

Knitting goes guerrilla

► **The group was founded** in January 2010 by Hana Nováková

► **Previous yambombing targets** have included trees on Strossmayerovo náměstí, a water hydrant in Stromovka Park and a lamppost outside the Interior Ministry

► **Public knitting happenings** are organized regularly and publicized through Facebook (search for Guerrilla Knitters). For more information, contact the organizer directly at hannah.xx@seznam.cz

GOING ROGUE

THERE IS GUERRILLA WAR, GUERRILLA MARKETING AND THEN THERE ARE THE GUERRILLA **KNITTERS**

Judging from the graffiti covering its buildings, Prague already has a fair share of would-be street artists. Most arm themselves with aerosol cans — or they did, that is, until the arrival of the Guerrilla Knitters.

Since beginning operations back in January, the rebel “yarnbombers” have left their mark all over the Golden City by creating a series of eye-catching, impractical covers for lampposts, statues, benches and trees.

“Guerrilla,” as I see the term, means doing things in a different way, to put something into a new context,” explains founder Hana Nováková. “Guerrilla for me is knitting on road fences or something in a public space.”

Yarnbombing originated in the United States with groups such as Texas-based Knitta, which frustrated with their piles of unfinished sweaters, adopted hip-hop style monikers such as Loop-Dogg, P-Knitty and The Notorious N.I.T. and turned their knitting into a seditious gesture, juxtaposing craft and vandalism. They inspired others across the world, including Nováková, to form their own copycat yarnstorming cells.

This wasn't Nováková's first foray into reclaiming neglected public space, however, having previously set up a group of guerrilla gardeners. The mission of these green-thumbed partisans was also to perk up neglected corners of the city but this time with illegally planted marigolds and sunflowers.

“The gardening season was over at that time — guerrilla gardening became my love that year — and I was thinking what I would do the whole winter. When I saw a picture of guerrilla knitting, I knew that was it,” Nováková said.

The Guerrilla Knitters' first piece of woolly art, a series of “tags” on road fences in Holešovice, was simple enough but taught them a vital lesson: Don't install anything that is easy to remove. By morning, the cosies had disappeared.

While the unit's activities are usually covert, their biggest operation to date took place in broad daylight outside a major Prague landmark: the National Theater. The equine sculptures which adorn the roof didn't end up with Day-Glo hoof warmers or stripy bobble hats; instead, the Guerrillas were asked to give the main entrance to the Nová scéna (New Stage), the 1980s extension designed by architect Josef Svoboda, a fiber-based facelift.

The reason? As of January this year, the building, previously the base of *Laterna magika*, came back under the management of the National Theater, which organized a series of artistic events in an attempt to rebrand the venue and help it emerge with its own fresh identity.

“I decided to go freestyle and open the creative space for other people — for everybody,” Nováková

said. “Everyone had the possibility to have their piece at Národní třída: It was a happening.”

If the group's aim was to attract attention, they certainly succeeded: numerous curious passers-by stopped not just to ask what they were up to but to exchange stories of what knitting meant to them. While only a few may have dared to pick up needles in public and actually join in, many more went on their way with a smile on their faces.

The installation took the form of a giant multicolored patchwork cover for the sphere at the center of the iconic eye sculpture above the theater's doorway.

“It isn't perfect, and we didn't have time to finish it as it started to rain heavily, but we are pleased with it,” Nováková said. “It fits the place, and it could help to engage people who have never been there or are not even aware that something like the theater exists.”

Imperfect it may be, the quirky hand-crafted embellishment, as of press time, is still in place and will remain “until it falls off,” according to Nováková.

Events take place regularly and are publicized through Facebook. The group has more than 300 online members, though most of these are just fans.

“I consider guerrilla knitting a fresh and fun approach to an old craft, and the Internet is great for sharing information and contacting each other,” said Jana Kománková, a self-confessed knitting fanatic.

Members cite numerous motivations for going rogue with their knitting.

“I became part of guerrilla knitting to discard prejudices,” said a knitter named Adam. “Unfortunately, knitting is still connected with old ladies, but it is different to knit socks or create something unconventional.”

Lenka Tinková believes yarnbombing provides her with a valuable outlet for self-expression.

“Art is something that comes from your heart. In this case, guerrilla knitting is art for me because you don't make sweaters or socks,” she said. “You are trying to express your feelings with colors and make others stop and smile.”

“I wrote, I studied literature, but I feel now, as I'm at a productive age, I need to create something tangible,” Nováková added.

Tangible though the results may be, the purpose behind “soft graffiti” is not to create something practical but to add a little novelty to life's humdrum routine along with the chance to reconnect with the urban environment.

Indeed, it is fleeting and irreverent, but ultimately a more meaningful gift than that misshapen reindeer sweater from Aunt Agatha.

“Stop knitting for children, grandchildren, brothers or sisters, wives and husbands, and start knitting for everyone,” urge the Guerrillas in their motto. “The world will be more beautiful to look at as well as to touch.”



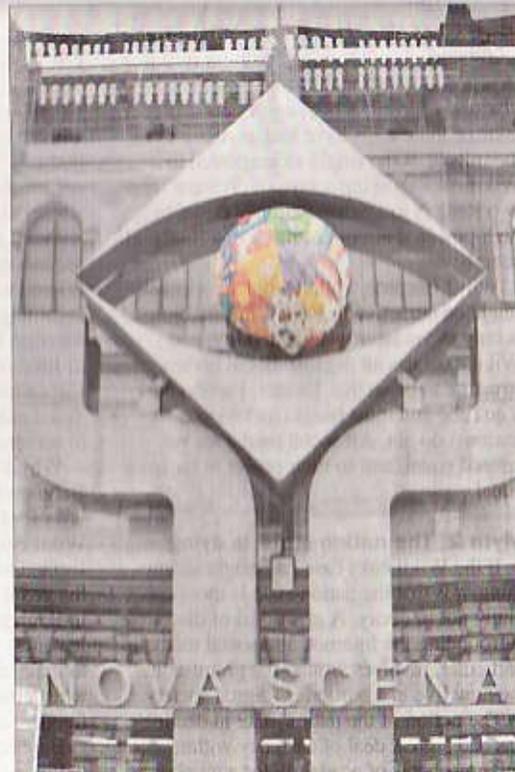
COURTESY PHOTO

Lightposts, road fences and other quotidian items are frequent targets of “yarnbombings.”



COURTESY PHOTO

The group's guerrilla operations occur on short



WALTER NOVAK/The Prague Post

The group's highest-profile work remains in place outside the National Theater's second stage.



COURTESY PHOTO

Knitters had the authorities' blessing as