
9. “Knitting Relay” is a project based on a double “relay race” that involves thirty players from Italy and Spain. For further information, please see http://knittingrelay.blogspot.it/p/english.html.
10. Available online: www.ravelry.com.

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