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Author

Asplund, Ingrid

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Happy Bullish 2011!!!: Olek's *Project B*

Ingrid Asplund

Project B and the *Charging Bull*

Arturo Di Modica's *Charging Bull* is imposing in scale. It is a model of muscular machismo and a popular tourist spot. It stands taller than most people in the middle of a very busy part of Manhattan, usually gleaming in the sun like a trophy of capitalist masculinity. Its scale is met with detail, as the *Charging Bull* features expressive eyes and eyebrows, a stance that exudes motion and energy, and a detailed musculature, from ribs to thighs. Very early Christmas morning (about three o'clock) in 2010, the artist Olek escaped from any potential sugar-plum fantasies and stole down to Wall Street to leave a Christmas gift for New York City.¹ Olek had crocheted, by hand and without assistance, a covering for the *Charging Bull*, perhaps a sweater or a sort of "bull cozy" and installed it in the dead of night so as to avoid the authorities. She would later entitle this piece *Project B (Wall Street Bull)*.²

The finished product was, like the object that it covered, imposing, even intimidating, but *Project B* contrasted *Charging Bull* with the comforting, warm, and cozy associations of yarn. The piece's execution is impressive in several ways: the yarn suit fits the *Charging Bull* precisely from horn to tail with no room for slacking or sagging, and the viewer can see every curve, bulging belly and thighs included. It is not formed in one seamless piece, but rather by means of several blocks of crocheted yarn stitched together with thick seams. The yarn is created to fit snugly over the horns of the *Charging Bull*, has a swirling pattern where its nostrils would be, and encases the tail, legs, and feet tightly as well as the rest of the body. The yarn is crocheted tightly enough that someone viewing the yarn-encased sculpture would not see the color of the metal, but loose enough that the stitches are visible



Figure 1 Olek, *Project B (Wall Street Bull)*, 2011. Image courtesy of Jonathan Levine Gallery.

from a short distance. It is crocheted in a macro camouflage pattern throughout and the pattern does not quite match up at the thick crocheted seams. At first glance the piece appears to be bright pink, and after the initial shock of such an intense color, notes of purple, black, turquoise, and even gray emerge. The stitches in the camouflage make it appear to be pixelated, which is a surprising feature for the postmodern or digitally-native viewer because the virtual connotations of a pixelated image contrast with the tactile quality of yarn.

In *Project B*, Olek represents a whole list of hierarchical, seemingly incongruous categories and binaries together. She does so in a way that unravels the constructions by which these categories are made to be not only separate, but greater or lesser than each other. She loops and knots genres together, creating a piece that incorporates street art, domestic fiber art, performance art, installation, and guerilla art to create a form that cannot be pinned down in one essential medium. *Project B* also knots up the gender binary. Olek does this by layering the feminine signifiers of the color pink, which was firmly established as a symbol for girlhood during the 1950s and the medium of yarn with masculine signifiers such as the site of Wall Street and the camouflage pattern, which is associated with the traditionally masculine realm of the military.³ She disrupts a hierarchy of work by putting the domestic, concrete work of crochet on the site of the abstract, lofty, male-dominated work that happens on Wall Street. The world of finance is masculine-coded in numbers, in corporate culture, and in cultural imagination. A

2012 New York Times article by Luisita López Torregrosa regarding gender on Wall Street clarifies all of these aspects of Wall Street hypermasculinity, explaining that, “On Wall Street [...] the scarcity of women in top positions has become a bitter symbol of the low status women hold in U.S. corporate life.”⁴ This symbolism is not based on mere stereotypes. López Torregrosa quotes statistics from the research and consulting nonprofit Catalyst, which find that women make up around half of the finance industry workforce but only hold executive positions at fewer than three percent of U.S. financial companies.⁵ Finally, this imbalance reflects on and is encouraged by a hypermasculine culture and work environment on Wall Street. López Torregrosa goes on to quote an interview with Catalyst president and chief executive Ilene H. Lang, who explained,

The Wall Street culture is characterized by what you might call really macho kinds of behavior. So what’s looked up to on Wall Street are people who swagger, people who will do the deal at any cost, people who will work day and night, hour and hour, for lots and lots of money and they don’t care about anything else. Those are characteristics that you think about when asked to talk about what the Wall Street culture is. That’s a very masculine, macho culture.⁶

The masculinity of Wall Street that *Project B* defies is not just a matter of numbers, rather it is a stereotype based on the reality of the people and characteristics that are given privilege in Wall Street culture. Although Olek is not an expert in the gender dynamics of Wall Street, it is widely understood to be a place with few women in power and a highly macho culture.

Because *Project B* addresses so many different kinds of categories, on another level it also entangles them. How do categories of medium such as paint or yarn exist in a hierarchy within the art world? Can we really witness patriarchy distinct from capitalism? *Project B* is a work of paradox, disorientation, and disruption of categories that are socially constructed to appear solid and inevitable but which Olek reveals in their fragility as mutually exclusive binaries. This piece produces anxiety and glee in equal measures, offering the equally terrifying and appealing vision of deconstructed binaries, boundaries, and hierarchies.

Project B was created less than a year before Occupy Wall Street began, and there seems to be a significant, if not intentional, link between these two events. This link is especially strong in light of the extent to which *Charging Bull* represents Wall Street and the controversy that surrounded high finance in the United States at the time. Olek’s concrete, maternal gesture seems to imply that the socially

constructed, abstract systems that Wall Street is home to are precarious and fragile, in need of a warm blanket. Taking care of, so to speak, a massively powerful institution such as Wall Street's stock markets has a disarming, and even emasculating, effect and calls to mind the United States government's bailouts of important banks just a few years prior that are and were key players on Wall Street. Covering in a comforting manner exposes a vulnerability in the systems that appear to be omnipotent, but which needed "bailing out" soon before *Project B* was made.

Multimedia Viewings

Project B was short-lived and ephemeral in nature, and barely saw the sunlight before it was cut down within a few hours.⁷ Like many temporary installations, the work is also tricky to pin down as having an "essential" form. While *Project B* did exist as an object occupying physical space, this is not how most of its viewers, myself included, have experienced it. It has primarily been disseminated through photographs and videos, which are necessarily part of the work as they are part of how it is presented. The photographs are often taken from below the *Charging Bull* and this perspective makes even the fuzzy, colorful iteration of the *Charging Bull* appear large and intimidating. The angle tends to be a semi-close-up that distorts the *Charging Bull* such that its head appears unusually large and the sculpture appears somehow taller than the buildings around it. The angles common to widely distributed photographs of *Project B* also emphasize the motion of the *Charging Bull*. The fact that the sculpture appears to be moving in photographs is not only an effect of the photography, but also of *Project B*'s colors and pattern.

Another key method of distribution for *Project B* was a YouTube video posted by Olek that chronicled in two minutes and forty-three seconds her process of installing *Project B* over the *Charging Bull* beginning with her arrival on Wall Street: duffel bags of crocheted yarn, hooks, and videographer at hand.⁸ The video begins with a few tracking shots of Wall Street, such as a street sign and the New York Stock Exchange building, emblazoned with several American flags. The video then cuts to a shot of Olek walking taken from about 20 feet behind. She carries a stepladder covered in colorful camouflage crochet, similarly to how we will see the *Charging Bull* covered. The video as a whole lacks any diegetic noise or music, and instead Manuel Panella's "El Gato Montes (Espagne)" plays in the background. The music, which comes from a lively Spanish opera, brings to mind cinematic scenes of bullfighting, and brings an energetic tone to the video. At the beginning and in a few moments throughout the video, narration of a bull fight overtakes the background noise. This offers a sense of occasion. The lighting is dim and appears

nonprofessional, contributing a DIY aesthetic and a sense of sneakiness to the video. Another contributor to this covert, DIY mood is its slightly out-of-focus appearance. The footage's lack of focus suggests that it was created quickly, under stress, and by a small or less professional team.

When we see the *Charging Bull*, it is adorned with a seasonally appropriate wreath that flutters in the wind. A caption identifies the time as two o'clock in the morning and the temperature as 20 degrees Fahrenheit. We then see Olek in the throes of installation. She struggles at first to get the bulk of the yarn over the top of the bull (it takes her a few tries), yet ultimately succeeds with impressive nimbleness and dexterity. Olek's appearance coordinates with the pattern of *Project B* as she wears a hat and legwarmers made of the same pattern of crocheted yarn as the bull cozy she is installing. This coordination emphasizes the role of performance in this piece by highlighting her physical presence and her personal relationship with the art. She has an air of playfulness, particularly considering that she is committing an illegal activity in the middle of a very cold night. There are a few shots of Olek waving at and interacting with the few tourists wandering through Wall Street in the wee hours of Christmas morning, but these are contrasted with several shots of the artist looking over her shoulder nervously, presumably in case of being caught by police officers.

One of the most compelling aspects of the video is the relationship that develops between Olek and the *Charging Bull*. Her playful demeanor extends to how she relates to the sculpture. To some degree, watching her cover the *Charging Bull* recalls an adult dressing a child, rather than the serious intensity that an important work of art and artifact of masculinity might usually elicit. Olek treats it with affection, patting the yarn-covered snout of the *Charging Bull* and then the uncovered backside. She does this somewhat absentmindedly in both cases, as if the *Charging Bull* is a pet or a lover and patting them on the nose or backside is second nature. This intimate, casual, and maternal relationship toward the *Charging Bull* is significant because it departs from the idea that handling art is a grave process due to the sanctity of the art object.⁹ Toward the end of the video Olek finishes stitching it all together. She jumps off the curb and does a short victory dance and then returns to the bull and embraces its head and horns as the shot freezes and pans out.

About Olek

Olek created *Project B* a few years after developing her yarn arts practice. Olek was born in Poland and graduated with a degree in cultural studies from Adam

Mickiewicz University in 2000. She later moved to Brooklyn and began exhibiting her yarn pieces for the first time in 2003 as part of the Williamsburg Arts and Historical Society Surrealist Fashion show.¹⁰ *Project B* was created several months before her first solo exhibition, *Knitting is for Pus*****. *Knitting is for Pus***** was originally shown in the Christopher Henry Gallery and was also recreated for the *40 Under 40: Craft Futures* show at the Renwick Gallery of the Smithsonian. *Knitting is for Pus***** is a study in excess and includes an entire room covered in crocheted yarn in various bright, eclectic colors crocheted in her signature camouflage pattern as well as photographs on the wall of some of her past installations and performances.¹¹

Olek also exhibited previously at the 2005 Venice Biennale with an international group of artists in their piece *Waterways*. Additionally, she is known for her staged performances, which include performers donning “wearable sculptures” and going about in public as they normally would (such as in her 2009 piece *Thank You for Your Visit, Have a Nice Day*).¹² She has staged such performances in several contexts, including at the 2009 DUMBO Arts Festival.¹³ Olek has a rich oeuvre that is generally oriented toward crochet; this paper will focus primarily on *Project B* while keeping in mind its context within her artistic past and present.

Since *Project B* was created, Olek has gained further notoriety and worked prolifically with a variety of themes and methods, although almost always using crocheted yarn as her medium. Olek has created soft sculptures thematizing reproduction (especially including pregnant women and phallic imagery), covered other art objects such as Tony Rosenthal’s *Astor Place Cube* or *Alamo*, and in the past year Olek and a few other women who call themselves “Team Olek” have participated in a project entitled *Love Across the USA*.¹⁴ According to the official website, “*Love Across the USA* project is a series of community-based public murals in cities across the U.S. that depict inspiring women from history.”¹⁵ The project began with a billboard covered in a crocheted portrait of Hillary Clinton and the commonly-used hashtag “#i’mwithher.” After the 2016 presidential election, the project continued in cities such as Auburn, NY with a crocheted mural of abolitionist and political activist Harriet Tubman and Philadelphia, PA with a mural of singer and civil rights activist Marian Anderson. The murals also feature quotations by the women depicted in them, emphasizing each person’s voice along with their image. *Love Across the USA* also has a strong community aspect, and Team Olek invites people from the community to join workshops where they can learn to crochet and contribute to the murals.¹⁶ In addition to having a medium in common, all of these projects bear similarity to *Project B* in various ways. Her project with the *Astor Place Cube* follows a template of covering art objects in yarn,

her soft sculptures continue with her gender-related imagery, and *Love Across the USA* is political and has a specifically feminist message to an even greater extent than *Project B*.

The Great Artists Steal: Peers, Influences, and Genealogy

Yarn bombing

Project B was not made in a vacuum, and indeed Olek's art has clear similarities to a larger artistic movement that is commonly referred to as yarn bombing. Yarn bombing is said to have been founded in 2006 by Magda Sayeg and has since become widespread in cities around the world, gaining popularity among many viewers at widely varying levels of "legitimacy" in the art world.¹⁷ While there are several male yarn bombers of repute (HotTea, Moneyless, and Spidertag come to mind) yarn bombing is very much a women's art movement in terms of numbers as well as in terms of the perception of the medium of yarn.¹⁸ In its most basic and common form, yarn bombing encases items such as trees or telephone poles in yarn while in other cases it may involve covering large and elaborate objects such as buses, cars, and in one case, a tank.¹⁹ Many yarn bombers are strictly hobbyists, whereas others work professionally and may work as artists in other media. Due to its collaborative capacity for co-constructing pieces, yarn bombing also lends itself quite well to collectives, such as Houston-based Knitta Please or Knit the City in London.

Yarn bombing is exciting because of its unapologetic femininity, especially in medium. In her article "Yarn Bombing: Claiming Rhetorical Citizenship in Public Spaces," Maureen Daly Goggins describes how yarn bombing "seeks to validate traditional female activities" by participating in knitting and crocheting "while challenging their stereotypical and hegemonic characterizations."²⁰ Through yarn bombing we see women artists seeking community and networking with one another to a degree that parallels women's art collectives of the 1960s and '70s.²¹ Of course yarn bombing isn't exclusively created by women, and there are several male street artists who work with yarn. Men certainly number among the many anonymous yarn bombers around the world and participate in the many yarn bombing collectives worldwide that knit and crochet in the street. Yarn bombing can nonetheless be considered a primarily women's art movement without being an all-women's art movement because the medium of yarn has become so heavily gendered.

Yarn bombing brings a highly private or domestic medium, one that is associated with blankets, babies, doilies, and other aspects associated with intimate home and family life, to the public sphere. The act of leaving yarn outside is unusual and surprising to most as yarn is often seen as a domestic material to be enjoyed by a cozy hearth. Yarn bombing is an act that destabilizes the dichotomy between public and private, thereby destabilizing the dichotomy between masculine and feminine.²²

Yarn bombing and the conversation around it seemed to reach a pinnacle not long after *Project B*. The art movement enjoyed success and praise as well as much derision, due to the large number of female artists who work with the medium, as well as the large number of outsider artists involved. One blog post in particular seems to exemplify the negative feelings toward yarn bombing that came from within the world of street art. In 2012, Caroline Caldwell wrote a post on the blog *Vandalog* entitled “Yarn Bombing: You Can’t Sit With Us.” The post is critical, offering the suggestion that yarn bombers can improve their art by being “more creative” but is also dismissive of the genre with such phrases as “I hate yarn bombing” and “[Olek] would be cool if yarn bombing were something that were cool.”²³ There is a great deal to deconstruct and unpack within this article, especially because the article and the robust conversation in the comments serve as a useful artifact of the sentiments toward yarn bombing.²⁴ For the purposes of this paper, what is most significant is the exception Caldwell makes for Olek, which stands out because it resonates with how Olek seems to perceive herself as an artist. Caldwell says of Olek,

Olek had always been one of these artists whom I’d come across frequently but always skimmed over with a sort of neutral reaction, like ‘That might be cool if yarn bombing were something that was cool.’ Then the other day Jonathan LeVine Gallery sent me this video compilation of Olek’s work over the past year. Through the entire video, I was trying to reconcile why I still hate yarn bombing but why Olek was starting to feel like an exception. The reason is that she has moved beyond many of the drawbacks of typical yarn bombing. She has a relatively large body of work and it is not built solely on sweatering trees in different cities. The sheer size of some of her pieces are enough to make even biased observers do a double-take. Olek’s work does not last longer or decay prettier, but like *Hot Tea*, *Moneyless* and *Spidertag*, her personal style is identifiable. Unlike usual yarn bombs which don’t seem to be communicating anything specific, Olek’s work is often blatantly

addressing the greater art community. Naturally, I don't like everything but the versatility in Olek's work proves that there is colossal room for creativity in this genre.²⁵

Caldwell identified a distinction between Olek and the yambombing movement. As several commenters pointed out, Olek has chosen to distance herself from the movement and is known for becoming offended when her work is put in the category of yarn bombing. The following excerpt from a *New York Times* article reads:

'I don't yarn bomb, I make art,' said Agata Oleksiak, 33, an artist in New York who has been enshrouding humans, bicycles and swimming pools in neon-colored crochet since 2003. Last Christmas Eve, Olek, as she prefers to be called, blanketed the 'Charging Bull' statue near Wall Street in a pink and purple cozy, and uploaded a video of it to YouTube. 'If someone calls my bull a yarn bomb, I get really upset,' she added.

Olek, whose work has been shown in museums and galleries worldwide, considers yarn bombing to be the trite work of amateurs and exhibitionists.

'Lots of people have aunts or grandmas who paint,' she said. 'Do you want to see that work in the galleries? No. The street is an extension of the gallery. Not everyone's work deserves to be in public.'²⁶

Here Olek is both complicit and critical of the hierarchies of the art world that fail to give legitimacy to women artists, outsider artists, and fiber artists. In the case of Caldwell's article, she is successful in distinguishing herself, however Jessie Hemmons, the Philadelphia yarn bomber also known as "Ishknits," contributed several comments to the conversation around the article. While Caldwell expresses appreciation for the way Olek seems to transcend the genre of yarn bombing, Hemmons strongly opposes her stance. Hemmons says, "Olek is a hack. When she talks about 'not everyone having a right to show their work in the street' it is the antithesis of a street artist, so I would hope no street artist would support her."²⁷ Olek is an artist who also works with and is represented by galleries; she is not exclusively a street artist, therefore she may not share the attitude

common among street artists that everyone does have the right to show their work, as Hemmons says.

The fact that Olek both works within an art world that will not give her any more legitimacy than she demands and also distances herself from a movement that is so often othered and not given credit within the art world may be an ultimately beneficial career move. Olek also resists the very real and challenging false equivalency made between female artists and women who may create crafts or art but do not identify as artists and do not have a need to be making their living by showing in galleries and finding a place in a strongly misogynist art world. This false equivalency not only has the potential to discredit her extensive training and qualification but can also have very real impacts on her ability to show her art and find commissions. Although it is difficult to guess what Olek's career would be without these factors, the state of her notoriety is that she has been extremely prolific and experienced success, but at the same time there is relatively little serious scholarship about her and the prices for her work are comparatively low (some of her sculptures sell for under \$1,000).²⁸ There may also be something subversive in her strict refusal to be grouped with other women who do not work as artist because of her gender and medium.

With due recognition given to the context in which she may have felt the need to avoid being classified as a yarn bomber, Olek's statement ultimately perpetuates elitist and misogynist art world hierarchies in several ways. First of all, she suggests that yarn bombing and art are mutually exclusive categories, which does not support artists who work primarily as yarn bombers. Magda Sayeg is often considered the mother of yarn bombing and in many ways has gained hegemonic approval in the same way Olek has.²⁹ Like Olek, Sayeg's work with yarn is her full-time career and her workload is such that she has several assistants and works with a loom rather than knitting by hand. Hemmons is another artist who has gained "credibility" in the art world. The Philadelphia Museum of Art commissioned her to create an installation for the facade of their Perleman building for the 2012 *Craft Spoken Here* show.³⁰ Clearly Olek's distinction between art and yarnbombing misunderstands the experiences and careers of self-identified yarn bombers who are also artists.

Olek's statement also reinforces a dichotomy between "real" artists and nonprofessional crafters that groups nonprofessional or outsider artists and perhaps even professional crafters in the same category. These categories are challenging to approach from a feminist perspective because on one hand, clearly Olek is in a different category from knitters who casually cover a tree or lamppost and she does have a need to establish herself as having professional credentials. On the other hand, suggesting that yarn bombing is not real art plays into the same

misogynist hierarchy that places male artists above female artists and paint above yarn. It seems that the model that equates Olek to someone who does not identify as an artist but who does make yarn bombs is flawed, as well as a model that supports a false dichotomy of yarn bombing vs. art. It is my hope that the many yarn bombers and other female fiber artists who are working right now will be able to build a path toward finding a more equitable way of defining their own work.

Finally, although my perspective is that the distinction Olek makes between herself and other yarn bombers ultimately does not reflect the reality of her work, out of respect to her identity as an artist I refrain from labelling Olek's work "yarn bombing" in this paper.

The Context of Street Art

Olek's oeuvre, and *Project B* in general, can be understood within the history of street art. Although she grew up in Poland and has worked extensively internationally, Olek has also situated herself as a New York artist by living and working there for most of her career. *Project B* exists in dialogue with much of New York's street art, and has a strong, site-specific association with the city—and with Wall Street in particular.³¹ Site-specificity is vital to street art and the medium of crochet, with its intersecting loops, seems to resonate with New York's urban grid. While nearly every significant street artist has some relationship with New York, Olek has declared it her chosen home, perhaps due in part to the profusion of resources and community available to street artists there.

In considering Olek's role in creating street art, the male-dominated setting of street art culture feels like a significant factor in how we understand her work. This is especially the case when Olek's context within a somewhat androcentric art community intersects with her choosing to encounter a masculine symbol in an especially male-dominated part of town.³² The reality of street art is male-dominated, and the perception of street art further privileges men. The reality—the actual demographics of who creates street art and who becomes successful in making street art—is skewed toward men, according to articles by sociologist Tristan Bridges and writer Chelsea Iversen.³³ In considering why this disparity exists, both Bridges and Iversen suggest that it is because the public space of the street is more accessible and safer for men than it is for women. Iversen interviewed Caldwell for her article, and wrote,

Of course, to be a muralist or a street artist, you have to endure these things: being in public spaces for long periods of time, often

alone and at night. And for male street artists, it's different. They're less vulnerable. 'Men are far less likely to be followed, harassed, assaulted, etc., when doing basic stuff like walking home from work,' Caldwell continued. Because men generally don't face the same vulnerabilities as women on the street do, male artists are able to spend more time comfortably honing their craft. '[Men] will have more practice time and advance faster,' said Caldwell. This could explain why women have been slower to gain prominence in the street-art world.³⁴

In addition to the safety implications named by Caldwell, the perception of the street and street art as being masculine impacts the representation of street art and street artists. Cultural Studies scholar Vittorio Parisi created a study that examines three major books compiling the works of street artists and observes their gender ratio. Parisi writes,

Let us consider, for instance, three major publications having the explicit purpose of serving as world indexes or anthologies of street and graffiti artists. The first is 'Graffiti World: Street Art from the Five Continents' by Nicholas Ganz (2004). Only 11 out of 114 artists taken into account by the book are women, i.e. 7.6%. 'From Style Writing to Art' (2011), the anthology curated by French gallerist Magda Danysz, does not show any substantial change: 4 women out of 46 artists, i.e., 8.7%. Nor does most recent 'World Atlas of Street Art and Graffiti' (2013), by Rafael Schacter and John Fekner: 3 artists out of 97 are women, with a share of 3.1%.³⁵

Parisi goes on to conduct a survey where people are asked to guess the gender of various artists based on images of their work, concluding that the statistics 'confirm the general trend of seeing urban art as a predominantly male activity.'³⁶ *Project B* is significant not merely because Olek is a woman making street art, but because she chooses to make street art with a distinctly feminine appearance due to its pink color and traditionally domestic medium.

Although Di Modica is not a typical street artist working with paint, wheat paste, or stickers, *Charging Bull* was originally an act of guerilla art. In 1989, Di Modica and some of his friends loaded *Charging Bull* into a truck and installed it without permission outside the New York Stock Exchange.³⁷ The sculpture was removed later that day despite a positive response from the general public because

it was obstructing a busy thoroughfare, although it was later reinstalled with the city's approval.³⁸ Although *Charging Bull* was initially installed as a work of guerilla art, it was not created with the spirit of protest or criticism, but rather in support of the United States and its financial systems. Di Modica expressed that it was to be a "Yuletide symbol of the 'strength and power of the American people.'"³⁹ Di Modica, an immigrant from Italy, seemed to be expressing his feelings of patriotism as well as encouragement toward Wall Street. A *New York Times* article from the day after its introduction effectively captures the reception of *Charging Bull* and its author explains that Di Modica "created the black-patina bull of bronze and stainless steel in his studio at 54 Crosby Street over the last two years in response to the market crash in 1987."⁴⁰ Then quoted Di Modica's assistant, Kim Stippa, who explained, "He wanted to encourage everybody to realize America's power."⁴¹ According to this account, *Charging Bull* seems to have been created completely in good faith.

Olek has since described her installation as an homage to Di Modica.⁴² *Charging Bull* has been adopted as a symbol of Wall Street's hegemonic systems. Olek's act of covering bears an interesting relationship to Di Modica because she claims to be paying homage to him, yet also seems to be adopting a critical approach to his work and the statement he was making. Project B's surprising formal qualities and the artist's assertion that it is an homage to Di Modica lends the project a mix of sincerity, playful irony, and subversiveness. The act of covering *Charging Bull* gave Di Modica recognition and showed Olek's desire to be associated with him. At the same time, *Project B* suggested an incompleteness to Di Modica's sculpture by adding to it and even visually blocking some aspects of the original piece, such as the color and sheen of the original bronze. It is also noteworthy that *Charging Bull* and *Project B* were both created in response to market crashes. *Project B*'s slightly more transgressive attitude speaks to a tension in the air that would later be expressed in the Occupy Wall Street movement.

Stitches in Alliance: Project B's *Occupation*

In this work, the world of street art is not the only male-dominated space Olek is occupying. Olek also performs a preemptive "occupation" of Wall Street's hypermasculine culture and systems. In doing so, Olek juxtaposes the female-dominated tradition of fiber arts with the male-dominated world of Wall Street and in particular juxtaposes the abstract nature of the macroeconomic systems orchestrated on Wall Street with the concrete work of the domestic sphere. Olek calls into question the relationship between the tangible and the virtual through her subtle use of pixelated imagery. Because her work is often so fleeting, she relies

on social media to spread it. Most people saw *Project B* as an image on the internet, and it is possible to imagine that some people may have seen a slightly pixelated image of this piece. Perhaps in this case, the viewer would not be able to know whether the pixelation was part of the piece due to looking at a low-resolution image. In addition to connoting the social media presence that is important to Olek's practice, the pixelation also brings to mind the abstract, virtual nature of the work that happens on Wall Street, where pixels and virtual information can represent, in massively removed and indirect ways, impossible amounts of physical, material goods. Olek's physical act of crochet is such a contrast to the way commodities are represented on Wall Street that it points out how overwhelming it is to consider the scale on which high finance operates, shifting almost unthinkably large amounts of money around every day.

The site specific implications of *Project B* contrast handcraft with the nature of finance, which is far removed from the physical goods and services that are represented by money, which is then represented abstractly in the stock market. The placement of Olek's work on Wall Street gives her language of gender politics another message. Although she does not explicitly embroider an appeal for a specific legislative change, putting her art on Wall Street suggests a political response to the recession and bank bailouts at that time, as well as its gendered implications. The finance industry that Wall Street is home to has a strong gender bias and this bias extends to impact the site of Wall Street itself, creating a gendered site. In a paper detailing the history of women on Wall Street, Melissa Suzanne Fisher describes the underlying reality of "Downtown Manhattan as a gendered space," explaining that "even its landscape" bears cultural and gendered significance.⁴³ To this end Fisher draws on ethnographic scholarship about Wall Street, noting that "Ethnographers have understood the formal sites of finance [...] to be spaces in which men perform hyper-competitive performances of masculinities, and have understood these performances to be part of the male drama of capital that construct women as inferior, 'other' and/or 'invisible.'"⁴⁴ However, it is not only the formal sites of finance that become gendered, but this masculinity also leaks out into the city. Fisher notes that "financiers have used the urban landscape beyond these sites," and concludes, "multiple and overlapping gendered enactments constitute the domain of finance and the city itself."⁴⁵ If the hypermasculinity of the formal sites of finance comes to color the city itself as Fisher suggests, Olek defies the "male drama of capital" that renders women invisible by asserting a physical and explicitly female or feminine presence through her art.⁴⁶

Project B was created mere months before the Occupy movement started. While Olek has no official association with Occupy, *Project B*'s placement connotes

the same political charge that fueled the Occupy Wall Street movement. Occupy was strongly corporeal in its imagery and messaging. As a movement it focused on the physical presence of human bodies in the space of Wall Street. Much of what *Project B* pushes in its assertion of concrete work and tangible quality within a space dominated by abstract, removed work is present in Occupy's assertion of the body. In an essay entitled *Bodies in Alliance and the Politics of the Street*, Judith Butler writes,

For politics to take place, the body must appear. I appear to others, and they appear to me, which means that some space between us allows each to appear. We are not simply visual phenomena for each other—our voices must be registered, and so we must be heard; rather, who we are, bodily, is already a way of being 'for' the other, appearing in ways that we cannot see, being a body for another in a way that I cannot be for myself, and so dispossessed, perspectively, by our very sociality. I must appear to others in ways for which I cannot give an account, and in this way my body establishes a perspective that I cannot inhabit. This is an important point because it is not the case that the body only establishes my own perspective; it is also that which displaces that perspective, and makes that displacement into a necessity. This happens most clearly when we think about bodies that act together. No one body establishes the space of appearance, but this action, this performative exercise happens only 'between' bodies, in a space that constitutes the gap between my own body and another's. In this way, my body does not act alone, when it acts politically. Indeed, the action emerged from the 'between.'⁴⁷

Project B is a kind of Occupation that does and does not have the presence of the body that Butler here presses as being the site of politics. In a literal sense, Olek's body appears in the capacity that her piece serves as performance art. She records her body in its appearance with a video camera. Olek also asserts what could be seen as proxy bodies. For example, she leaves a physical trace of her presence in the landscape in the form of yarn. She also uses her yarn for a sort of transfiguration, bringing the *Charging Bull* to life in a way by giving it a sort of clothing. She places crocheted yarn over the bull in what appears to be an act of warming, but warming the sculpture through insulation implies that it generates heat, as if it is alive. In this way, she asserts her body on Wall Street in a way that bears important similarities to Occupy Wall Street. Art and activism here blend

together, informing one another and doing similar projects from completely different points of view.

Olek's use of yarn in a masculine setting exposes the frailty of a gender binary. In its exposure of Wall Street's precarity, this piece also calls into question exactly why or where these systems are precarious. *Project B* was made during a time of unemployment and housing crisis on Wall Street. That is, the failings of precarious, socially constructed, and abstract financial systems that Wall Street is home to have concrete, physical manifestations. While *Project B* suggests that the stock market and capitalist systems possess a certain frailty that needs comfort, it also brings to mind the people who are most negatively affected by these systems. *Project B* is striking because it brings what looks like a domestic crocheted item, perhaps a blanket, into a public space and perhaps the only other similar sight is that of a homeless person who has no access to domestic space but who must be covered by a blanket for warmth. Olek's cozy, domestic aesthetic draws attention to the fact that while macroeconomic solutions to issues of unemployment and housing were being drafted, there were immediate physical needs among the general public that weren't being addressed and that were made urgent by the financial crisis associated with Wall Street. Olek uses the language of yarn bombing to reveal the precarity of both financial systems on Wall Street and those affected by the failings of those systems.

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Ingrid Asplund received her bachelor's degree in History of Art from Bryn Mawr College in 2014. In the several years following her undergraduate study, she served as a missionary for the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in Maryland, Virginia, and West Virginia. Ingrid is a Ph.D. student in the University of California, San Diego's Art History, Theory, and Criticism program where she specializes in contemporary art, especially installations employing light, fiber art, and other experimental media. She enjoys volunteering as a doula, beekeeping, writing about faith and feminism, and trying out new shades of lipstick.

Notes

¹ olek olek, "OLEK WALL STREET WEB," YouTube video, 2:43, December 30, 2010. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zT0HhNvDFRQ>.

² See Figure 1. I will refer to this piece primarily as *Project B* for clarity.

³ Anna Broadway, “Pink Wasn’t Always Girly,” *The Atlantic*, August 15, 2013, accessed August 14, 2018, <https://www.theatlantic.com/sexes/archive/2013/08/pink-wasnt-always-girly/278535/>.

⁴ Luisita López Torregrosa, “On Wall St., Gender Bias Runs Deep,” *The New York Times*, July 24, 2012, accessed August 17, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2012/07/25/us/25iht-letter25.html>.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Happy Famous Artists, “ab fab: merry f*ing xmass wall street!,” *Happy Famous Artists* (blog), December 27, 2010, <http://happyfamousartists.com/blog/2010/12/ab-fab-merry-fing-xmass-wall-street/>.

⁸ olek olek, “OLEK WALL STREET WEB,” YouTube video, 2:43, December 30, 2010. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zT0HhNvDFRQ>.

⁹ For more theoretical grounding on this concept see Michael Fried, “Art and Objecthood,” *Artforum* 5, no. 10 (1967).

¹⁰ Claudia Cukrov, “Crochet Work by Olek,” *PFSK*, May 9, 2009, <http://www.psfk.com/2009/05/crochet-work-by-olek.html>.

¹¹ Nicholas R. Bell, *40 under 40: Craft Futures* (Washington, DC: Renwick Gallery of the Smithsonian American Art Museum, 2012).

¹² These sculptures represent a fusion between such artists as Nick Cave, traditional performance artists, and yarn bombing. Time Out editors, “Art in Odd Places 2009,” *Time Out New York*, August 25, 2009, <http://www.timeout.com/newyork/things-to-do/art-in-odd-places-2009>.

¹³ Jowy Romano, “The World of Olek,” *Subway Art Blog* (blog), October 20, 2010. <http://subwayartblog.com/2010/10/20/the-world-of-olek/>. See-ming Lee, “Agata Olek/13th Annual DUMBO Art Under the Bridge Festival NYC 2009: Part 8 / Art Artists,” *Brooklyn Art Project*, October 16, 2009, accessed July 24, 2018, <http://www.brooklynartproject.com/profiles/blogs/agata-olek-13th-annual-dumbo>.

¹⁴ “Olek: 26 Artworks, Bio & Shows on Artsy,” *Artsy*, accessed July 28, 2018, https://www.artsy.net/artist/olek?page=1&sort=-partner_updated_at. Alex Maeland, “Astor Place Cube by Olek,” *HYPEBEAST* (blog), October 13, 2011, accessed July 31, 2018, <https://hypebeast.com/2011/10/astor-place-cube-by-olek>.

¹⁵ “Love Across the USA,” Love Across the USA, accessed July 29, 2018, <http://www.loveacrosstheusa.com/>.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ By “legitimacy” I mean that many of these artists have shown in galleries or work as full-time artists while many others knit and crochet strictly as hobbyists.

¹⁸ For a more in-depth read on the relationship between yarn bombing as a movement and feminism, see Alla Myzelev, “Creating Digital Materiality: Third Wave Feminism, PublicArt, and Yarn Bombing,” *Material Culture* 47, no. 1 (Spring 2015).

¹⁹ Maureen Daly Goggin, “Yarn Bombing: Claiming Rhetorical Citizenship in Public Spaces,” in *Contemporary Rhetorical Citizenship*, eds. Christian Kock and Lisa Villadsen (Leiden, Netherlands: Leiden University Press, 2014).

²⁰ Maureen Daly Goggin, “Yarn Bombing: Claiming Rhetorical Citizenship in Public Spaces,” in *Contemporary Rhetorical Citizenship*, ed. Christian Kock and Lisa Villadsen (Leiden, NED: Leiden University Press, 2014).

²¹ Rozsika Parker, *The Subversive Stitch: Embroidery and the Making of the Feminine* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2014).

²² Griselda Pollock writes about the way that the public space has become designated as a masculine space while the private space has become designated as the feminine realm, especially in art. See Griselda Pollock, “Modernity and the Spaces of Femininity,” in *Vision and Difference: Femininity, Feminism, and Histories of Art*, (London: Routledge, 1988), 62.

²³ Caroline Caldwell, “Yarn Bombing: You Can’t Sit with Us,” *Vandalog A Street Art Blog*, November 13, 2012, accessed July 31, 2018, <https://blog.vandalog.com/2012/11/yarn-bombing-you-cant-sit-with-us/>.

²⁴ For example, it is concerning that Caldwell’s three positive examples of yarn bombing aside from Olek are three of the only male artists working in this medium: Spidertag, Moneyless, and Hottea.

²⁵ Caroline Caldwell, “Yarn Bombing: You Can’t Sit with Us.”

²⁶ Malia Woolan, “Graffiti’s Cozy, Feminine Side,” *The New York Times*, May 18, 2011. <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/05/19/fashion/creating-graffiti-with-yarn.html>.

²⁷ Comment by Jessie Hemmons. Caroline Caldwell, “Yarn Bombing: You Can't Sit with Us.”

²⁸ “Olek: 26 Artworks, Bio & Shows on Artsy,” *Artsy*.

²⁹ NPR/TED Staff, “Magda Sayeg: What’s The Emotional Power Behind ‘Yarn Bombing?’” *NPR*, November 10, 2017, accessed July 31, 2018,

<https://www.npr.org/2017/11/10/562881943/magda-sayeg-whats-the-emotional-power-behind-yarn-bombing>.

³⁰ Although this does represent Olek's assimilation and acceptance into the world of high art, her work is still grouped with and named as "craft."

³¹ Miwon Kwon, *One Place after Another: Site-specific Art and Locational Identity* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004).

³² Di Modica's bull bears many "masculine" features: the visible maleness of the horns and its prominent testicles, its bronze-cast musculature, and its aggressive, "charging" stance all fit traditionally masculine ideals. Patrick McGeehan, "Discrimination on Wall St.? The Numbers Tell the Story," *The New York Times*, July 14, 2007, <http://www.nytimes.com/2004/07/14/business/market-place-discrimination-on-wall-st-the-numbers-tell-the->.

³³ "Writing Gender on the Walls—Women and Graffiti Art—Feminist Reflections," *The Society Pages*, January 14, 2016, accessed July 31, 2018, <https://thesocietypages.org/feminist/2016/01/14/filler-writing-gender-on-the-walls-women-and-graffiti-art/>. Chelsea Iversen, "Women Street Artists Explain Why Street Art Is So Male Dominated," *The Bold Italic*, November 29, 2016, accessed July 31, 2018, <https://thebolditalic.com/women-street-artists-explain-why-street-art-is-so-male-dominated-5e475b276686>.

³⁴ Chelsea Iversen, "Women Street Artists Explain Why Street Art Is So Male Dominated."

³⁵ Vittorio Parisi, "The Sex of Graffiti: Urban Art, Women, and 'Gender Perception': Testing Biases in the Eye of the Observer," *SAUC Journal* 1, no. 1 (November 2015), https://www.urbancreativity.org/uploads/1/0/7/2/10727553/parisi_journal2015_v1_n1.pdf.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Robert D. McFadden, "SoHo Gift to Wall St.: A 3 1/2-Ton Bronze Bull," *The New York Times*, December 16, 1989, accessed April 3, 2014, www.nytimes.com/1989/12/16/nyregion/soho-gift-to-wall-st-a-3-1-2-ton-bronze-bull.html.

³⁸ The Associated Press, "Wall St.'s Bronze Bull Moves 2 Blocks South," *The New York Times*, December 20, 1989, accessed August 17, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/1989/12/20/nyregion/wall-st-s-bronze-bull-moves-2-blocks-south.html>.

³⁹ Robert D. McFadden, "SoHo Gift to Wall St.: A 3 1/2-Ton Bronze Bull," *The New York Times*, December 16, 1989, accessed August 17, 2018,

<https://www.nytimes.com/1989/12/16/nyregion/soho-gift-to-wall-st-a-3-1-2-ton-bronze-bull.html>.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Malia Woolan, "Graffiti's Cozy, Feminine Side."

⁴³ Melissa S. Fisher, "Wall Street Women," *City & Society* 22, no. 2 (2012), DOI:10.1215/9780822395799-001.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Judith Butler, "Bodies in Alliance and the Politics of the Street," *European Institute for Progressive Cultural Policies*, September 2011, accessed May 1, 2014 <http://eipcp.net/transversal/1011/butler/en>.