



Decorating the dunes

GRAFFITI GRANNYS BRIGHTEN UP CORNWALL
WITH THEIR COLOURFUL YARN-BOMBING

Words by **Yayeri van Baarsen**, photographs by **Mike Newman**

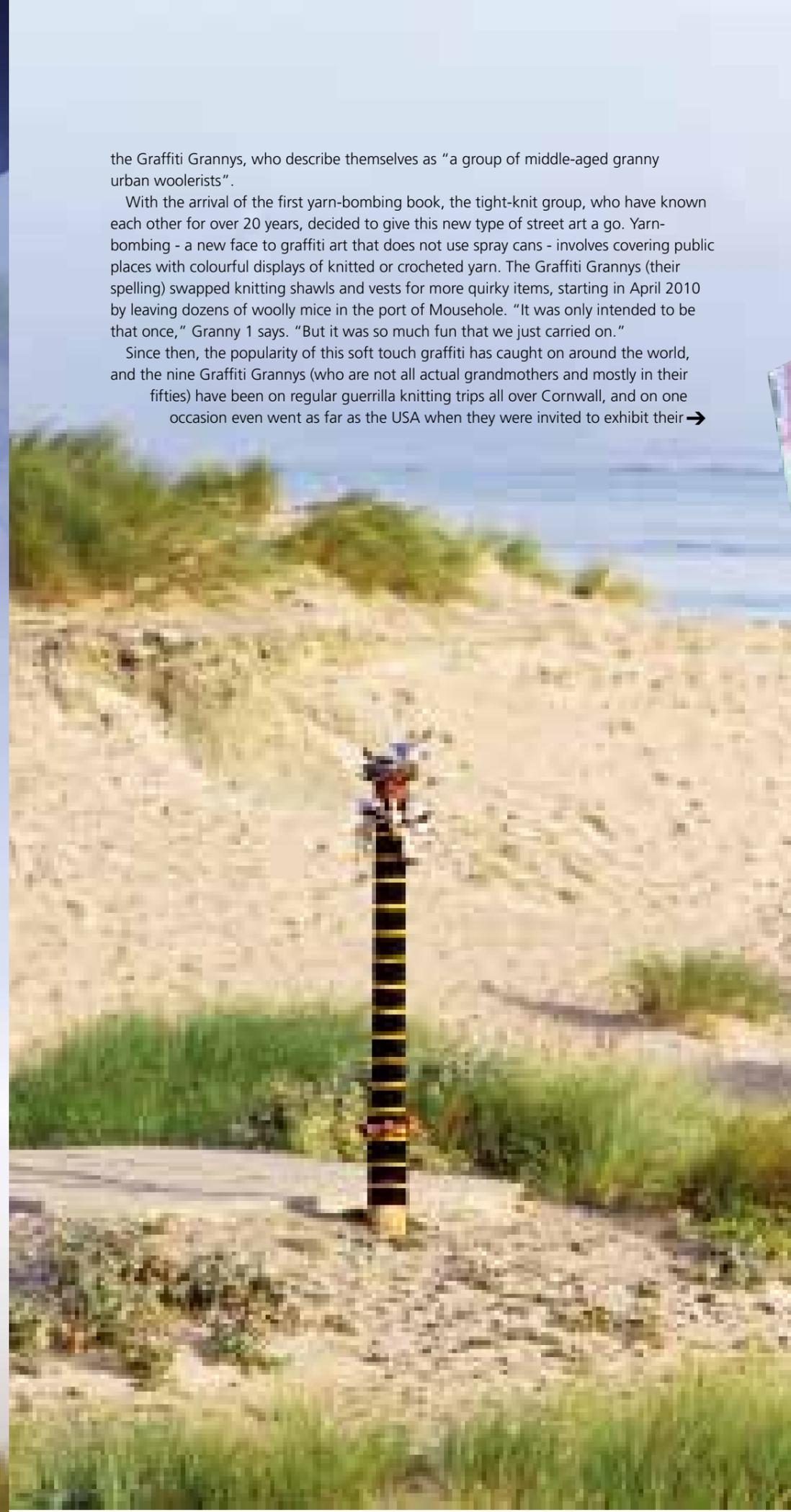
It's still dark outside when my alarms ring. I wonder whether I should wear some camouflage clothes with a balaclava, but in the end settle for a warm sweater instead. It's foggy on the road to Gwithian; the mist makes it impossible to see more than a few hundred yards ahead, therefore creating the perfect conditions for this morning's mission.

I'm slightly worried – is there some secret code I should use to identify myself? But the beach car park is desolate apart from one other car. In a far corner of the car park, I finally meet them:

the Graffiti Grannys, who describe themselves as “a group of middle-aged granny urban woolerists”.

With the arrival of the first yarn-bombing book, the tight-knit group, who have known each other for over 20 years, decided to give this new type of street art a go. Yarn-bombing - a new face to graffiti art that does not use spray cans - involves covering public places with colourful displays of knitted or crocheted yarn. The Graffiti Grannys (their spelling) swapped knitting shawls and vests for more quirky items, starting in April 2010 by leaving dozens of woolly mice in the port of Mousehole. “It was only intended to be that once,” Granny 1 says. “But it was so much fun that we just carried on.”

Since then, the popularity of this soft touch graffiti has caught on around the world, and the nine Graffiti Grannys (who are not all actual grandmothers and mostly in their fifties) have been on regular guerrilla knitting trips all over Cornwall, and on one occasion even went as far as the USA when they were invited to exhibit their →



woolly art on Vogue Knitting Live. They have become quite the hype, nowadays boasting over 3,788 followers on Facebook. "We never expected this popularity; we just plot on in our own little way," Granny 3 says. "We're definitely no fame and fortune seekers - we want to stay anonymous."

Therefore, they make their yarn-bombing trips either late at night or very early in the morning, like this one among the dunes of Gwithian. The Grannys have come well prepared with wool, scissors and even a ladder, which gets us strange looks from incidental passers-by. When we come to an old pipe extruding from the sand, they get to work. They are speaking in knitting jargon, incomprehensible to the outsider, while wrapping the pipe in Cornish colours. The whole project runs with the precision of a military operation: scissors change hands in the bitter cold and Granny 2, standing on the ladder, places the knitted nest on the pole while the others sew on pre-crocheted seagulls.

The Cornish Graffiti Grannys differ from other guerrilla knitting groups because their objects can be taken away – they even have tags attached to them saying 'please take me'. "Other yarn bombers just cover objects to brighten up dull places, but we make stuff people can take home if they want

to," Granny 3 explains. "Eventually, everything we make will vanish, but we always take photos to keep a record. Hopefully people will just look at it and leave it alone for a few days, so as many people as possible can enjoy our knitting," she adds.

With their anonymous yarn-bombing trips, the secret knitting society aims to bring happiness and make the world a brighter place. Their mission, if you could call it that, is to make people smile. "We're not trying to change the world, or do this for political reasons like some yarn-bombing groups; we just love knitting and crochet. We like it when people enjoy finding our knitting and let us know," Granny 2 says. "It's just about making people smile - there's no more to it."

Believe it or not, there are people who don't approve of this innocent yarn graffiti. "Generally, comments are very positive, but some people left quite abusive remarks on Facebook after we decorated the Merry Maiden stones, claiming they are listed ancient monuments that should not be vandalised," Granny 1 explains. "Since then, we stay clear of anything religious and just stick to natural places."

The end result in Gwithian dunes is amazing; the sun rises and a flock of real seagulls flies past just as the Grannys are attaching the last knitted birds to the old pipe. To me, it seems like an amazing natural artwork, complementing - even improving - the sight of the already gorgeous Cornish dunes. Granny 1 is more down to earth about it, though: "It's just covering a messy old pipe," she says.

When all yarn-bombing is complete, a couple of early dog walkers stroll past, looking slightly confused and certainly impressed by the colourful spectacle. The lady comes closer, looks intently at the seagulls dangling from the nest and takes some photos. "They are absolutely gorgeous; seeing this has made my day," she says, and smiles. Mission accomplished. 🧶

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