

Craftivism (craft + activism)

is a term coined by Betsy Greer in 2003 to describe “a way of looking at life where voicing opinions through creativity makes your voice stronger, your compassion deeper and your quest for justice more infinite.” Craft is a frequent feature of protest, from handmade signs to cardboard figurines to papier-mâché sculptures to puff-painted tshirts to homemade buttons.

Activist threads

Knit and crochet craftivism have recently had the spotlight because of the ubiquitous hot pink hats associated with the Women’s March on Washington (and elsewhere) in January. The Pussyhat Project (<https://www.pussyhatproject.com/>), cofounded by Krista Suh and Jayna Zweiman, was designed to give crafters a way of participating in the march, whether or not they could attend a march—and to make an explicit statement protesting the current President’s recorded admission of sexual assault.

Today, we’re going to focus on two kinds of fiber-based graffiti: subversive cross-stitch and yarnbombing. Fibercraft activists might seek to beautify eyesores, bring attention to often-overlooked elements of the landscape, soften the hard edges of cities, add color to a monotone palette, draw attention to a message included in the tag, among other things. But the practice has its limitations: in wet climates, fabric can hold water, which damages trees, rots wooden structures, and rusts metal ones. Tags can get dirty, dingy, and saggy, defeating the purpose of the tag. If left long enough to the elements, the fabric will break down, becoming its own kind of litter (making its way into waterways—but also into bird nests).

So if you’re ready to accept the risks (like citation or arrest) and responsibilities (maintaining your project or taking it down before it becomes an environmental problem), it’s time to do some fibercraft!

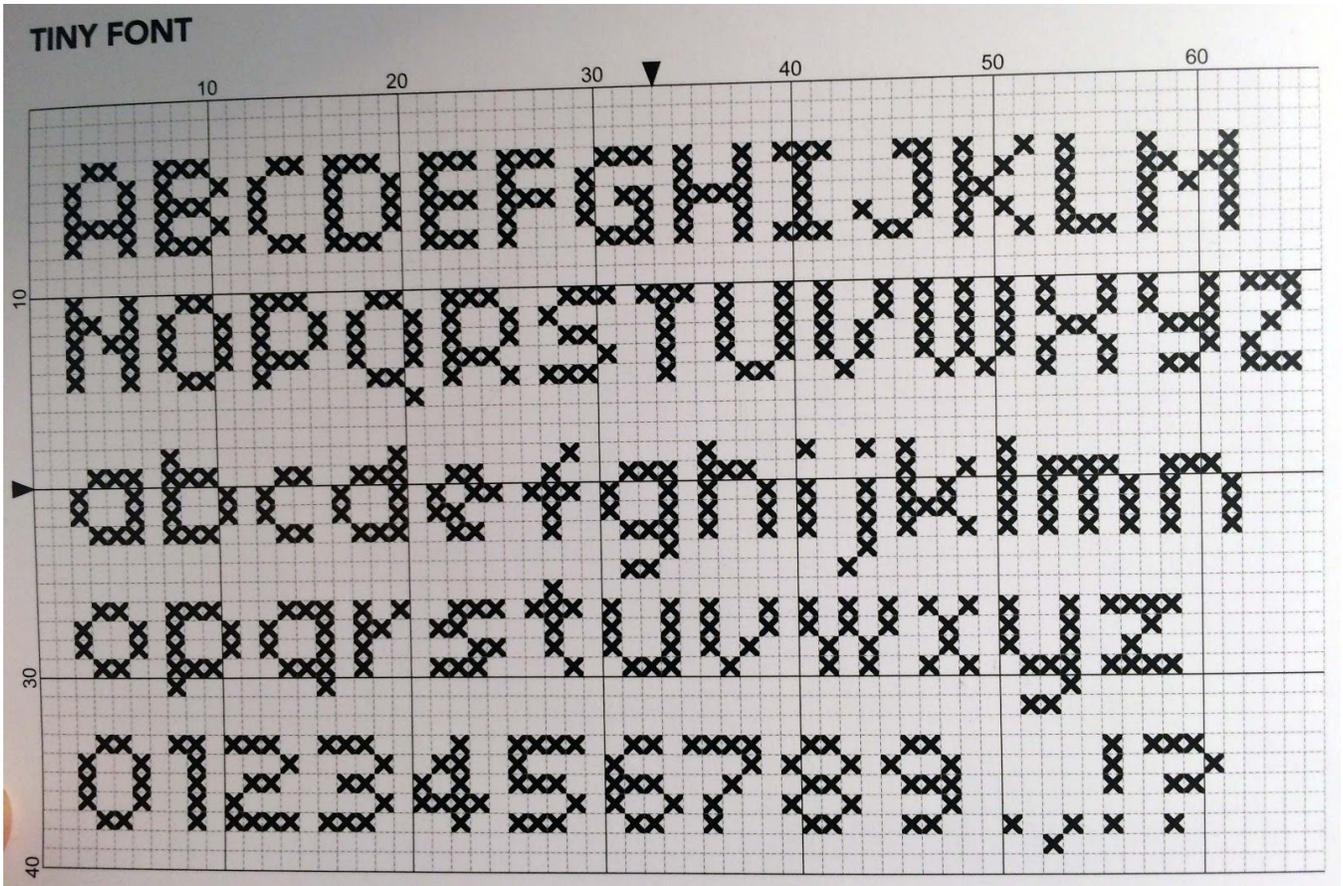
Subversive needlework has a long history (see Maureen Daly Goggin’s work on embroidery), but it is also part of contemporary craftivist practice. From not-your-grandma’s cross-stitch patterns (<http://subversivecrossstitch.com/blog/> and <http://radicalcrossstitch.com/>) to cross-stitch activism (<https://craftivist-collective.com/>), DIY crafters are stitching and spreading the message.

Once you get the hang of it, cross-stitch is pretty simple: if you can count tiny squares and make an X, you’ve got it. Julie Jackson at Subversive Cross-Stitch has lots of resources here: <https://shop.subversivecrossstitch.com/pages/how-to>. Your cross-stitch can be a crass slogan you frame for your office, or you can make something like the Craftivist Collective’s Mini-Banner project: <https://craftivist-collective.com/mini-banner>.

A Craftivist Collective mini-banner:

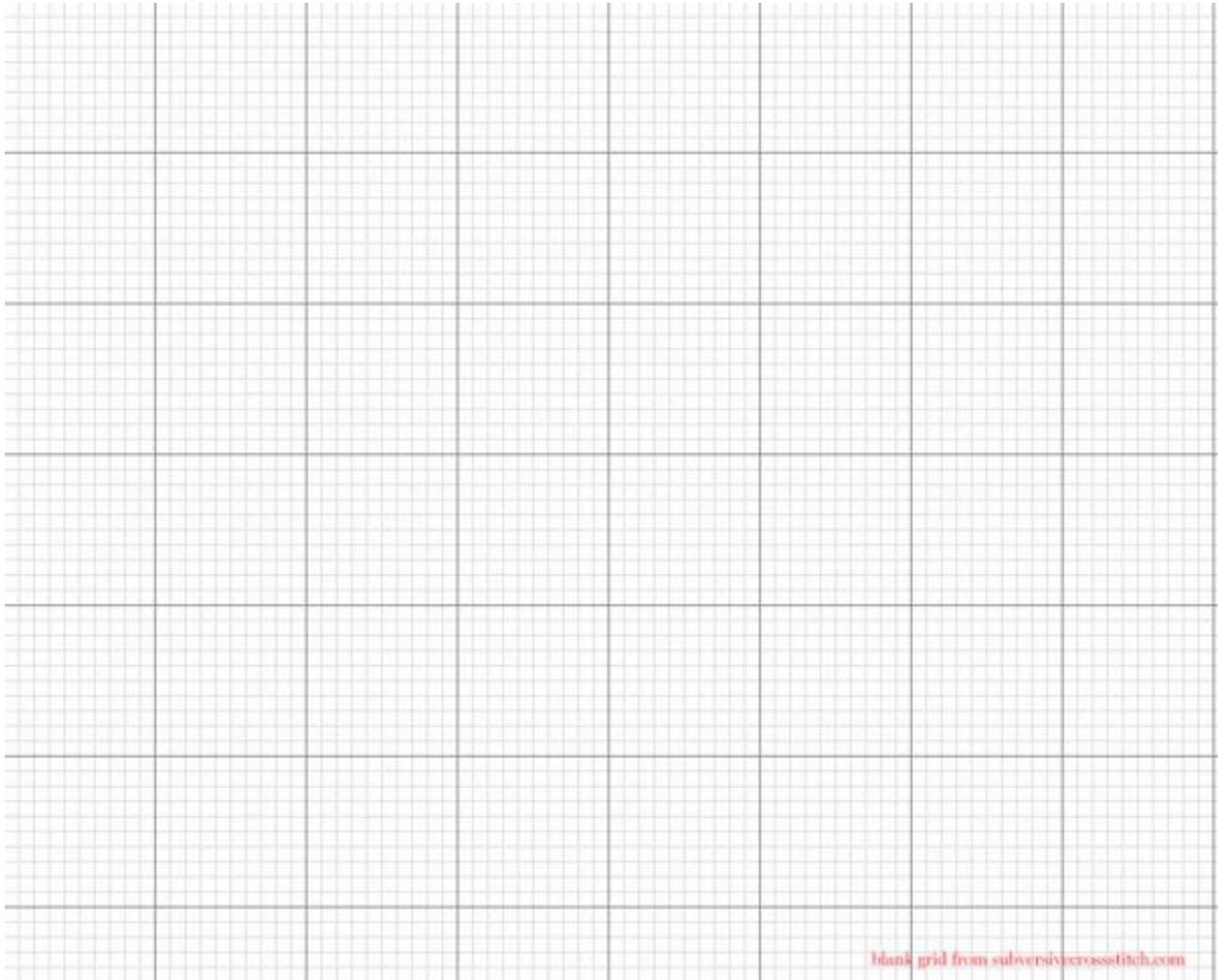


A good font for the mini-banner is Jackson's tiny font:



And using that (or another font or your own improvised pattern), you can then use any grid paper (or the grid on the next page) to create your own pattern. In the mini-banner above, the lettering is done using the “backstitch” technique, so that letters that are made using lines instead of Xs.

Blank grid for cross-stitch pattern making:



Yarnbombing—or yarn graffiti, as it’s also called—takes all kinds of forms around the world: cozies on trees, rocks, doorknobs, benches, lampposts, chain-link fences, and bridges, crocheted or knit signs and pothole filling, and free-form 3d objects like flowers and mushrooms. And just like graffiti, some yarnbombing projects are illegal—while others are ignored by the law or commissioned by individuals, civic bodies, or other organizations.

Yarnbombing has been a feature of the 2011 Wisconsin protests, the 2012 student strike in Québec, a World AIDS Day event in Durban, South Africa, and other activist and protest actions. One iconic example comes from Copenhagen in 2006, when knitters and crocheters covered a WWII-era tank set in front of the Nikolaj Contemporary Art Center to protest the war in Iraq.

Yarnbombing is pretty evenly divided between knit and crochet. (Knitting is the one with two sticks, while crochet is the one with one hook.) Both have their advantages, but since crochet

is a bit more freeform (and can be a *bit* easier to learn at the beginning), that's what we're going to do today. Some yarnbombing projects involve working right on the object being covered, but most projects—certainly *beginner* projects—consist of pre-made squares or rectangles that are joined to other pieces or themselves on-site (often using zip-ties). So we're gonna get real square(ish) (or rectangle-y).

Instructables has a really nice beginner crochet tutorial:

<http://www.instructables.com/id/Beginning-crochet/?ALLSTEPS>. If you prefer video, this beginner YouTube video is pretty good: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aAxGTnVNjIE>.

Once you have a finished square or rectangle big enough to install on something, you're set! You could embellish the piece (by stitching words onto it, by making little flowers to apply to it, by joining it to other pieces) or just head out to wrap and zip-tie it around an appropriately-sized and -located object. BOOM!

This image—of yarnbombers at work on a bridge in Berlin—is part of a 2014 series called “yarnbombing for lgbt rights” by Flickr user distelfliege. The album tags include “sochi2014,” “lgbt,” “pride,” “humanrights,” and “uganda.” Thanks to distelfliege for making this photo available for use through a Creative Commons CC BY 2.0 license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/2.0/>).*



Resources

Articles

everything in issue 14 of *Harlot*: <http://harlotofthearts.org/index.php/harlot/issue/view/14>

Maureen Daly Goggin, “Joie de Fabriquer: The Rhetoricity of Yarn Bombing,” *Peitho*

—, “Knitting Social Identity: Yarn Graffiti in Transnational Craftivist Protest,” *HyperCultura*

Books

Maria Elena Buszek, *Extra/Ordinary: Craft and Contemporary Art*

Betsy Greer, *Knitting for Good! A Guide to Creating Personal, Social, and Political Change*

David Revere McFadden, *Radical Lace and Subversive Knitting*

Mandy Moore and Leanne Prain, *Yarn Bombing: The Art of Crochet and Knit Graffiti*

Web

<http://castoff.info/>

<https://craftivist-collective.com/>

<http://craftivism.com/>

<http://www.magdasayeg.com/>

<http://radicalcrossstitch.com/>

<http://subversivecrossstitch.com/blog/>

<http://www.yarnbombinglosangeles.com/>

Us

Kristi Prins / @kkprins / kristiprins@gmail.com

Marilee Brooks-Gillies / marilee.brooks@gmail.com