Knit Two Together and Repeat

Breaking with Tradition through Yarnbombing by the Cercles de Fermières du Québec

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Abstract

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In 2015, Quebec celebrated the 100th anniversary of the Cercles de Fermières. For this celebration, the current members chose to yarnbomb their communities, a type of street art in which knitted and crocheted elements are created to cover up the urban landscape. As their general reputation is for being 'traditional,' setting their craft practices as distant from the contemporary practice of knitted graffiti used in this anniversary celebration, this thesis will explore the historical and present perception of the organisation, in order to better understand and argue against this dichotomy. Interviews done with local practitioners of yarnbombing, and current members of the Cercles de Fermières help prove the importance of oral history in deconstructing the narrative constructed around the Cercle de Fermières and yarnbombing. At the moment of this celebration, their engagement with this contemporary street art was understood as an attempt to mobilize and enliven their 'traditional' skills for newer craft practices and aims, and thus actively participate in present-day craft discourse in Quebec. By comparing their practice to that of local and international yarnbombers, and discussing it in light of current discourse around the street art, I argue that while the impact of this activity on the image of the organisation was small, exploring the impact of this activity on the Cercles de Fermières in the years following it has shown that they regained some of the popularity and relevance they had lost over time.

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Introduction

In 2015, the Cercles de Fermières du Québec[1] celebrated their 100th anniversary. For the occasion, the current members chose to yarnbomb[2] their communities (yarnbombing is a type of street art in which knitted and crocheted elements are created to cover up the urban landscape). This event was pivotal for the current members of the organization: the women interviewed for the occasion insisted on the importance of such a project in demonstrating to the public that the Cercle de Fermières are not just crafters from the past, but rather an involved and active contemporary organization. The organisation was originally created in order to transmit and preserve the province's cultural heritage and handicraft skills, while also providing rural women with the means and knowledge for a domestic craft production that could benefit the home. However, the group's reputation is for being 'traditional,' and this often sets their craft production as distant from the contemporary practice of knitted graffiti used in their celebration. Artist Aram Han Sifuentes, in "Steps towards Decolonizing Craft" (2017), explains how "traditional is often understood as old and ancient,"[3] therefore setting everything defined as such apart from the contemporary. However, she argues, the two are not complete opposites, and do coexist. She further suggests that these terms are set in opposition to allow the fetishization and appropriation of traditional practices.[4]

This thesis will attempt to deconstruct the Cercles de Fermières' anniversary event in order to better understand the ramifications behind the use of yarnbombing by this long-standing institution. The goal of this research is to prove that this particular engagement with knit graffiti is an attempt to demonstrate the ability of the Cercles to mobilize and enliven their 'traditional' skills for newer craft practices and aims, and thus actively participate in the present-day craft discourse in Quebec. This study is organised into three sections. The first will look into the

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1 Throughout its existence, the Cercles de Fermières has had many variations of its name. Except in the case of quotes or names used in resources, the organisation's name will remain Cercles de Fermières, as per their official website: "Mission et Objectifs," *Les Cercles de Fermières Du Québec*, accessed June 4, 2017, http://cfq.qc.ca/a-propos/mission-et-objectifs/. The word Fermière will also be used to designate members of this organisation, and should not be mistaken for fermière, which designates a woman farmer.

2 Yarnbombing has been written in many forms, but for the sake of clarity, this thesis will use it in a single word, rather than separating it in two, such as with yarn bombing. This thesis will also use knit graffiti as a synonym for this practice, however this term has been used less by academics, practitioners and the public. Nevertheless, its more literal wording serves as a bridge between the French version of the name, tricot-graffiti, and its English counterpart.

3 Aram Han Sifuentes, "Steps towards Decolonizing Craft," *Textile Society of America* (blog), accessed February 27, 2018, https://textilesocietyofamerica.org/6728/steps-towards-decolonizing-craft/.

4 Sifuentes, "Steps towards Decolonizing Craft."

discourse surrounding this organization, both at the moment of its creation and today, in order to understand the factors that have perpetuated these myths of a pastoral and atemporal community of Québécois women. This section will approach the topic through a close reading of archival texts written by the founders and interviews with contemporary Fermières. The story of Émélie Chamard – an important Fermière from the early years of the organisation – will also further explain how French Canadian nationalism and cultural preservation went hand in hand in order to encourage the preservation of an imagined tradition thought to be declining. Additionally, scholars like craft historian Glenn Adamson and professor of cultural studies Susan Luckman will help contextualize the very pastoral and idealized vision of rural culture and traditions in relation to craft. More local authorities on women's work and the Cercles de Fermières, historians Yolande Cohen and Jocelyne Mathieu, will help define the background and research on both the organisation and the social context of the province.

The second section will offer greater details on the yarnbombing event done by the organisation, while also providing an overview and critique of the street art more globally. The work of geographer Joanna Mann and sociologist Fran Tonkiss is used to understand the relation between knitting and urban space, while the work of design historian Joanne Turney and writer and maker Betsy Greer will attempt to complexify the meaning and history of knitting itself. Interviews with people who practice the craft, coming either from the Cercles de Fermières or from the now dissolved collective Les Ville-Laines, will help refocus the discourse on the particularities of the province, and the similarities between the practices of these two groups of women.

The final section will explore the outcomes of this anniversary yarnbombing and compare it with the international scene best known through the commissioned work of artists Olek (Magda Sayeg) and her collective, Knitta, in order to comprehend the reach of yarnbombing, and the success of the celebratory project by the Cercles in changing the perception of the organisation. The critique of the commodification of street art and its assimilation into both the art market and ad campaigns of big corporations by communication studies professors Leslie A. Hahner and Scott J. Varda will provide the background necessary to understand the impact of the projects by the Cercles that followed the yarnbombing event and their impact on the future of the organisation.

Section 1 – History and myths about the Cercles de Fermières

The Cercle de Fermières recently celebrated one hundred years of activity. Of course, throughout this long period of time, it was necessary for it to adapt to its clientele and to the society to which it was contributing. It is now an organisation only for women located as much in rural regions as in cities, dedicated to preserving a Québécois cultural heritage and contributing to charitable causes aiding women and families. Its beginnings, however, were quite different. Created in 1915 by agronomist Alphonse Désilets and politician and agronomist Joseph-Georges Bouchard, under the guidance of then minister of Agriculture Joseph-Édouard Caron, this initiative is generally understood to be inspired by the Homemakers' Clubs in Ontario[5] and the Belgian Cercles de Fermières. Historian Yolande Cohen explains how the Clubs in Ontario were amongst the first internationally to initiate such groups of rural women.[6] The success of such enterprises, both in Europe and in North America, provided Désilets and Bouchard with proof of the viability of their project. In order to counter the rural exodus happening at the time, the two men working for the government had high hopes that such an organisation would help maintain families in remote regions of Quebec. In their groups, they imagined members would be able to exchange and support each other on matters relating to farming and homemaking. Additionally, the government would provide educational resources like lectures by experts and a library to each Cercle.[7] The financial contribution asked of every new member was 25 cents initially, in order to cover the cost of all the projects planned for every Cercle.[8] This small fee offered the new member education on a wide range of subjects, but also provided these women with the tools to develop an independent, but cooperative, form of cultural production.

To provide support to many communities throughout rural Quebec, the organisation was broken up into chapters, called Cercles, throughout the province, starting in Chicoutimi and Roberval (Fig. 1).[9] The Saguenay-Lac-Saint-Jean region, in which these cities are situated, was

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5 Jocelyne Mathieu, "Les Cercles de Fermières: Cent ans d'expertise et d'engagement dans les arts textiles," *Les Cahiers des dix* 68 (2014): 95; Yolande Cohen, *Femmes de parole: L'histoire des Cercles de Fermières du Québec, 1915-1990* (Montréal: Le Jour, 1990), 27-28; Joseph-Georges Bouchard, "Cercle des Jeunes Fermières," *Le Progrès Du Saguenay* (June 17, 1915): 2.

6 Cohen, *Femmes de Parole*, 28.

7 Bouchard, "Cercles de Jeunes Fermières," 2.

8 Mme Charles Gagné, *Pages d'histoire des Cercles de Fermières (1915-1965)* (Québec: Ministère de l'agriculture et de la colonisation, 1965), 10.

9 Yvonne Rialland Morissette, *Le passé conjugué au présent* (Montréal: Pénéloppe, 1980), 40.

first opened up to settlers after the Hudson's Bay Company gave it up in 1842.[10] This opening up of the territory for colonisation was the result of an already existing interest from settlers in occupying this territory. In the seventy years prior to the creation of the first Cercles in Chicoutimi and Roberval, this territory became increasingly important as new lands and water sources to exploit.[11] The establishment of those Cercles is the continuation of the project of colonisation of the region, and an incentive for women to remain there. As sociologist David Dupont writes in his book about the history of agriculture in Quebec, the ways in which lands were appropriated by farmers to establish their sons near the family plot preserved the colonial grip of non-Indigenous people over the territory through agriculture.[12] The creation of these first Cercles in this particular region may therefore be read as part of the provincial officials' colonial agenda to maintain settlers in these appropriated lands through agriculture.

While the activities, demographic, and goals of the organisation greatly changed in order to adapt to the changing needs of its members, some stereotypes and assumptions persist. Throughout the decades, they maintained their role as guardians of a Québécois craft heritage, but such a role has often served to relegate them to history by academia and the general public. Interviews with current Fermières demonstrate how such myths surrounding this large community of crafters still affect the image of its members. Yolande Chrétien, coordinator of the yarnbombing event for the Cercles de Fermières, is disappointed that people only associate them with knitting, when in fact they offer much more to their communities, their members, and to non-profit organisations. In an article by Steve Bergeron in the newspaper *La Tribune*, Chrétien states: "Non seulement de nombreuses personnes ne savent pas que les Fermières existent encore, mais plusieurs croient que nous ne faisons que des pantoufles en Phentex."[13] Her criticism of this continued association of her community to this sort of 1960s slipper style (Fig. 2) explains the extent to which ideas of the traditional have served to diminish and devalue the presence of these women today. The knitted creation of the "pantoufles en Phentex" she refers to is most

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[10] Arrivée de La Société Des Vingt-et-Un Au Saguenay," Répertoire du patrimoine culturel du Québec, accessed April 14, 2018, http://www.patrimoine-culturel.gouv.qc.ca/rpcq/detail.do?methode=consulter&id=26533&type=pge.

[11] Gérard Bouchard points out how over 28,000 people migrated to these lands between 1838 and 1911, mostly looking for fresh lands of good quality, unlike the overpopulated Charlevoix. Gérard Bouchard, *Quelques arpents d'Amérique: Population, économie, famille au Saguenay, 1838-1971* (Montréal: Boréal, 1996), 21.

[12] David Dupont, *Une brève histoire de l'agriculture au Québec: De la conquête du sol à la mondialisation* (Montréal: Fides, 2009), 31.

[13] Steve Bergeron, "Quand les Fermières font de l'art urbain," *La Tribune*, June 27, 2015, http://www.lapresse.ca/la-tribune/arts/201506/27/01-4881306-quand-les-fermieres-font-de-lart-urbain.php.

commonly associated to Québécois traditions of knitting slippers from the fibre invented in 1960 by André Girard, then an employee of the textile manufacturer Phentex in Saint-Hyacinthe.[14] It took hold to such an extent that it is often still found in the closets of many Quebec households. Made from a well-known local acrylic yarn brand, in a typical *épi de maïs* pattern, it is a symbol of vernacular craft creations in this large community of French-Canadian settlers,[15] and helps in this context to exemplify how traditions are seen in the most pastoral of senses even when the material itself is a modern, industrial product. Yet their presence in many Quebec homes is an indicator of their continued value as an item of clothing despite their association with the past. The current image of the Cercles may be viewed in very similar ways: while this community of women is generally associated with traditional crafts, this cannot justify why they are not be perceived as contemporary as well. As indicated earlier by Sifuentes, these two descriptors are not opposites. The following section will serve to deconstruct this association with the traditional by exploring how the Cercles de Fermières played a very particular role in the development of a Québécois identity and culture at the moment of its creation, through a revalorization of Québécois traditions. Quebec historian and sociologist Gérard Bouchard, in *La construction d'une culture: Le Québec et l'Amérique française* (1993), explains that the most important goal of this identity-formation project was to unite the people under a homogeneous model of Québécois culture. This meant not only reinforcing certain traits and characteristics, but also denying any anomalies that would tarnish this cohesive whole. It became primordial then, to create a distinction between the Québécois people and their English-speaking neighbors, in Canada and the United States, but also from other communities that could affect the homogeneity of their nation.[16] This meant, for instance, rejecting Métis people from their cultural group.[17] Additionally, as others all around were modernising, and shaping themselves through change and

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[14] "À la recherche d'une fibre parfaite, il a créé le Phentex," ICI Radio-Canada Première, accessed June 30, 2018, ici.radio-canada.ca/emissions/c_est_pas_trop_tot/2014-2015/chronique.asp?idChronique=360340.

[15] I would like to mention that the Phentex anecdote and the story of the Cercles de Fermières stem from two different periods of settler nationalism in the province. French Canadian nationalism, to which the creation of the Cercle de Fermières is associated, had important connections with the Catholic Church and early New France settler history. Québécois nationalism, which came later on, and to which we can associate the Phentex slippers as symbol of Québécois vernacular craft, focused more intensely on secularism and French speaking communities in the province. Therefore, while both overlap to some extent, it important to understand their differences.

[16] Gérard Bouchard and Serge Courville, eds., *La construction d'une culture: Le Québec et l'Amérique Française*, *Culture Française d'Amérique* (Sainte-Foy, Québec: Presses de l'Université Laval, 1993), 10.

[17] This sort of exclusion also allowed for other French speaking diasporas in North America to grow their own type of nationalism. See Simon Langlois, ed., *Identité et cultures nationales: l'Amérique française en mutation*, Culture Française d'Amérique (Sainte-Foy, Québec: Presses de l'Université Laval, 1995).

dissociation from their past, Quebec took pride in its traditions and imagined past. As Eric Hobsbawm defines it, this sort of imagined past, or "'invented tradition' is taken to mean a set of practices […] which seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behaviour by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the past. In fact, when possible, they normally attempt to establish continuity with a suitable historic past."[18] Rather than seeing its future as distinctly separate from the past, as the Americans would do, Quebec was clinging to its early settler roots.[19] Such roots could be found in the rural regions of the province, as they were believed to be affected more slowly by changes brought about by modernity.

Such an idealised perception of the rural world and its people, and disdain for urban settings, echoes larger trends by institutions of power in the province using rural communities as models of a national identity.[20] As more and more people were migrating to cities, and coming into contact with new ideas and mindsets, it was imperative for power structures in the province to tighten their grip on a rapidly changing and diversifying population. In order to do this, influential members of the Quebec elite, like the clergy,[21] government officials, and men like Désilets, encouraged certain behaviors and characteristics, while also discouraging others.

In this mindset, they saw rural communities through a very conservative lens which permitted them to approach it as an untouched Québécois identity. "Il y a, dans la vie des nations, une chose qui compte: c'est la tradition."[22] This quote by Alphonse Désilets serves to introduce one of his texts on how traditions must remain an important part of identity, and must be maintained by keeping new generations of French Canadian settlers on the land. Indeed, to distinguish themselves from their surroundings and modernity, and in order to reduce the impact

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[18] Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, eds., *The Invention of Tradition*, (Cambridge [Cambridgeshire] ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 1.

[19] Bouchard, *La construction d'une culture*, 12.

[20] Dupont, *Une brève histoire de l'agriculture au Québec*, 17. This sort of glorification of the country by intellectuals of the time also echoes larger fears of the middle class migrating to the United States, and was yet another attempt at gathering the population under a nationalistic project to avoid the exodus of the 1830s. See Bouchard, *La construction d'une culture*, 17.

[21] On the role of the Catholic Church in the education of the middle class working force, we can look at the *Rerum Novarum* encyclical of Pope Leo XIII of 1891, and the later *Quadragesimo Anno* of Pope Pius XI written in 1931. These texts, which dictate certain teachings to workers and the population more generally, were used in the province as social and moral guides by communities like the Jesuits, which founded the *École Sociale Populaire* in 1911, only a few years before the creation of the Cercles. This sort of involvement in the lives and education of the population can certainly attest to the power of the clergy in the province. See Richard Arès, "Le Père Joseph-Papin Archambault, S.J. et l'École Sociale Populaire : Témoignage," *Revue d'histoire de l'Amérique française* 35, 4 (1982): 563–87.

[22] Alphonse Désilets, "Choses et gens de chez nous," *Le Bulletin Des Agriculteurs* (September 20, 1938): 12.

of cultural exchanges happening in urban centers, it was important for the Quebec institutions of power like the Catholic Church and the provincial government – the former to keep a hold on their parishes, and the latter to enforce a certain uniformity of identity within their nationalistic project – to encourage a return to an idealised past communicated by rural productions and ways of living.[23] Gérard Bouchard explains that such a project also benefited the social and cultural elites of the time, which was comprised of upper middle-class francophone (civil servants, journalists, intellectuals, and so on).[24] As the introduction by the Honorable Rodolphe Lemieux to Georges Bouchard's *Vieilles Choses, Vieilles Gens* of 1926 showcases, such French Canadian powers were boasting the value of the countryside, and the pristine morality of the people residing there. He writes:

> Fidèle à vos origines, vous [Georges Bouchard] enseignez à vos élèves et vous proclamez au parlement que la terre, source de nos richesses, espoir de notre avenir, fait non seulement germer la moisson mais contribue à l'épanouissement des plus solides vertus de la race.[25]

In this passage, the formation of a Québécois identity should be focused on the countryside, a region full of virtuous and hard-working citizens. This perception of the rural world throughout this project of identity formation reveals the pastoral assumptions imposed on these communities. American craft historian Glenn Adamson, in his *Thinking through Craft* (2007), dedicates an entire chapter to the pastoral, a notion that comes up frequently when dissecting perceptions of rural crafts. Concerned with how crafts and rural regions have been seen as timeless nuggets of authenticity, he writes: "In many cases, pastoral craft has been part of a purposeful invention of an 'authentic' past – as in the romantic nationalist movements of the turn of the century."[26] Australian scholar Susan Luckman, in *Locating Cultural Work: The Politics and Poetics of Rural, Regional and Remote* (2012), explores how 19th century Arts and Crafts thinkers and entrepreneurs had to see the countryside in this very pastoral way. They equated factories to alienating labor, and assumed creative labor like that of the artisans to be a more

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23 Bouchard, *La construction d'une culture*, 12.
24 Bouchard, *La construction d'une culture,* 7-8.
25 Georges Bouchard, *Vieilles choses ... vieilles gens: Silhouettes campagnardes* (Montréal: Beauchemin, 1926), 7-8.
26 Glenn Adamson, *Thinking through Craft* (London/New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2007), 107.

mindful sort of work.[27] It was a deeply romanticized vision of the pre-industrial world which encouraged such an interest in the rural craft production of the time. In this case, much like the ideals of Georges Bouchard which I will turn to next, it was imperative not to lose sight of what was really important as the world was rapidly changing: the humanity of workers.

While not against cities, both Bouchard and leading thinkers of the British Arts and Crafts Movement, William Morris and John Ruskin, felt that their growth at the time was unbalanced, uncontrolled, and unkempt. Bouchard writes how there should always be an equilibrium between rural folks and city dwellers in order not to compromise the strength of a nation,[28] while Ruskin saw the formation of cities as chaotic, and prone to slums due to the lack of structure and organisation.[29] In other instances, we can compare the lyrical prose with which Bouchard describes farm work and the countryside, to Morris' romanticization of a farmer's relation to nature:

> I can deeply sympathize with a weary man finding his account in interest in mere life and communion with external nature, the face of the country, the wind and weather, and the course of the day, and the lives of animals, wild and domestic; and man's daily dealings with all this for his daily bread, and rest, and innocent beast-like pleasure.[30]

Indeed, all three men idealized a return to nature where they believed life to be much simpler than in the city, and their discourse around an idealization of the past further encouraged this longing for the countryside.

Georges Bouchard also writes, in his very lyrical text of 1915 advocating for the Cercles de Fermières in *Le Progrès du Saguenay*, how people are abandoning their homes in the country to go work for the factories in search of a better future, one which also comprised remuneration. He writes:

> Un phénomène saillant de notre époque, c'est l'abandon progressif des petits métiers domestiques de nos campagnes au profit des grandes industries de nos villes, et

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27 Susan Luckman, *Locating Cultural Work: The Politics and Poetics of Rural, Regional and Remote Creativity* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 51-2.

28 Georges Bouchard, *Les petites industries féminines à la campagne* (Montréal : L'École Sociale Populaire, 1927), 16.

29 Luckman, *Locating Cultural Work*, 57-8.

30 Luckman, 61.

> l'enracinement de cette idée que l'excédent de main d'œuvre féminine ne peut plus être appliqué économiquement à la campagne.[31]

In this quote, the agronomist decries the lack of purpose for women in rural sectors with the arrival of modernity in the province. He then goes on to mention the apparent despair of city dwellers and the lack of meaningful social relationships in this sort of overcrowded, overworked, and anonymous environment.[32] In contrast, his portrayal of the rural, farming, woman is quite positive, calling her work noble, and describing her abundance of energy and good spirit. It is clear, from the dichotomy that he paints in his text of urban and rural lifestyles, that the founder of the Cercles de Fermières was partial to a pastoral image of the countryside and its occupants.

The role of such an organisation in the bigger project of identity-formation by the institutions of power in Quebec is especially important to approach in the context of its gendered mission, as understood in the quote above by Bouchard. As industrialisation in the cities brought with it incredible turmoil in the structure of society, the role of women in countering such change by upholding traditions and conservative family values is often overlooked. Jocelyne Mathieu, when discussing the valorization of women's lives and labor at the turn of the 20th century, reveals how the work of women came to be seen as something necessary to control in order to unify the Québécois population. As women, they had to care for the dwelling and the family. While the skills necessary for such a job were for a long time transmitted from one generation of women to the next, in the 19th century, a movement to standardize the education of young women and girls in the various branches of homemaking started gaining traction.[33] Home economics schools that were initiated at this time revitalised traditional methods of managing a home, and were designed as a way of controlling women and their dwellings. This renewed interest in such tasks turned what was initially an assigned gendered task into a science, therefore providing the necessary valorization to such labor.[34] It was thus easier to reinforce the conventional family structure by strengthening the role of women in it as mothers, wives, and homemakers in this period of change.[35] Maintaining traditions was much simpler when done in such a family unit,

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31 Bouchard, "Cercle des Jeunes Fermières," 1.

32 Bouchard, "Cercle des Jeunes Fermières," 1.

33 Anne-Marie Poulin, "Le 'boutonné' de Charlevoix: Pertinence d'une découverte," *Rabaska : Revue d'ethnologie de l'Amérique française* 13 (2015): 124.

34 Jocelyne Mathieu, "L'éducation familiale et la valorisation du quotidien des femmes au XXe siècle," *Les Cahiers des dix* 57 (2003): 122.

35 Mathieu, "L'éducation familiale et la valorisation du quotidien des femmes au XXe siècle," 122-3.

mostly because it honored a familial structure already common practice in the past. The Cercles de Fermières were a similar solution that helped standardize and unify the work of rural women in what they considered traditional and typical Québécois practices and cultural productions.[36]

The perception of this organisation today as outdated is informed by this history of standardization of women's labor, which restricted and scrutinized their role in the household. While giving value to such tasks helped housewives to regain pride in their work, it also reduced their agency over their methods. This notion is evident in the story of Émélie Chamard, a well-known weaver from the Cercles. With an established and successful career as a demonstrator, tester and critic for the Leclerc looms, she joined the Cercles des Fermières in Saint-Jean-Port-Joli in 1926.[37] Her talent as both a teacher and a weaver made her the ideal candidate to lead classes within the organisation. In her many years as an active practitioner, she would not only be appreciated as a weaver, teaching women across the province (Fig. 3), but would also become a successful entrepreneur selling her own creations.

In her teachings, Chamard also put tradition to the forefront as the home economics schools established at the time had done, by initiating newcomers and skilled weavers to the *boutonné* stitch (Fig. 4), a technique she adapted to her own practice from the *boutonné* de Charlevoix.[38] This method consists of pulling wefts of colored threads from the piece during weaving in order to create raised details. Chamard, in her own practice, used a knitting needle to keep the consistency of the pulled weft, by looping it throughout the length of the needle.[39] Of course, while this technique has been understood as part of Quebec's heritage due to the research of ethnographers like Marius Barbeau who considered it as originating from Charlevoix, its use has been discovered in many other regions of the world, and can be dated as far back as Babylonian antiquity.[40] Anne-Marie Poulin, in discussing the *boutonné* stitch, indicates just how important it was, for Barbeau and others concerned with the changes happening in Québécois culture, to see this technique, seemingly hidden in Charlevoix, as a salvaged remnant of the glorious past of this settler nation.[41] This stitch, for all those concerned, was symbolic of the possibility for a revival of skilled handmade production true to the traditions of the French-

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36 Mathieu, "Les Cercles de fermières," 96.
37 Angéline Saint-Pierre, *Emélie Chamard, tisserande* (Québec: Éditions Garneau, 1976), 85.
38 Poulin, "Le 'boutonné' de Charlevoix," 137.
39 Saint-Pierre, *Emélie Chamard*, 80.
40 Poulin, "Le 'boutonné' de Charlevoix," 132.
41 Poulin, "Le 'boutonné' de Charlevoix," 133.

Canadian settlers in Quebec. Nevertheless, its appropriation by the Cercles des Fermières and academics as a distinctive Québécois design is crucial in this identity building project, and can be seen as part of this necessity to invent tradition existing material culture.

When interviewing Elizabeth, Marie-Jeanne, Hélène, and Claudette from the Cercles de Fermières in Ahuntsic (Fig. 5), it became even clearer that the history of the organisation, and its strong association to the rural and the traditional, still affects its image today. Elizabeth and Claudette were both concerned by the power the Catholic Church had over the organisation and Québécois society overall until very recently.[42] This concern is real, as a quick look at the history of this community shows how important the Catholic Church was in the decision-making of the organisation. At its start, the Catholic Church asked every chapter to associate itself to the almoner (*aumônier*) of its choice.[43] However, by 1938, every new Cercles created required the authorisation of the Catholic Church.[44]

Meanwhile, Hélène, who joined the Cercles de Fermières over 6 years ago, after she retired, also criticized the very conservative role of the Cercles at its beginnings, mentioning that they stood against the vote and the emancipation of women, and that it served to keep women in their homes.[45] It is true that in its early years, the organisation was against the vote for women, as the words of Rolande Désilets can attest.[46] In his early articles on the benefits of the Cercles, Georges Bouchard also writes: "Ceux qui craignent de voir leurs jeunes filles devenir des suffragettes ou des émancipées, n'auront qu'à apprendre à connaître le fonctionnement des Cercles […] pour voir leurs objections se dissiper."[47] The Cercles were therefore created in order to enforce certain traditional ideals of womanhood, many of which supported the cohesive national identity project of its founders, and actively sought to dissuade members from organising for social or political change.

As for Marie-Jeanne, who has been in the Cercles for over 18 years, she explained how women from the organisation used to create not for leisure, but for survival. She says: "…ils

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42 Elizabeth Odabachian and Claudette Jubinville, interview by author, *Ahuntsic Cercle de Fermières Group Interview*, personal interview, Montreal, February 19, 2018.

43 Cohen, *Femmes de parole*, 40.

44 Cohen, *Femmes dearole,* 41.

45 Hélène L. Larocque, interview by author, *Ahuntsic Cercle de Fermières Group Interview*, personal interview, Montreal, February 19, 2018.

46 André Beaulieu and Jean Hamelin, *La presse québécoise, des origines à nos jours: 1920-1934* (Presses Université Laval, 1973), 3.

47 Bouchard, "Cercle des Jeunes Fermières," 2.

faisaient des choses pour survivre. Ils faisaient des couvertes, leurs habillements, et tout."[48] Indeed, she is not the first one to mention the contrast between the more recent work of the Fermières and what was done at its origin. Jocelyne Mathieu, in her text commemorating the hundred years of the organisation, quotes from another source on the Fermières, *Nous sommes des perles rares*, which reads:

> L'artisanat est depuis toujours la marque de commerce des Cercles de Fermières du Québec. À l'origine, on filait, on tissait et on cousait surtout pour tenir au chaud les membres de notre famille. Graduellement, la fonction utilitaire a perdu de son importance au profit de la créativité.[49]

These examples confirm the persistence of this image found in the primary source material presented above, namely of an organisation founded to maintain traditions formed from a pastoral and imagined French Canadian settler past.

The existing scholarship on the organisation reveals how important its history and presence in the development of French Canadian identity and culture has been. However, it often overlooks or rapidly skips over their current role as a socially and politically engaged community of women. Their sheer number and renowned skills has allowed them to mobilize for the betterment of women's condition through largely popular craft and bakes sales.[50] Historian Jocelyne Mathieu, writing on the centennial anniversary of the organisation in "Les Cercles de fermières: Cent ans d'expertise et d'engagement dans les arts textiles," mentions in passing other publications created in honor of other milestones reached by the Cercles de Fermières:

> Entre autres, leur cinquantenaire est souligné dans la revue *Terre et Foyer* où plusieurs pages sont consacrées à leur histoire. Plus spécialement, le 65e anniversaire a été marqué par la publication d'un historique d'envergure de Yvonne Rialland-Morissette; et à l'occasion du 75e anniversaire des Cercles, la professeure Yolande Cohen s'est vu confier la réalisation d'une étude qui s'est avérée un jalon important et une référence incontournable pour qui s'intéresse aux Cercles de Fermières.[51]

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48 Marie-Jeanne Guay, interview by author, *Ahuntsic Cercle de Fermières Group Interview*, personal interview, Montreal, February 19, 2018.

49 Mathieu, "Les Cercles de fermières," 101-02.

50 Mathieu, "Les Cercles de fermières," 117-18.

51 Mathieu, "Les Cercles de fermières," 94-95.

Much like the other sources of reference, Mathieu offers a lengthy discussion of the timeline of the organisation, with an emphasis on the importance of their role as guardians of a Québécois craft heritage ever since their creation. In Yolande Cohen's *Femmes de Parole: L'histoire des Cercles de Fermières du Québec 1915-1990* (1990), the chronology is also very central, especially considering the full name of the book.

Rather than focusing on the longevity and persistence of this community of women revered for its involvement in preserving a Québécois tradition formed by men like Bouchard, this thesis focuses on the impact of their actions today, which has allowed them to do more than preserve their heritage. Their engagement with yarnbombing which will be explored in the following part of this thesis will demonstrate how these women are able to mobilize and enliven their 'traditional' skills for newer craft practices and aims, and thus actively participate in present-day craft discourse in Quebec.

It must be acknowledged that current perceptions of the organisation have not changed much, but that this is what makes the use of yarnbombing in the celebration of its 100th anniversary all the more relevant. The goals of the Cercles de Fermières founders Bouchard and Désilets, much like those of the Arts and Crafts Movement, depended on the perpetuation of a myth of the rural. Seen as the cure to modernity and alienating factory work that was ravaging the cities of the Western world, these regions were believed to embody a more traditional way of life, one which also comprised more mindful labor. In the context of the province of Quebec, it also provided an example of cultural purity to which government officials like Désilets and Bouchard, could refer when trying to form a model of Québécois identity, and women within it, as exchanges with other cultures in these regions were less common than in urban centers.

It would be wrong to assume, however, that modernity and cultural exchanges did not exist in the countryside. The way technologies shifted women's labor from the land to a domestic cultural production to be sold to tourists definitely disproves this assumption that rural regions were seemingly untouched or static. Nonetheless, women were assigned the role of preserving this supposed purity through their management of the home and cultural production closely linked to their cultural heritage as French Canadian settlers. Yolande Chrétien's example of the Phentex slippers indicates just how knitting and crochet has been used to maintain the importance of Québécois culture in the history of the province, but also in the production of the Cercles de

Fermières. To use their knowledge of the craft in order to create something completely different from what is expected of them, and get involved with a street art barely a decade old, breaks with those stereotypes, in order to announce the contemporaneity of its members. The following section pertains to the event of 2015, in which almost 500 Cercles intervened in their communities with knit graffiti, and how it relates to the larger understanding of yarnbombing, both internationally and locally.

Section 2 – Knitting a new image

Celebrating one hundred years of existence for the Cercles de Fermières was the perfect occasion to prove their contemporaneity, and to try and break down the stereotypes that kept its members in an atemporal space of rural isolation and purity. To do so, each Cercle worked to yarnbomb their surrounding public spaces, in this way engaging with a practice seen to be supposedly clashing with their own longstanding image. While the previous section detailed some of the stereotypes that surround the work of the Fermières, the explanation of why yarnbombing is such a radical opposite is the focus of this section.

In late 2017, I had the chance to interview Yolande Chrétien, the provincial vice-president of the organisation, who is also known for introducing the project of yarnbombing to the Cercles de Fermières for their celebration.[52] In our discussion, she provided details on the events that led up to this occasion, and more insight on the results of such a large effort. First approached by the Musée d'Art de Joliette about one or two years before, Chrétien was asked to do a yarnbombing activity for the institution. However, when funding fell through, so did the project. The idea stuck with her nonetheless, and when the moment came to find something memorable to do in honor of the centennial anniversary of the organisation, she suggested that they all yarnbomb their respective communities.[53] As many of the members were not familiar with the concept, Chrétien got in contact with the people responsible for the yarnbombing in Frelighsburg (Fig. 6) on the occasion of the 2012 edition of the Festiv'Art, an open-air display of art in the Eastern Townships. It is also interesting to note that this was the same year that Les Ville-Laines contributed to the festival by leading a yarnbombing workshop with children of the St-François

[52] "Comités," *Les Cercles de Fermières Du Québec*, accessed June 4, 2017, https://cfq.qc.ca/a-propos/comites/.

[53] Yolande Chrétien, interview by author, phone interview, Montreal, December 19, 2017.

D'Assise School located in the town.[54] The organisers then provided her with lots of documentation and images of the festival that she was able to show to the participating Cercles.[55] The learning process which the Fermières went through for this yarnbombing project is in line with the original values of the organisation for providing opportunities for learning and development in crafts.

With the idea planted, it was necessary to coordinate the effort. The presentation of the results was in the spring of 2015 (Fig. 7), while the project was initiated in July of the previous year. In the few months needed to produce the knitting and crochet elements necessary for the interventions, each Cercle was responsible of requesting the authorities' permission to interfere with the space they chose to alter. This made for some missed opportunities to some municipalities, as Chrétien explains:

> …elles [the Fermières] avaient le mandat de demander, elles n'avaient pas le droit d'apposer un tricot-graffiti sur un objet qui appartenait à la municipalité sans demander la permission, et il y a des municipalités qui n'ont pas accepté. Mais quand elles ont vu l'impact que ça a donné et la visibilité que ça donnait autant à la municipalité qu'au CFQ, je me demande s'ils n'ont pas regretté d'avoir refusé.[56]

The organisation, due to its size and visibility, could not truly embody all facets of yarnbombing. The illegality of the practice, which gives it its credibility as a street art, is in this case omitted, in order to focus instead on the idea of softening, beautifying, and ornamenting spaces, whether urban or not.[57]

If this qualifies as yarnbombing in the eyes of the media and the general public, then what are the boundaries that define it? Many have attempted to answer this question, and while all introduce the practice in a certain way, there is no definite answer, except that it can be defined as a street art that uses knitted and crocheted elements to cover up the urban landscape. Most often, they are seen attached to lampposts, benches, and street signs, but the creativity of its makers

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54 More information here: "Tricoter pour rassembler à Frelighsburg," *Le Guide de Cowansville* , June 13, 2012, https://www.journalleguide.com/tricoter-pour-rassembler-a-frelighsburg/. ; Tricot_pirate, " Frelighsburg... on ne vous oublie pas!," *Les Ville-Laines*, July 19, 2012, http://ville-laines.blogspot.com/2012/07/frelighsburg-on-ne-vous-oublie-pas.html.

55 Chrétien, interview.

56 Chrétien, interview.

57 Joanna Mann, "Towards a Politics of Whimsy: Yarn Bombing the City," *Area* 47, 1 (March 1, 2015): 67.

allows for a multiplicity of uses and models, like mailbox monster feet for example.[58] Exploring the history and common understanding of knitting as a craft in the following pages will help define the mindset from which yarnbombing emerged. The street art will then be explored in greater depth, both in the work of scholars and practitioners in the global West, before delving into the local context with the help of interviews conducted with Les Ville-Laines.

To understand how impactful this celebration was in its use of yarnbombing however, it is important to understand the transformation of knitting, from a utilitarian practice that kept women within the realm of a timeless past that honored traditions and customs, to a mode of subversion, as in the case of the street art. This research therefore begins by exploring the story of knitting and crochet, a craft that has, much like the Cercles de Fermières, felt the weight of its association with traditions throughout history. The work of Joanne Turney, design historian, was of great help in exploring this type of creation and its definition. In *The Culture of Knitting* (2009), she starts off by saying that knitting is "…generally understood as ordinary, unchanging, and what it represents and means is so culturally constructed and embedded that it is assumed there is nothing more to say."[59] Unchanging in the minds of the general public, this craft has nevertheless lived many periods and eras which regarded it differently each time. In order to deconstruct this aforementioned perception of knitting, it is important to uncover how those constant needs for the revival of crafts has maintained knitting in a supposedly 'endangered' and 'declining' position. In order to do so, Turney looks at the history of the Arts and Crafts movement in order to better understand this romanticisation of craft. She writes that Romanticism, the movement from which the Arts and Crafts emerged, was preoccupied with the emotions and the experience of the individual, which led to an interest in a past that was nostalgic in nature, and therefore constructed and modified to fit certain ideals.[60]

When, quite similarly to Georges Bouchard with the Cercles de Fermières, William Morris, a leader of the Arts and Crafts Movement, was facing the rapid and hectic industrialization happening in the United Kingdom at the end of the 19th century, he searched for what he considered to be the pre-industrial past in order to find a more harmonious lifestyle and

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58 Mandy Moore and Leanne Prain, *Yarn Bombing: The Art of Crochet and Knit Graffiti* (Vancouver, BC: Arsenal Pulp Press, 2009), 76-8.

59 Joanne Turney, *The Culture of Knitting* (Oxford/New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2009). 44.

60 Turney, *The Culture of Knitting*, 44.

work alternative.[61] He looked at medieval times and the rural world in order to find more mindful ways of working. Work environments such as guilds and crafts workshops caught the eye of the man, as he understood from his research that the individual was happier there than he could ever be when working long and exhausting hours to profit factory owners. However, in his construction of this ideal past, he encouraged the perpetuation of the myth that such practices were seemingly lost (or left in this past which he crafted for his movement). Ever since, other thinkers and practitioners have perpetuated this myth that the past could be the answer to current woes, especially in the way they approached work and cultural production. Turney explains how this also affects knitting as a vernacular type of craft.[62] It is clear from the multiple revivals of craft, and especially knitting that it has gained the reputation of a practice in constant need of support and interest in order to continue existing.[63] Those revivals are echoed in the re-appropriation of the craft by yarnbombers and craftivists alike, as their use of it relies on its association with not only popular culture, traditions, and the pastoral, but also with a gendered craft production.

In order to comprehend the context in which yarnbombing came to be, it is important to look into the history of craftivism. The term, which links together the words craft and activism, was coined by writer and maker Betsy Greer in 2003, and serves to define any sort of political, ecological, or social activism that is conveyed through craft practices. Very often, it is inspired by do-it-yourself (DIY) culture, and attempts to return to more traditional ways of making in order to fight against mass production. In this case, the practitioners of this movement opt for craft as an alternative to the mass consumption of today.[64] Media scholar David Gauntlett in his work on this recent movement in activism in his book *Making is Connecting: The Social Meaning of Creativity, from DIY and Knitting to Youtube and Web 2.0* (2011) explains that in this counterculture of sorts, knowledge considered traditional, like knitting, is seen as the remedy to rampant consumerism, in the way that it not only brings awareness of the process of making, but also allows for a more self-sufficient life.[65] It also allows for a repurposing of waste, and

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61 Turney, *The Culture of Knitting*, 44.
62 Turney, *The Culture of Knitting*, 44.
63 Turney only discusses the case of the 1970s in her book however. Turney, *The Culture of Knitting*, 46.
64 David Gauntlett, *Making Is Connecting: The Social Meaning of Creativity, from DIY and Knitting to YouTube and Web 2.0* (Cambridge, UK ; Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2011), 56.
65 Gauntlett, *Making Is Connecting*, 57.

upcycling of things no longer functional.[66] In this engagement with making, fixing, and recycling, people become more aware of the conditions of making and of their own patterns of consumption. Having more agency over this process allows one to be creative, and thus, to create something unique which cannot be bought.

Yarnbombing may be situated as part of craftivism for two reasons. First, knitting and crochet are seen as traditional crafts being revived in order to act against the mass production of a globalized world. Secondly, it is meant as an act of transformation on the urban landscape, in order to call out and change its often frigid and anonymous atmosphere. Seen as the initiator of the yarnbombing movement in Houston, Texas, Magda Sayeg, also known as PolyCotN within the collective Knitta, was apparently the first to use yarnbombing in 2005.[67] Mandy Moore and Leanne Prain, in *Yarn Bombing: The Art of Crochet and Knit Graffiti* (2009), explain that Sayeg got the idea to knit a pink and blue cozy for the handle of her clothing store's front door.[68] Mixing together many theories around the persistence and resilience of knitting, feminism, and women's fiber art practices, this intervention into the urban space takes advantage of the stereotypes linked to knitting to deliver its message, an idea similar to the goal behind the Cercles' yarnbombing activity. As Joanne Turney writes "knitting has a history that is intertwined with the history of women and women's work – a marginal group, in relation to discussions relating to cultural production and indeed to social status."[69] The practice which has, in the past, been used to control and maintain women at home in order to keep them busy and docile is now being re-appropriated by communities of women in order to question its limited and limiting definition.[70] This craft, which has long been seen as a domestic enterprise, alters the urban and public space, in order to create spaces that are now dominated by the feminine.[71] Used in this way, it can be understood as a political statement that aligns itself with third-wave feminist practices which question the gender binary and societal norms.[72]

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66 Gauntlett, *Making Is Connecting*, 57-8.
67 Moore and Prain, *Yarn Bombing*, 20.
68 Moore and Prain, *Yarn Bombing*, 20.
69 Turney, *The Culture of Knitting*, 176.
70 Turney, *The Culture of Knitting*, 9; Jo Turney, "Making Love with Needles: Knitted Objects as Signs of Love?," *TEXTILE* 10, 3 (January 1, 2012): 309.
71 Mann, *Towards a Politics of Whimsy*, 67-68.
72 Turney, *The Culture of Knitting*, 10-1. See also Kristen A. Williams, "'Old Time Mem'ry': Contemporary Urban Craftivism and the Politics of Doing-It-Yourself in Postindustrial America," *Utopian Studies* 22, 2 (2011): 308-9; and Kirsty Robertson, "Rebellious Doilies and Subversive Stitches," in *Extra/Ordinary*, ed. Maria Elena Buszek (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2011), 184–203.

However, this practice is not only a social commentary on women's role. The variety of yarns and models available and possible for knitted tags makes for creations that are not only colourful and bright, clashing with the usual grey of urban spaces, but also whimsical, according to English geographer Joanna Mann. In her essay, Mann argues that yarnbombing, in its capacity to make people experience joy or surprise, when displayed in the public realm, acts as a *punctum*– a reference to Barthes's usage of the term – in the daily routine of people.[73] Considering how a person moves in the urban space, it is not surprising that such a creation attracts the public's gaze. Sociologist Fran Tonkiss, in her book *Space, the City and Social Theory* (2005), indicates how people navigating urban space are often indifferent to the crowd around them. This mechanism allows one to go through this encounter with countless strangers without being overtly conscious of it.[74] Similarly, Mann refers to the theories of sociologist Georg Simmel to explain how individuals often ignore what surrounds them, as they are "constantly bombarded with new mental stimuli in such quick succession that it would be impossible to react to, and process, them all."[75] Therefore, when yarnbombing comes to disrupt this routine of concrete from the cold and anonymous buildings with its softness and colorful assemblages, it forces the people it affects to react, and thus give it attention and thought.

The yarnbombing work of the Cercles de Fermières in the province can be understood in very similar ways. As Yolande Chrétien described it, when speaking of the organisation's use of this practice to prove their contemporaneity:

> Le tricot-graffiti c'est vraiment quelque chose de plus ludique, de plus moderne et je me disais 'bon, ils vont voir qu'on tricote, parce que c'est par ça qu'on est connues, qu'on tricote, mais qu'on fait autre chose que des pantoufles'…[76]

In this sense, the clash between the whimsical and playful aspect of yarnbombing and the more conservative perception of the Cercles allowed for a disruption of this preconceived image that

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73 Mann, *Towards a Politics of Whimsy*, 69. Barthes defines the punctum, a notion which he discusses in his 1980 *Camera Lucida*, as an element in photographs that disturb the *studium*, and come to affect the viewer abruptly. He writes: "A photograph's *punctum* is that accident which pricks me (but also bruises me, is poignant to me)." Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981), 27. In the case of Mann, this term is used to describe the force of the encounter between passersby and the knit intervention.

74 Fran Tonkiss, *Space, the City and Social Theory: Social Relations and Urban Forms* (Cambridge; Malden, MA: Polity, 2005), 11.

75 Mann, *Towards a Politics of Whimsy*, 68.

76 Chrétien, interview.

the public had of them. Moreover, through this action, the Fermières are indeed engaging with the political realm, even if the whole project was approved by municipalities and officials, rather than an illegal enterprise. Changes are usually understood to be initiated by younger generations in response to the older ones, as in many occurrences of youth culture in the Western world.[77] In this instance, the use of yarnbombing by a community associated with older practices of homemaking is all the more ground breaking, especially if we take into account their questioning of the ageism in street art. As this organisation constituted mostly of retired women engaged with this street art, they are once again questioning the ramifications behind the use of knitting and crochet, just as craftivists began doing a decade earlier.

Looking into the practice of Les Ville-Laines, who also exploit the softness and warmth of craft to ornate the urban landscape, it is possible to better understand the way yarnbombing is used in Quebec. While it would be erroneous to assume all yarnbombing creators think the same, to see similarities in the practice of two recognized communities of makers in the province does suggest that such a common mindset is possible in some of these instances. In both my interviews with Karine and Tricot pour la paix, they admit that what they love from this street art is the warmth and colorful touch it seems to bring to the people that interact with it.[78] In a way, this is the biggest strength of this practice, according to Mann, Prain, and Moore.

However, this interest in the softer side of this protest was not appreciated by all. Another Montreal yarnbombing collective called Maille à Part, is known for their more charged practice in terms of their stance on political and social issues. When interviewed for *La Presse*, Marie Pagès, member of the group, said: "Nous ne voulons pas embellir la ville […] Nous ne faisons pas de la déco extérieure, mais des actions politiques!"[79] Of course, we might look into the context of creation of this collective to better understand their stronger interest in using the craft for activism. Started in 2011, just like Les Ville-Laines, the collective made its first big project at the Occupy Montreal gathering space, namely Square Victoria. Initially, the group was created in response to a call for politically engaged art. However, they really grew into their own during the

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77 Turney, *The Culture of Knitting*, 94-95.

78 Karine Fournier, interviewed by author, personal interview, Montreal, November 7, 2017; Tricot pour la paix, interviewed by author, personal interview, Montreal, November 21, 2017.

79 Frédérique David, "Les militantes du tricot," *La Presse*, August 3, 2013, http://plus.lapresse.ca/screens/4e0c-4540-51f6ccef-93ea-7181ac1c6068__7C___0.html.

2012 student protests in Quebec.[80] Rather than tagging the city to counter its cold and anonymous appearance, this collective engages with activist movements first.

These two viewpoints of the street art coexist in the same environment, demonstrating the broad definition of yarnbombing. Instead of imagining the practice to be in stark contrast with the practice of the Fermières, we should rather explore it for its fluid attributes. Knit graffiti is a shared effort, and a social occasion for many. How far is it from the practice of Quebec's own Fermières?

There are multiple arguments that can attest to the capacity of this group of women to engage in street art. One of them is their ability to mobilize their already existing knowledge of the craft for this practice. The understanding of gauges, of color-coordination, and so on, are necessary skills in the confection of knitted goods like clothing and accessories. They allow for the end result to fit nicely and to respect the desired dimensions. Such skills are also transferable to the street art, confirms Yolande Chrétien. When asked about the links that tied knitting projects done for the family and the home to yarnbombing, she responded with:

> C'est sûr que le tricot-graffiti c'est un art urbain, mais il y a toujours un rapport, parce qu'un tricot, c'est un tricot. Quand on habille une statue, et qu'on lui fait une robe, ben ce n'est pas tellement différent que quand on tricote pour une personne. C'est sûr que tricoter pour un arbre, ben ça peut être aussi un tricot pour une courtepointe, pour une couverture. Mais la couverture, au lieu de la mettre sur le lit, on l'a mise sur un banc. […] Quand une personne décide de tricoter un foulard, par exemple, que ce soit un foulard ou une veste, elle pense à la sorte de la laine, elle pense à la couleur, elle pense à la finition du tricot, mais elle fait la même chose pour le tricot urbain.[81]

Indeed, many aspects of the skilled knitting and crocheting done by the Fermières can be transferred to the creative process of yarnbombing.

Another aspect of yarnbombing that is of utmost importance, is the notion of community. Most practitioners do not work alone. In their book, Moore and Prain mention how, due to the illegality of the practice, it is beneficial to keep a crew around as lookout, and as support during the installation of the tag.[82] There are also plenty more reasons for this, one of which is that

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80 "Les Projets," *Maille À Part*, n.d., http://mailleapart.blogspot.com/p/les-projets.html.

81 Chrétien, interview.

82 Moore and Prain, *Yarn Bombing*, 93.

working in groups on the pieces to be installed allows for collaboration, knowledge transmission, and a more diverse ensemble of practices. As they write: "With a crew, you'll be able to take advantage of different skill sets. You might have a great technical knitter, a color-harmony obsessed knitter, or a sculptural-crochet addict in your crew."[83] As established earlier, it is unnecessary to take into account the safety component of working as a group in the case of the Cercles de Fermières, as they installed their work with the approval of officials or of the people responsible for the space occupied by the knit graffiti. However, all the other aspects or benefits of working in a community do apply to the practice of the Fermières.

When asked about the knowledge required to practice yarnbombing, she responded candidly that a great understanding of knitting or crochet was not necessary. In fact, she explained that some participants even learned the craft for the activity. In her own words:

> …ça dépend ce qu'est le tricot, mais en majorité c'était des carrés qu'on devait tricoter. […] Oui, on peut le faire très, très simple, le carré peut être un seul point dedans, tandis que d'autres carrés vont être faits plus perfectionnés.[84]

What can be understood from this quote is that bringing together people with different levels of understanding of a craft allows for the transmission of knowledge, from advanced practitioners to beginners. There is no gate-keeping of this knowledge in the case of the Fermières, especially considering the *raison d'être* of this organisation. As an amateur and non-competitive space – if we omit the regular cooking and fibre arts contests held within the organisation – the Cercles are predisposed to provide this sort of support and room to learn and thrive as a practitioner. This is what Betsy Greer, who coined the term craftivism, also appreciates from craft circles and gatherings.[85] In *Knitting for Good!: A Guide to Creating Personal, Social, and Political Change Stitch by Stitch*, Greer quotes sociologist Alison Better, who argues that "knitting groups […] provide members with social opportunities, as well as opportunities to relax, network, and share knowledge."[86] Much like in any other sort of craft meetup, the members of the Cercles support each other and converse on their lives during their workshops. We also see similar interests in the connectivity of craft in the practice of Karine, as part of Les Ville-Laines, who mentions that the

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83 Moore and Prain, *Yarn Bombing*, 93.

84 Chrétien, interview.

85 Betsy Greer, *Knitting for Good!: A Guide to Creating Personal, Social, and Political Change Stitch by Stitch*, Original edition (Boston: Roost Books, 2008), 58.

86 Greer, *Knitting for Good!*, 59.

social aspect of creating is just as important as anything else. In her discussion with me, she explained how creating, even before the collective was formed, allowed many people to gather and socialize when isolated.[87]

While there are many accepted definitions of yarnbombing, the actions of the Cercles de Fermières definitely align themselves with the soft and whimsical side of the practice. I would also suggest there are very few differences between the practice of the historical organisation and that of current yarnbombers. Although the impact of the Cercles yarnbombing activity relied on the perceived contrasts between their traditional practices and this street art, in reality, many of the characteristics inherent to the work of the Cercles de Fermières are found in yarnbombing. The most significant of these is their interest in sharing their knowledge and creating a community in which learning and growth can happen in a non-competitive and supportive environment.

Given this, can this event be considered a success at demonstrating the contemporaneity of the historical organisation? In the short term, people applauded the gesture, and media coverage helped in reintroducing the work of the Fermières to the public. I contend that the real way in which the result of this activity is changing the image of the Cercles, is found by looking at their subsequent involvement with their communities. The following section will therefore explore two instances of commissioned work done by the Fermières following the yarnbombing in relation to other national and international instances of commissioned street art.

Section 3 – Impact

Once the anniversary project was over, and the tags were left at the mercy of the Quebec weather; once the press and media had done the work of covering the event, what could be said of the resonance of this celebration in the future? In the opinions of the current members, the general public, and academia, the focus is on the longevity of the organisation than its current goals and achievements. Has the ephemerality of yarnbombing also only momentarily affected the collective understanding of the Cercles de Fermières, in which we celebrate their presence one day, only to be returned to this atemporal space in which traditions are allowed to exist once all is

[87] At the time, Karine was co-hosting a monthly poetry, craft, and zine event with Paula Belina called *Rock Paper Scissors*, of which you can see an example here: swirlz, "THIS Week in Montreal," *Radicalmontreal*, July 5, 2010, http://radicalmontreal.blogspot.com/2010/07/this-week-in-montreal.html. She met another member of the collective les Ville-Laines through these gatherings.

said and done? To be able to research the topic a few years after the event has allowed for some answers to gradually emerge over time.

In my interview with Yolande Chrétien, I discovered the opportunities offered to the Cercles de Fermières following the celebration. One notable example was the opportunity offered to the organisation to yarnbomb a tree in the background of the set for the Radio-Canada show *Par ici l'été*, hosted by Stéphane Bellavance (Fig. 8).[88] Throughout the season of this summer talk show, the public could observe the knitted creation of these women. Chrétien also recalls that the show commissioned them for two consecutive summers, effectively showcasing the interest of the show organisers, and possibly its audience, in the current work of the Fermières.

The Fermière also mentions another case in which the project provided the organisation with work outside of their community:

> Il y a une municipalité que je connais dont le cercle avait décoré une maison dans un parc, une maison qui appartient à la ville, avec toute des fleurs collées sur la maison et eux, la municipalité leur demande à chaque année de reproduire ça. Ils ont beaucoup aimé et ils veulent que ça reste. Bien sûr, les fleurs ne se gardent pas tout le temps, donc elles recommencent, elles en re-tricotent d'autres, elles réparent leur jardin. On peut dire ça comme ça, elles réparent leur jardin.[89]

In this instance, their involvement with the surrounding population, namely their own municipality, can indicate how positively the project was received, and the capacity of these skilled crafters to adapt to current trends.

Looking into the practice of the yarnbombing collective Les Ville-Laines, and other international street art collectives as points of reference, it is possible to better understand the reception of this street art in the province, and to speculate on how it has helped change the image of the Cercles de Fermières moving forward. The Montreal-based Les Ville-Laines was appreciated by the communities it worked with, and while their collaboration only lasted four years, the number of projects they were commissioned to do by festivals between 2011 and 2014 was phenomenal.[90] Tricot pour la paix, one of its members, recalls: "Les réactions ont toujours été très positives. Je pense que ça fait plaisir aux gens. Pour moi, c'est d'ouvrir une brèche sur

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88 Yolande, interview; Cercles de Fermières, "Rapport Annuel 2015-2016" (Éditions Les Cercles de Fermières du Québec, n.d.), 15.

89 Chrétien, interview.

90 Fournier, interview.

comment on peut créer du changement, que c'est tous à notre portée."[91] This interest in the democratisation of the craft is not unique, as many agree that it is important to allow citizen engagement with the shaping of the urban environment. Donovan Finn, an urban planner writing on the implications of DIY activism in the city, indicates how important it is for citizens to get involved to a degree in the way their environment is constructed and managed. While Finn recognizes the necessity of city planning and regulations in his essay, he nevertheless argues that these protocols might misunderstand the realities, wants and needs of those who live in the space they help shape.[92] Reclaiming those spaces allows citizens to form them, while also exposing these flaws in official decisions.[93] This type of protest also brings them closer to their community, and enables a stronger sense of belonging, as the exchanges remain between citizens and users of the space.

In the context of yarnbombing, yarn is being used in order to whimsically alter the space. As Finn explains, "DIY efforts take many forms. Some are mostly humorous commentary intended to literally or metaphorically soften the rough edges of urban landscapes."[94] In our interview, Yolande Chrétien definitely agreed with this statement, mentioning how the practice made objects like benches even more inviting. "…Quand on voit un beau banc de parc tout recouvert, et qu'on s'assoit dessus, c'est bien aussi les gens pouvaient en profiter, ce n'était pas juste décoratif, ils pouvaient s'asseoir sur le banc et en profiter."[95] This interest is not singular, as understood from the practice of Les Ville-Laines. During the interview with Tricot pour la paix, we came to discuss one of their large installations done in November of 2011 in the Agora of Viger Square located in downtown Montreal (Fig. 9). This space, known for housing homeless people, is for the most part constituted of concrete surfaces, on which this community is known to rest. By introducing knitting in this area of the Square, Les Ville-Laines exposed the inaction of the city towards the well-being of its citizens with no fixed address, while also responding in their own way to this lack of solutions. The textiles which they installed in the Square provided

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91 Tricot pour la paix, interview.

92 Donovan Finn, "DIY Urbanism: Implications for Cities," *Journal of Urbanism: International Research on Placemaking and Urban Sustainability* 7, 4 (October 2, 2014): 390-91

93 Finn, "DIY Urbanism," 383.

94 Finn, "DIY Urbanism," 383.

95 Chrétien, interview.

warmth, care, and softness to those in need, in an area considered cold and anonymous. As she explains it, "C'était pour attirer l'attention, et réchauffer l'espace des sans-abris."[96]

Much like the Cercles, Les Ville-Laines's work was greatly appreciated by the press, even when their actions on the urban landscape are technically illegal. Very quickly after this tagging of Viger Square, the collective was offered many occasions to work for organisations and municipalities. Karine mentioned one project in particular that really exemplified how big the street art had come to be in the province: the tagging of fifty lampposts on Saint-Denis Street (Fig. 10) in 2013 for the SDC Pignons rue Saint-Denis,[97] an organisation "dedicated to the economic development of Saint-Denis Street."[98] The piece, called *50 Lampadaires Transfigurés*, was commissioned by Joël Pourbaix, president of the organisation at the time.[99] The aim of this project was to enliven and soften the popular street, and change the way people usually interact with the space. What started out as an illegal practice of temporarily tagging the city with knitted items and cozies turned into a trend. It even became encouraged by officials and corporations alike for their own gain. The collective saw a sudden surge in commissions, which ranged from the Osheaga music festival, to the Côte-Des-Neiges Maison de la Culture.[100]

Not surprisingly, the more politically driven Maille-À-Part collective did not appreciate this commercialization of their practice.[101] As Tricot pour la paix mentioned, the *50 Lampadaires Transfigurés* project, a pillar in their history of commissioned works, created a rupture between the two groups of yarnbombers who, up until then, had been seen collaborating on projects.[102] Les Ville-Laines, in accepting this sort of commissioned work for bigger organisations, was perceived as selling-out, and was denounced as not radical enough in a note, which is now

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96 Tricot pour la paix, interview. I would also like to note that while the Cercles de Fermières are not often understood as activists, they frequently donate knitted articles of clothing to nonprofit organisations. They are therefore also directly engaging with causes that matter. The Saint-Joseph Cercle for example, donated over forty scarves on the occasion of the Drummonville's 2017 « Nuit des Sans-Abri » : "La nuit des sans-abri," Les Cercles de Fermières du Québec - Centre-du-Québec, accessed July 23, 2018, http://www.cfqcentreduquebec.com/nouvelles/saint-joseph/2017/nuit-des-sans-abri/.

97 Fournier, interview, Tricot pour la paix, interview.

98 "Mission," SDC Rue Saint-Denis, accessed June 8, 2018, http://www.ruesaintdenis.ca/en/the-sdc/mission.

99 Tricot pour la paix, interview.

100 Tricot_pirate, "OSHEAGA," *Les Ville-Laines*, August 6, 2012, http://ville-laines.blogspot.com/2012/08/osheaga.html; L'Équipe de Médiation Culturelle, "Le «jardin suspendu» des Ville-Laines," *La médiation culturelle*, February 16, 2015, http://montreal.mediationculturelle.org/le-jardin-suspendu-des-villes-laines/.

101 Tricot pour la paix, interview.

102 Tricot pour la paix, interview.

unfortunately gone, by Zola from the collective Maille-À-Part (who Tricot pour la paix wrote a response to on her blog).[103]

While this local disagreement allows for a debate on the place of yarnbombing in Quebec society, it also reflects a larger international issue. Looking at the history of other well-known practitioners of the craft, like Magda Sayeg (who has worked with the collective Knitta), or Olek, a Polish-American maker based in New York, it becomes clear that the assimilation of this practice by corporations and officials is not uncommon. As Leslie A. Hahner and Scott J. Varda wrote: "yarn bombing is no longer a simply pedestrian activity but has become revered art with a high commission."[104] The craft, which was initially practiced illegally to reclaim spaces in the urban landscape and question socially established gender norms, was commodified by transnationals as a legitimate marketing idea, such as in the famous example of the city bus of Mexico City covered in its entirety with crochet and knitting by Sayeg and Knitta, sponsored by Absolut Vodka (Fig. 11).[105] Hahner and Varda explain how the constant comparison of traditional graffiti with knit graffiti has allowed the practice to enjoy its status as something exceptional, or a better and improved form of the painted street art.[106] In particular, they mention how it is easier to appreciate yarnbombing for what it does not share with graffiti itself, namely its association with softness, femininity, temporality, and most importantly, "middle class whiteness,"[107] this last statement being used as a contrast to painted graffiti which is "a criminal transgression usually performed by young, urban, non-white bodies."[108] In fact, those aspects are given such an importance that its guerilla qualities are erased in order to highlight its exceptionality.[109] It is at this thin line delimiting craftivism from commissioned artistic gestures, that we must discuss the impact of commodification of yarnbombing in the context of this case study.

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103 Tricot pour la paix, "Lettre à Zola," *Tricot pour la paix*, August 14, 2013, https://tricotpourlapaix.com/2013/08/14/lettre-a-zola/.

104 Leslie A. Hahner and Scott J. Varda, "Yarn Bombing and the Aesthetics of Exceptionalism," *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies* 11, 4 (October 2, 2014): 303.

105 It is interesting to note that most times, when the project is mentioned in sources, Sayeg does not reveal that she was commissioned by Absolut Vodka. She generally references them when listing the companies with which she collaborated and worked for, as seen in her biography, on her website. The flickr album of the Mexico Bus Project does however reference the commissioner: knitta please, "The Mexico City Bus Project," flickr, November 10, 2008, https://www.flickr.com/photos/knitta/albums/72157622253164l2/.

106 Hahner and Varda, "Yarn Bombing and the Aesthetics of Exceptionalism," 302.

107 Hahner and Varda, "Yarn Bombing and the Aesthetics of Exceptionalism," 302.

108 Hahner and Varda, "Yarn Bombing and the Aesthetics of Exceptionalism," 305.

109 Hahner and Varda, "Yarn Bombing and the Aesthetics of Exceptionalism," 305.

Considering that the celebratory activity of the Cercles de Fermières was organised with the approbation of the parties concerned by the intervention on the space, it is difficult to see it as the act of vandalism it is usually defined. It is important to note however that even if yarnbombing is considered an act of vandalism, it is easily removed with scissors by authorities, while spray painted interventions are not, therefore reducing the stigma that could be attached to it. Aligning themselves with the whimsical and soft qualities of this sort of intervention definitely leads the organisation not far from the initial perception of the public about the Cercles – namely, an organisation constituted for the most part of retired women, whose creations focus on the betterment of the home. Of course, to have this community of women radically change their current image, and to change it to one less concerned with traditions would cause a lot of chaos. Considering the size of this organisation, and their role as guardian of Québécois heritage, a change this big would damage their credibility and influence over the well-being of women in the province and internationally.

Can we therefore assume that its assimilation into the world of commissioned work in the province is simply the result of a bigger international trend in treating the practice less as the work of activism, and more as a non-threatening artistic expression of women privileged enough to have leisure time and money to spend it on ephemeral works, as Hahner and Varda would argue? Probably. Nevertheless, it is important to recognize the success of the activity in providing not only a platform to the members of the organisation, but also future project opportunities which stems from this assimilation of the craft as a soft and inviting one rather than a politically engaged and intrusive one. One thing is certain however: this activity definitely served to show how the Fermières are able to adapt their practice to artistic trends, even if these trends remain within the realm of the label which they are trying to escape from, by associating with knitting, and women's labor.

Conclusion

While the work necessary to transform the image of the Cercles de Fermières is equivalent to that of a rebranding, the event planned in honor of the one hundredth anniversary of creation of the organisation definitely helped situate its members in the present, rather than in the past. Of course, the longevity of this organisation, and their role as keepers of a Québécois heritage in craft knowledge definitely assisted in maintaining this image of the community as atemporal

guardians of traditions to this day. From its first Cercles, the organisation has juggled both modernity and tradition, in an attempt to control and guide Québécois people facing great changes and turmoil in the construction of its society. Today, the Fermières, freed at last from the authority of officials and clergymen, are embracing their role as keepers of a craft heritage, and use such knowledge to give back to those in need. *Engagée*s, they give their time, skills, and creations to charitable causes that benefit women, mothers, and families both nationally and internationally.[110]

Other communities have also engaged with crafts in order to benefit their communities or those in need. Craftivism, as Betsy Greer argued, allows for a broad interpretation of the uses of crafts for the greater good. Whether it is deployed as an alternative mode of protest,[111] or exploited in order to create items to donate to charities,[112] knitting, and other types of crafts, have the power to change things. Similarly, collectives and practitioners of yarnbombing around the world use knitting to reveal the errors of urban planners and officials in reading the demographics that use the space. We can understand it as a more specific branch of this larger interest in activism and craft.

However, this practice has also received a lot of backlash by writers like Hahner and Varda for example, on the principle that it comes from a very privileged place from which the idea of re-appropriating the public space with knitting can actually do something to change the status quo. While significant protests and actions might be nonexistent in the activity of the Fermières, smaller scale changes did prevail. The image of a pastoral and idyllic rural home in which an older woman is seen knitting remains quite popular in the general understanding by the public of the organisation. To use a street art with characteristics so close to their already existing practice, while fascinating for a while, is no radical change. However, this much mediatized event has allowed for a resurgence of interest in their work, skills, and knowledge. We could therefore consider that yarnbombing did not change the Cercles de Fermières' image with its message, but rather that its current trendiness did popularize the organisation by association. The words of

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110 In this case, the international component of their help comes from their involvement with the ACWW, short for the Associated Country Women of the World: Rialland Morisette, *Le Passé Conjugué au Présent*, 136.

111 Greer, *Knitting for Good!*, 129

112 Greer, *Knitting for Good!*, 130

Yolande Chrétien can attest to this statement, as during our interview, she admitted that many new, and younger, recruits came after the mediatisation of the activity.[113]

To try and alter the perception of the Cercles de Fermières by the general public gets even harder when considering that the organisation officially only allows in people who identify as women.[114] While they attempted to change the perception of their practice through yarnbombing, the insistence on protecting its gendered mission might be holding them back. It is possible that the heart of the problem resides in the solidity of the structure of the organisation, a hundred years strong. Sticking with these requirements therefore does little to break the common association between knitting, fibre arts, traditions, and women. Yarnbombing, by comparison, is more open to other communities, most certainly due to its roots in DIY and zine culture, and relative newness. Men, women, and non-binary people have engaged with street art, with varying levels of political engagement,[115] very often using it to question notions of gender and sexuality through the common associations of knitting with the feminine. The question thus remains: How can this latest chapter in knitting's history help change the Cercles des Fermières and their image?

113 Chrétien, interview.
114 Jubinville, interview.
115 Tricot pour la paix, interview.

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Fig. 1 – Picture of one of the first Cercles, in Roberval. 1915. Source : "Fondation Des Cercles de Fermières Du Québec." Répertoire du patrimoine culturel du Québec. Accessed July 30, 2018. http://www.patrimoine-culturel.gouv.qc.ca/rpcq/detail.do?methode=consulter&id=26924&type=pge.

Fig. 2 – Image of Phentex Slippers. Source: "Pantoufles - Épi de Blé d'Inde." Cercle de Fermières de Montréal-Nord, January 30, 2014. http://www.cfq-mtl-nord.com/article-pantoufles-epi-de-ble-d-inde-121203514.html.

Fig. 3 – Cours de Filage à Kénogami. c.1937. Picture by Studio L. Charpentier. Source: "Émélie Chamard, Femme D'avant-Garde." Musée de la Mémoire Vivante. Accessed July 30, 2018. http://www.virtualmuseum.ca/sgc-cms/histoires_de_chez_nous-community_memories/pm_v2.php?id=record_detail&fl=0&lg=English&ex=00000752&rd=201241#.

Fig. 4 – Émélie Chamard. *Feuille d'Érable au Point Boutonné*. c.1950. Picture by Judith Douville. Source : "Émélie Chamard, Femme D'avant-Garde." Musée de la Mémoire Vivante. Accessed July 5, 2018. http://www.virtualmuseum.ca/sgc-cms/histoires_de_chez_nous-community_memories/pm_v2.php?id=record_detail&fl=0&lg=English&ex=00000752&rd=201200#.

Fig. 5 – Yarnbombing by the Cercle de Fermières at Ahuntsic. 2015. Source: "Cercle de Fermières d'Ahuntsic." Facebook. Accessed July 31, 2018. https://www.facebook.com/CFAhuntsic/photos/a.1232408566810366.1073741829.159383250779575/924029790981580/?type=3&theater.

Fig. 6 – Yarnbombing in Frelighsburg for the Festiv'Art. 2012. Source : Tricot_pirate. "Frelighsburg: Conférence de Presse et Tricot-Graffiti." *Les VILLE-LAINES*, August 17, 2012. http://ville-laines.blogspot.com/2012/08/frelighsburg-conference-de-presse-et.html.

Fig. 7 – Yarnbombing by the Cercle de Fermières in Val-d'Or. 2015. Source: "Graffiti de Tricot." Culturat. Accessed July 31, 2018. http://culturat.org/projets/graffiti-de-tricot7681477/.

Fig. 8 – Screenshot by author from *Par Ici l'Été*. 2016. Source: Par Ici l'été. "Les relations à l'ère des réseaux sociaux." Radio-Canada, August 4, 2016. https://ici.radio-canada.ca/tele/par-ici-l-ete/2016/segments/chronique/8243/claudine-prevost-relations-reseaux-sociaux-amour.

Fig. 9 – Les Ville-Laines surrounded by their yarnbombing intervention in the Agora of Viger Square. 2011. Picture by Eli Larin. Source: Tricot_pirate. "Square Viger: Mission Accomplie!" *Les VILLE-LAINES*, November 15, 2011. http://ville-laines.blogspot.com/2011/11/square-viger-mission-accomplie.html.

Fig. 10 – One of the 50 lampposts intervened on by Les Ville-Laines for SDC Pignons rue Saint-Denis. 2013. Source: Tricot_pirate. "50 Lampadaires Transfigurés." *Les VILLE-LAINES*, July 30, 2013. http://ville-laines.blogspot.com/2013/07/50-lampadaires-transfigures.html.

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