



JOOLS GILSON AND NICOLA MOFFAT

# TEXTILES, COMMUNITY AND CONTROVERSY

THE KNITTING MAP

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# Textiles, Community and Controversy

*The Knitting Map*

Edited by  
**Jools Gilson**  
**Nicola Moffat**

BLOOMSBURY VISUAL ARTS  
LONDON • NEW YORK • OXFORD • NEW DELHI • SYDNEY

BLOOMSBURY VISUAL ARTS  
Bloomsbury Publishing Plc  
50 Bedford Square, London, WC1B 3DP, UK  
1385 Broadway, New York, NY 10018, USA

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First published in Great Britain 2019

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A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Gilson, Jools, editor. | Moffat, Nicola, editor.

Title: Textiles, community and controversy : The knitting map / edited by Jools Gilson and Nicola Moffat.

Description: New York : Bloomsbury Visual Arts, Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2019. | Includes  
bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2018037984 | ISBN 9781350027527 (pb) | ISBN 9781350027510 (hb)

Subjects: LCSH: Fiberwork—History—21st century. | Art and society—History—21st century. | half/angel  
(Firm). Knitting map.

Classification: LCC N6498.F54 T49 2019 | DDC 746.09—dc23 LC record available  
at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2018037984>

ISBN:	HB:	978-1-3500-2751-0
	PB:	978-1-3500-2752-7
	ePDF:	978-1-3500-2753-4
	ebook:	978-1-3500-2750-3

Typeset by Lachina Creative, Inc.

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*For a thousand knitters and more . . .*

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# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I'm writing this in May 2018, sitting in a gazebo in Fota Gardens in County Cork. It's a short and pretty train ride from Cork City Centre to get here. From the tall house on Summerhill North, where I walk down four flights of stairs, I then trip across the road and down more steps to the station. Just a few hundred metres from here across the wide lawns, and through the sounds of birdsong, I performed for one of *The Knitting Map's* monthly 'knit ins', in July 2004. We held twelve of these events that year, performances in public spaces in the city, or close by, followed by a knit-in, where our growing group of knitters would sit and knit with us. My performances were playful, sometimes raucous affairs that cajoled our audiences with wool and knitting in provocative and twinkling ways. We did this on the street, on buses, in shopping centres, even on the back of motorbikes. We had a lot of fun, and I got to wear some pretty extraordinary knitted outfits, made mostly by Kate O'Brien and Susan Tector Sands (see Chapter 9). In that year (2004), we were preparing to launch *The Knitting Map* itself, in January 2005, and we needed knitters to do that. So, in 2004, when I also got the train to Fota Gardens from Cork City, in an outfit knitted from cotton yarn in shades of pale blue and turquoise, I came here in the sunshine and wove a performance in the gardens beside the big house here, winding children into its games, and finding ways for playfulness to work on the possibilities of knitting, on the literal as well as the wide heft and history of all its gestures. Unbeknown to those children dancing with me on the lawn, I was seeding revolution. I was proposing that playfulness might be a political act, and that it was possible to do this by reworking knitting as literal fact and resonant metaphor. There are children here today on this late spring morning, pre-school and toddling with their mothers. I watch them as I look up from typing, tripping between the irises.

In 2018, it seems a very long time ago that I danced here at Fota, when I was innocent of what would happen with *The Knitting Map*, and how it might become a cypher for how textile art tangles with community and controversy. This book is a significant marker in the journey of *The Knitting Map*, even as its story continues. Here, at the book's beginning, I write to thank the many communities of people who have contributed to *The Knitting Map* project in all its iterations. I thank you for getting us here, for making it possible that the vibrant voices here written, and all those who contributed to its making, might entwine to make a solid thing you can hold in your hands and pore over, or something you peer at online. I write here all the thank-yous that fourteen years can hold.

Firstly to Richard Povall, who led *The Knitting Map* project with me from 2003 to 2005. Richard was the Codirector of our company, *half/angel*, from 1996 to 2006.

Composer, sound artist, filmmaker, photographer and friend, Richard was also an alchemist of technology and the person behind the technology that drove *The Knitting Map*. Thank you, Richard, for all you gave to make *The Knitting Map* happen.

*The Knitting Map* was commissioned in 2003 by the Executive of the European Capital of Culture: Cork 2005, specifically Mary McCarthy (now Director of the Crawford Art Gallery in Cork), Tony Sheehan (now Director of Triskel Arts Centre in Cork) and Thomas McCarthy (poet and Cork City librarian). Other Cork 2005 staff who worked closely with us on the project were Tracy McCormack (Director of Project Management) and Valerie Byrne (Project Manager, now Director of the National Sculpture Factory in Cork). *half/angel* had a busy two years from 2003 to 2005, and my thanks to all those who worked for the company during that time on *The Knitting Map*: Kate O'Brien (Project Manager), Susan Tector Sands (Project Coordinator), Michelle Whelan (Office Manager), Elizabeth O'Dea (Administrator), Margaret Kennedy (Administrator) and Maureen O'Rourke (intern). Thank you to the following community groups and schools who worked closely with *The Knitting Map* project in 2005: L'Arche, Blarney Girls School, Cois Tine, Colaíste Choilm, Cope Foundation, ICA (Irish Countrywomen's Association), Mná Feasa (Domestic Violence Project), NCIB (National Council for the Blind of Ireland), National Learning Network, Niche (Northside Community Health Initiative) and St Luke's Women's Group. Thank you to Bernadette Sweeney, who photographed *The Knitting Map* performances during 2004, and to Enrica Bertolini, who designed the knitting amphitheatre that housed the project. Our group of core knitters included Marian O'Sullivan, Mel Murphy, Betty Flynn, Mary Norris, Lesley Stothers, Elsie O'Connell, Eileen Henrick, and Helle Krammer. Thank you also to David Rawson, Marketing Manager at Sirdar (now retired), who facilitated the wool sponsorship for *The Knitting Map*, and to Kieran McCarthy (Independent Councillor, Cork City Council) for his unstinting support and for publishing an oral history of *The Knitting Map* (McCarthy 2005). Research and development for *The Knitting Map* was also supported by an Arts Council (Ireland) Multi-Disciplinary Artist's Bursary (2003).

After 2005, storage for *The Knitting Map* was initially provided by Cork City Arts Office, and my thanks to Liz Meaney (now Arts Director at the Arts Council, Ireland) for facilitating this. John Fitzgerald (Librarian, Boole Library University College Cork [UCC]) and Crónán O'Doibhlin (Head of Research Collections & Communications, Boole Library, UCC) also provided storage for the work for a number of years, and my thanks to them for this. The work is now in private storage.

*The Knitting Map* exhibition at Cork City Hall in 2006 was facilitated by Ali Robertson of the Cork Midsummer Festival (now Executive Producer at Kneehigh Theatre, UK). Thank you to Jeri Robertson (then Chair of Visual Arts, Millersville University, PA) whose invitation to exhibit the work in Pennsylvania in 2007 got us across an ocean and into the Ganser Gallery. My thanks to Margaret Kennedy, who was our project assistant for this exhibition. This 2007 exhibition was generously supported by Culture Ireland, Arts Council Ireland and the Arts Faculty at UCC.

My sincere thanks to Fiona Kearney, Director of The Glucksman, as well as Chris Clarke (Senior Curator, Exhibitions) and Tadhg Crowley (Senior Curator, Education) for their careful curation of *The Knitting Map* as well as the documentation of the controversy for the exhibition at The Glucksman in 2015 (*The Knitting Map: Art, community and*



*controversy 2005–2015*). Thanks also to Michael Waldron, who was my research assistant for this exhibition, and to Tomás Tyner (UCC photographer). This book arose out of a symposium held in The Glucksman during this exhibition, made possible through the support of the Glucksman and with grants from the President's Fund and Boole Library Visiting Speakers' Fund, as well as a conference grant from the School of English, all at UCC. Particular thanks to my co-editor, Nicola Moffat.

This book was generously supported by a Publications Grant from the National University of Ireland, as well as a grant from the Strategic Research Fund (Research & Innovation) and a Research Publication Grant from the School of English, both at UCC. Visual research was provided by Gillian Walsh. Thank you also to our editors at Bloomsbury who worked on this book: Belinda Campbell, Faith Marsland and Pari Thompson.

The art critic and scholar Deborah Barkun wrote the catalogue essay for the exhibition at the Ganser Gallery, Pennsylvania, in 2007, and since then we have collaborated on several essays on *The Knitting Map*. One of these – *Choreographed Cartography* (Gilson & Barkun 2011) – surprised us by winning the 2010 Founding Presidents Award from the Textile Society of America. We also presented on *The Knitting Map* at conferences at the University of Nebraska and California State University. Thank you, Deborah, for a decade of continued belief in the value and importance of *The Knitting Map* and for proposing that we write and present on the work internationally.

I owe particular thanks to my colleague Róisín O'Gorman, whose belief in *The Knitting Map* buoyed me through years of ongoing media controversy. She unhesitatingly felt the work was important, and when I didn't believe her, her continued encouragement to write about the controversy, to focus on exhibiting the work, was critical to the 2012 *Performance Research* article (reprinted here), the 2015 exhibition at the Glucksman in Cork, and this book. Fiona Kearney (Director of the Glucksman) also believed in this project enough to suggest that what was an expanding catalogue should become a book.

Thank you.

To Penny Rae (formerly Director of Triskel Arts Centre, Cork), whose intelligence, experience, laughter and bike riding in 2004 and 2005 made me glad and wiser in all kinds of ways.

To my family, who have grown up with *The Knitting Map* as background. As well as everything else, I became a mother in 2005, adopting five-month-old Natalie from Guatemala in October. When we exhibited at the City Hall the following year, she came and played on its surface, delighted at the colours. The year after that, in 2007, we exhibited the work in Pennsylvania, and when I travelled to work on the exhibition, it was also the first time I left my daughter. When I returned to Cork, our family immediately left again to travel to Guatemala to meet our daughter's birth brother, then eight months old. The Pennsylvania exhibition was shot through with thoughts of my daughter and her brother, who I hoped would become our son. One of the women who came to the exhibition in Pennsylvania (Anne Rogers) sent Natalie a beautiful book – a fairytale about quilts and quilting with an image towards



**Figure 0.1** Natalie Gilson standing on *The Knitting Map* at the exhibition in Millennium Hall, Cork, Ireland, June 2006. half/angel.

its end that looked just like *The Knitting Map* (Brumbeau & de Marcken 2001). Anne sent it with dozens of colourful stamps on the envelope, so that Natalie pored over the cacophony of colours when it arrived. The book was accompanied by a quilt book, so that you could make the quilts from the fairytale. When our son was two years old and still stuck in Guatemala, I invited neighbours and friends to make one of these quilts for him, because I couldn't believe that he was still not in our arms. Róisín O'Gorman, with the fervour of possession, took up the task of finishing that quilt, and she and I spent evenings and days piecing together cotton shapes – blue fishes and deep reds – sitting together late into the night in front of sewing machines in Ballymacoda and Cork: the making of my family is all tangled up with textiles of the knitted and quilted kind. At the heart of this making is my resilient and steady husband, Vittorio Bufacchi, who has been by my side from the beginning, when I first dreamed up the idea of *The Knitting Map*. For fifteen years he has enthused and listened, reassured and responded coolly, when I was full of indignation and exasperation, or just sorrow, and latterly joy. We have a teenager now, and a boy almost twelve, who make our family a place of busy discussion and debate, of meal-making, and film-discussing, and chivvying to school and activities. Since we are an Italian father, a British mother, and two Guatemalans living in Ireland, we know all about knitting together family. And without them all, I could not have made this book and all that came before it. Thank you.

Finally, to all the knitters who knitted *The Knitting Map* in 2005: This book is for you.

Jools Gilson

**M**y foremost thanks goes to Jools Gilson, who graciously invited me to join efforts with her in making this book a reality and whose expertise and insight gave me a new fascination with both maps and knitting. I am very grateful for the opportunity to have worked with Jools, as well as with the book's contributors, whose varying experiences, views, and skills I have found to be rich, astonishing, and enchanting. Thank you all for teaching me so much about the importance of material objects, of community, and of making. I would also like to add further thanks to Jools and Richard Povall, whose hard work, bravery, and poetic imaginations made *The Knitting Map* a possibility in the first place.

I would like also to thank my aunt, Linda van Duyker, whose constant and consistent encouragement gave me the confidence to keep writing. Thanks also to my cousin, Marian van Duyker, for helping me to locate Linda's haiku, which is included in my chapter, and to my father, Russell Moffat, for helping me with place names I had forgotten. Thank you to Paul Casey, Shara McCallum, Anna Monk, and the wonderful readers at Ó Bheál (Cork's longest running open mic night) for your encouragement and feedback on the creative sections of my chapter.

Finally, I would like to thank the women of Cork—those who knitted, both publicly and privately; those whose voices have rung out with mine in joy, frustration, laughter, anger, and love; those whose hands and hearts have touched and are touched; and to the makers, every one of you, thank you!

Nicola Moffat

# PREFACE

**O**f all the projects that came to us at the offices of the 2005 European Capital of Culture in Cork, half/angel's *The Knitting Map* has proved to be the most deeply imagined and the most enduring. Yes, there were other ambitious projects, the Munster Literature Centre's astonishing *European Translation Series*, the Crawford Gallery's James Barry exhibition and the National Sculpture Factory's cerebral *Caucus*, but *The Knitting Map* delivered with elegance and plenitude; it was, to quote its creator, Jools Gilson, 'a thing made slowly together (*thousands of us*)' (Gilson 2012: 18).

Here, in this timely and necessary publication, new voices of critique as well as the veteran voices of remembrance, are gathered together. Fionna Barber's brilliant and complex essay locates the half/angel project within the contested aesthetic of Irish landscape art and its political imperatives. Barber captures this new moment in durational art beautifully: 'the constant clacking of needles, fragments of conversation and laughter, the smell and feel of wool.' Richard Povall, an important 'dance-tech' expert of our era and co-imaginer of the project, gives a haunting guide to the thought processes and professional practice that helped engineer this new map of our Cork world. Povall, always idealistic and romantic, had the unenviable task of filtering a knitting pattern from inputs of movement, traffic and weather. At times, his control desk in the crypt of St Luke's Church looked like the bridge of a spaceship under attack. To attempt to speak with him at such moments was merely to exchange complaints with a worried skipper.

Jessica Hemmings' decision to see knitting as a noun, rather than a verb, is an insightful one. It allows us to understand that, as artists, what we do is where we dwell. She explains that 'textiles and a general level of knowledge shared by the public about textile techniques have made them useful components of participatory art strategies.' And this was precisely the genius of *The Knitting Map*: it called a massive, unprecedented community into action. Not just working-class women, but intellectuals, teachers, academics, musicians, serious persons from a most serious, passionate city, all answered Jools and Richard's call to the workstations. While I was painfully aware of

much publicised hostility to this project, the Cork ‘slagging’ about a big cardigan for the poor of Cork, the perceived favouritism of a youngish 2005 programme team for expensive new-fangled notions, I was also aware of an immense communal power that became more powerful with every Cork 2005 day that passed. This project created its own vortex, its own quiet-spoken, superior brilliance. Kieran McCarthy’s essay here captures some of that firm and formal intimacy of a truly communal artwork. That this could happen speaks volumes for Jools Gilson’s and Richard Povall’s confidence and faith. Their belief made it happen; before a thing can be, it must be imagined.

‘So here is the affect of failure. It hurts. It is an injury’, Jools writes, still remembering the hostility and a perceived lack of buy-in by the powers-that-were in a small European Capital of Culture. Yet even her own memories of the project are saturated with the stains and dyes of the poetry she achieved – with Amethyst and Heather, Glencoe and Naturelle, Biscuit and Sandstorm. All the colours and tones that she would transform into a wide, ambitious, embracing work of art. What Cork had given in programme funding it withheld in affection. I think this is often the trade-off in a huge public project, certainly in Ireland, where the advocacy of one artist is seen as an exclusion of some other good person. These feelings and atavisms are always at play in the politics of arts funding, but I don’t think a city or an arts community can allow these political amino acids to freeze decision-making. As programmers in Cork 2005 we insisted on a process and we lived by it. Lucky for us, one of our flagship projects was this communal and mystical *The Knitting Map*. The *Map* itself is a thing made, a great fabric that captured time, a haughty silent structure. And when I looked at it again in *The Glucksman* at UCC, I understood its muteness, that brilliant knitters had created something absolutely extremist in its non-verbal nature. More than a decade later, still, even still, I can understand its modernist verbal frugality, its enduring, silent power in an Irish city that was always full of the most fabulous talk. Here in half/angel’s wool was all the murmur and innuendo of taxis, traffic lights and rain.

Thomas McCarthy, Poet  
Cork, Ireland, 2017

# INTRODUCTION

## Mapping this book: Here be monsters

*Nicola Moffat*

Why is *The Knitting Map* still important? The essays that we have gathered here (remembering that, like stitches, people can be gathered) demonstrate the *Map*'s critical importance, but also its social, artistic and material importance. Because of its many meanings, the authors of this book have found themselves mimicking, in a way, the *Map*'s performativity, unable to remain strictly academic in their writing; and so, the essays incorporate memoir, biography, letters, poetry, reportage, interviews, photography and storytelling. Each mode of telling, moreover, has its critical importance, especially regarding the making of meaning – of the *Map*'s meaning, but also in a wider sense of understanding how it is that meaning is made and the world mapped into easily definable areas of knowledge. The thread that winds its way through each chapter, stringing together these remarkable pearls (or purls) of wisdom, is, of course, *The Knitting Map*, but there are also other threads present, intertwining and co-mingling, explaining and simultaneously disrupting the *Map*, its making, and its trace. As Jools noted in the run-up to the 2015 Symposium, the “story of what happened to the map is as much a part of the meaning of the map as the map itself” (qtd. in English, 2015). It is this *Map*, the knitted remains of Cork City of Culture 2005, its different strands of meaning and its legacy, that we weave together here.

What is, or was, *The Knitting Map*? These essays attempt in their individual ways to give it body, grappling with the many voices that have gone into its making and into making its meaning, exploring its conception, its birth, its brief life and its (un)death. Arguably, part of the *Map*'s importance is its continued resistance to categorization, its resistance to embodying a rigorously defined meaning: the *Map* is and was a community



arts project, a testament to women's cultural work, the outline of a choreographic score, a memory bank of life stories; it is a material object, but it is also a ghost, and one which summons our own personal ghosts when we are in its presence; it is both the thing itself and its remains. It is because of such resistance to categorization that *The Knitting Map* can be viewed as monstrous. While it may seem odd to describe *The Knitting Map* as monstrous—it is, after all, a community project that was knitted chiefly by older women from a small city in Southern Ireland—it can be argued that the *Map*'s monstrosity is precisely the reason why it continues to be important. Monsters don't arrive for the fun of it (or, as we say in Cork, “for the craic”). Monsters, by their very definition, arrive as warnings or signs pointing towards an unknown future (‘monster,’ from the Latin *monstrum*, meaning portent, sign, or omen), and thus cannot be ignored. Monsters are also creatures traditionally viewed with suspicion, dread, and awe because they defy societal rules and transgress the boundaries to which we typically adhere, including the boundaries of time and meaning. Jacques Derrida characterizes the monster as an unknown thing that unexpectedly arrives at the shoreline or doorway (limn), defying meaning, destabilizing defined categories, and confounding ways of knowing particular to a community; it is a “formless form” (Derrida, 1989: 80) that is “unnameable because it is unknowable; it def[ies] semantics as much as ontology” (Derrida 1994: 6). *The Knitting Map* arrived in Cork by way of its monstrous birth in the crypt of St. Luke's Church, resisting meaning by confounding local modes of knowledge and destabilizing the apparent fixity of the local population's preconceptions regarding cartography, art, performance, women's crafts, individualism, community work, status, funding and labour.

The monster only ceases to be strange, to be unknowable, once it has suitably adapted its environment into something habitable; as Derrida notes, it can, at first, “only be mis-known (*méconnue*), that is, unrecognized and misunderstood. It can only be recognized afterwards, when it has become normal or the norm” (1989: 79). In the thirteen years since *The Knitting Map*'s conception, has Cork become a place in which this monster may now be welcomed? The jury is still out, but what is evident is a continued adaptation of the city into something other than what it was in its City of Culture year. This transformation has occurred in part due to *The Knitting Map*, where its presence – lurking just out of earshot, in the corner of the eye – marks perhaps a time when the city might become its home. That time is not, however, this time. For now, we must continue to be haunted by this great woolly apparition, as it clamors its dissatisfaction from storage in nearby Kinsale, Co. Cork. The chapters in this collection all interact with the *Map*'s monstrosity, whether or not this is explicitly realized by each author. Joanne Turney, for instance, notes that the *Map*, as well as the act and product of knitting themselves, can be viewed as instances of the “monstrous feminine”, which Barbara Creed explains as the mutability, lack and excesses of (and symbolized by) the female form (1993). The subversiveness of knitting and knitted objects within the context of Contemporary Art, where knitting refuses to remain the homely craft of the domestic sphere and instead invades the public (masculine) arena of High Art, is also discussed by Turney, as well as by Lucy Lippard, Fionna Barber and Jessica Hemmings in their chapters. For Rachel Andrews,

the transgression of feminine crafts into the public realm remains a source of discomfort, where she links these homely arts to the subordination of women and their relegation into domesticity, and her chapter reflects on the painful memories of being forced to knit as a school girl in an Ireland that deemed this her only suitable work.

Andrews' recollections of this early rejection of feminine craft is interwoven with an analysis of the Irish media's reaction to *The Knitting Map*, both during its Culture year and afterwards, where she pointedly warns against viewing 'the' media as singular, and reminds us that, like Mary Shelley's famous monster, it is an assemblage of disparate parts. Sarah Foster's chapter also interacts with the media's criticism of the City of Culture project, connecting the frustration and disappointment of Cork's citizenry with the overall management of the Culture year to the scapegoating of the *Map*. Both Andrews and Foster quote Katie Mythen's derisive *Inside Cork* opinion piece, which names the *Map* an "absolute Frankensteinian creation" (2005), using Mythen's disparagement as an indication of the media's and the public's view of the project. Like Turney, Foster links this to the public's perception of artistic value, where knitting is viewed as outdated, silly and embarrassing, and not at all worthy either of funding or being taken seriously as art. That Mythen explicitly links the *Map* to monstrosity is, however, interesting, especially considering the particular monster to which she refers. While *The Knitting Map*'s patchworked appearance certainly recalls Frankenstein's careful suturing of the many different body parts that constitute his creation, Mythen's comparison is unwittingly correct: not realizing that her reasons for rejecting the *Map* are akin to humankind's rejection of the Creature, Mythen cannot see that neither the *Map*'s nor the Creature's monstrosity is innate, but rests instead on the misconceptions of those who come into contact with it.

Deborah Barkun's chapter illustrates this neatly by contrasting reactions by the media and public in Ireland with those abroad. Barkun charts *The Knitting Map*'s only journey away from Cork, to Lancaster County, Pennsylvania in 2007, intertwining this with a critical evaluation of the *Map*'s reported "loss" in 2012, which she reads as an attempted erasure of the *Map* and a fate typical of women's art. Here, *The Knitting Map*'s monstrosity is due not only to its excess (being both gargantuan of size and an excessively feminine transgression of the traditionally masculine arena of art), but also to its lack, which Barkun presents as its alleged loss – a hole in its own narrative. Both Richard Povall and Róisín O'Gorman, meanwhile, point out the *Map*'s Cyborgian elements, demonstrating that its monstrosity also lies in its birth, which was animated by combining the materiality of wool with the technologies of CCTV, cartography, and meteorology. The Cyborg is a familiar figure in Popular Culture and has been since the publication of *Frankenstein* (1818); its monstrosity lies in its hybrid form, where it disturbs the boundaries between the corrosiveness of flesh and the apparent immutability of machines, between the material and the immaterial. What survives of *The Knitting Map*, that is, its woollen archive, may also one day succumb to the ravages of time, which is, I think, why we attempt to record its journey here, digitally and in print. As Peggy Phelan writes, "[a]t the heart of mimicry is a fear that the match will not hold and the 'thing itself' (you, me, love, art) will disappear before we can reproduce it. So we hurl ourselves headlong toward copy machines, computers, newspapers, cloning labs" (1997: 12). The *Map*'s

hybridity is also made manifest by the multiplicity of its birth, where literally thousands of hands helped to deliver it, and this is reflected by the varied responses in this book to the *Map* as both object and signifier – because, of course, any map can be considered as both of these things. For O’Gorman, the *Map* archives a complicated choreography, one which was performed unwittingly by the public in 2005 – another reason, perhaps, why the people of Cork feel haunted by the *Map*, as it charts the unpracticed steps we danced during its Culture year. Povall’s essay maps a more personal choreography through his journey as one half of half/angel, the performance company responsible for the *Map*’s conceptualization, and beyond, finding his own wings steady for further flight into his career as a digital artist.

The implied infinity of the digital, as well as its cost-effectiveness means that fewer and fewer material objects need to be produced—among them books, music recordings, film, and maps—especially where the object’s materiality is generally not thought to be necessary to its use. *The Knitting Map* has invited many of this book’s authors to reflect on the materiality of objects such as maps, especially regarding the ‘use’ of these material items in relation to both their and our physical transience. Thus, Kieran McCarthy’s chapter explores the different meanings *The Knitting Map*’s makers have ascribed to material objects such as those that make up a landscape or a city’s topography, as well as those that form our more immediate surroundings at home and at work, and includes testaments of the knitters’ material connections to Cork City and County and to the knitted garments they have made. Both Hemmings’ and Turney’s chapters argue for the importance of material objects in making and maintaining bonds between people, singularly and as communities, while my own navigates between the loss of materiality and its ghostly remains when a loved one dies. Like the physical vestiges left by those we love once they have passed on, *The Knitting Map* is at once material and immaterial, at once present and absent, its materiality haunting us by acting as a supplement for the bodies we’ve lost. Speaking of this kind of haunting, Derrida writes that “the specter is a paradoxical incorporation, the becoming-body, a certain phenomenal and carnal form of the spirit. It becomes, rather, some ‘thing’ that remains difficult to name: neither soul nor body, and both one and the other” (1994: 6). Jeffrey Jerome Cohen explains that the same (im)materiality can be applied to monsters, where “[n]o monster tastes of death but once. The anxiety that condenses like green vapor into the form of the vampire can be dispersed temporarily, but the revenant by definition returns. And so the monster’s body is both corporeal and incorporeal; its threat is its propensity to shift” (1996: 5). The *Map*’s monstrosity thus lies not only in its hybrid birth, but also in its undeath, being both corporeal and ghostly and refusing to remain buried in its own “controversial” past. That it spent part of its time resting in the old city morgue, awaiting resurrection for its gallery debut, is an irony not lost on us.

The *Map*’s simultaneous materiality and evanescence permitted it to archive and, indeed, to map its very processes, which Gilson notes

allowed us space to be playful with how cartographic energies depict all kinds of geographies, from the tone of laughter of the cartographer, to how Mary was

late on that Tuesday, to the vast impossible secrets of the complexity of knitting, to the floods in March, and the snow in November, and the heat of August, and the lull in October, to Ciara's poor tension, and Maura's cable, and nobody cleaned the toilets on Sunday so I had to do it before I could change the wool for Monday, to the valuing of women's lives and community . . . (2012: 8-9).

Evanescence is crucial to performance, and this is documented in Povall's and O'Gorman's essays, as well as Gilson's. However, it is the stillness within movement that is best captured by Bernadette Sweeney, where she meditates on humanity's desire to grasp the fleeting and the momentary (perhaps, if we can make something still, we can keep it here forever). So, the photographs Sweeney took to document Gilson's performances during the Culture year remind us, just as *The Knitting Map* does, that life itself is fleeting – a series of dances, acts, and processes that are repeated, but by different performers. These processes are ongoing, mutating with each new stitch we learn about the creation of art, about community, about Cork, and about the increasing importance of women's stories in the making of a progressive and Fair Isle.

A quick note on the sea....

*The Knitting Map*, along with the threads it has gathered on its thirteen year journey, seems to have reminded many of this book's writers of the sea. Indeed, one of its threads appears to *be* the sea, connecting these essays as the oceans connect the continents. Given its length and use of natural colours, it isn't difficult to see why the sea is invoked by many of the essays, but I'd like to offer another reason for this similarity, which is that it has everything to do with monstrosity. This is to say that *The Knitting Map* has everything to do with the unknown, with wildness, adventure, and danger, and with all the possibilities that such things offer. The *Map*'s monstrosity lies in its very function as a map, as maps, like monsters, are signs, always already deflecting from their materiality, pointing towards an unknown future. The future to which *The Knitting Map* points remains on the horizon, but the chapters in this book go some way towards welcoming its possibilities.

# 1

## Navigation, nuance and half/angel's *Knitting Map*

A series of navigational directions<sup>1</sup>

*Jools Gilson*

**T**his writing is a navigation of failures. The safe channels in an estuary are marked by buoys; keep the red buoy to port and the green to starboard, and you will travel safely. But I am compelled by the spaces outside of the publicly marked, and I wonder if it is possible to make it to harbour by other routes. Such heretic navigation promises possibility, but failure lurks under the surface. Such danger is profoundly part of the aspirant pedagogy I describe here, in which failure is itself a kind of buoy, one which tempts an exuberant buoyancy, as much as it threatens being lost at sea. So that it makes the best sense to speak of a pedagogy of failure, rather than the failure of pedagogy.

This is a story about two publics; one involved in a vast collaborative knitting project, which used traditional as well as experimental gestures; the other a public who witnessed the same project through the media controversy that described it.





**Figure 1.1** Women knitting *The Knitting Map* in the crypt of St Luke's Church, Cork, Ireland, 2005. half/angel.

*The Knitting Map* was a departure for us as a company; we had spent ten years making dance theatre and installation work. In *The Knitting Map* we proposed a work that we hoped could be a gift to the city that was my home, and which was designated as European Capital of Culture in 2005. But by a contingent of its Irish audience (the majority of whom never visited the work), this gift was unwanted. So here is the affect of failure: It hurts. It is an injury. But being on the whole a cheerful and hardy traveller, and having made such an impossibly huge map, I'm off to chart this story with all its complexities of nationality, femininity, fury and love.<sup>a</sup>

We are called *half/angel* for a reason. The name is from a trapeze move, which I learnt when studying trapeze in the early 1990s. I loved it because one moment you are sitting prettily on the trapeze, with one hand grasping the bar, and the next you fall backwards holding on with that single grasped hand, and a flexed foot catches the place where wood and rope meet. If it works you fly underneath the

bar, and you are half an angel. I long for such falling and such flight; movements in which you have to fall in order to fly. So we are half/angels, creatures equally enamoured of falls and flights, knowing in our bones and blood that there is a way to fall into flight.

But there are times when falling fails to turn into any kind of angel, even half of one. Learning this technique was a process of repeated indignity, training with a wide belt around our waist called a *lunge*. Should we fall, as we all do, our teacher pulls down hard on the lunge rope, so that we are caught, dangling in space. But we always try again, cajoled into ending with our (partial) angel intact. And in this way, failure is our guide. Being willing to fall is another.

And so we fall into the prosaic and everyday. We fall into our first tangle, in which some contingents of the press, and many of our knitters, believe our project *The Knitting Map* to be about a literal mapping of Cork City. We are appalled, whilst many of our

a. 13th October, 2008

Dear Róisín, I'm writing this facing north, away from the sea, sitting in the study looking out over the spiral garden. The penstemons are still out in October, scarlet amidst the grey.

knitters think of it as a lovely idea, and volunteer to knit particular parts of the city. Our understanding of processes of cartography assumed a poetic plurality. Our map wasn't literal, because such literality would not have allowed us space to be playful with how cartographic energies depict all kinds of geographies, from the tone of laughter of the cartographer, to how Mary was late on that Tuesday, to the vast impossible secrets of the complexity of knitting, to the floods in March, and the snow in November, and the heat of August, and the lull in October, to Ciara's poor tension, and Maura's cable, and nobody cleaned the toilets on Sunday so I had to do it before I could change the wool for Monday, to the valuing of women's lives and community, to the ferocity of some of the press, to people crossing oceans solely to visit us, to indignant men arriving surprised at quiet industry, to the way we laughed so hard we wet our knickers at Elizabeth's leaving do, to the neighbours getting upset, to drums playing, and scones being eaten, to fury and love, and tears, and tension of all kinds, and love, and love. And women in Philadelphia weeping at the sight of it. How could we map that with something that was just a picture that imagined streets to stay in orderly parallels, and suburbs to remain peripheral, and all of that? And whilst we sat appalled, we began to understand that imagination is a privilege of unparalleled proportions, far beyond the material privations that play themselves out in the lives of too many of us. To be able to be playful with imaginative possibilities is to believe in different kinds of worlds. The vision of *The Knitting Map* – the women of a city rising up and knitting the weather for a year, has a revolutionary gesture at its core. Its poetic motion sought to find a quiet but profound way to give space to the astonishing in the everyday of so much feminine activity. It sought to give space to a profound politics of care, to ask if skills normally used for gift giving and solace, could be used for something of vast collaborative gorgeousness, something whose use-value (a thing that would so often trouble our critics and collaborators alike) was both poetic and political.

A small boat under oars need show only a lantern or electric torch  
in sufficient time to prevent collision.

*RYA International Regulations for Preventing Collisions at Sea (Anderson 1995: 18c)*

Reverse Stocking Stitch Check in Nutmeg.  
Quiet. Sister Susan and the girls from Knocknaheeny.

*The Knitting Map Log (2005: 7 June)*

Holding on to my trapeze with a clasped hand and readying my flexed foot, I drop backwards. And my repeated tangling with rope and wood is still happening when I sit down and knit in this cacophony of knitting that is *The Knitting Map*. Here I am falling, and whilst failure attends my learning and my teaching, I am brave enough to carry on catching wool and knitting needles like a trapeze move, but this time, it is the hundreds of women who visit daily who perform stunts between their dextrous arms and fingers, and the twine of wool. And they come with us to risk flight.

## Risking flight<sup>b</sup>

In half/angel's project *The Knitting Map*, digital codes were written to translate information about how busy Cork City was, into knitting stitches, and what the weather was like, into wool colour. This information was uploaded to digital screens as a simple knitting pattern (knit this stitch in this colour), and volunteer knitters sat at twenty knitting stations in a wooden amphitheatre in the crypt of St. Luke's Church and knitted. And they did this every day for a year. (Barkun, Gilson-Ellis & Povall 2007: 13–14)

The technology that was part of imagining *The Knitting Map* had been part of half/angel's performance and installation practice for ten years prior to 2005. This work with

technology allowed us to haunt performance and installation with unsettling connections between gestures and voiced text or music. In *The Lios* (2004), gallery visitors moved their hands in pools of water to trigger recordings of a community remembering the sea, as if memory itself were dissolved in water. In *The Secret Project* (1999), dancers moved and spoke poetic texts whilst producing another layer of the same text with their movement, so that they and the audience became unsettled by a vocal and corporeal plurality, and time itself seemed troubled. If we had not spent a decade refining this kind of work we could not have imagined *The Knitting Map*, in which a city and its weather generated knitting stitches and wool colour.

*The Knitting Map*, then, involved the culturally disenfranchised in the making of a vast artwork that was commissioned (and certainly perceived) as a flagship project for Cork's year as European Capital of Culture in 2005. Poetically and politically it was a work that sought to rework the urban territory of matter and meaning: knitting was used as something monumental – an abstract cartography of Cork



**Figure 1.2** Edge shot of *The Knitting Map*, from an exhibition at Millennium Hall, Cork, Ireland 2006. half/angel.

b. 27th November, 2008

Dear Róisín, a north wind today, fierce as a slap, whipping up clouds with brilliant sunshine, so that pushing the buggy up the breen with my new son, I am faced with a wide sky tumbled grey and white, sun on the hay field, with its abandoned cylinders of straw, and the brilliant green of the fields around here. I am ravished by colour, and the gorgeous simplicity of pushing my child up a muddy lane, for a walk on a wild day. But as he sleeps, I slip away quietly, and write.

generated by the city itself and its weather, and knitted every day for a year. To make such a gesture using feminine and female labour aspired to rework the relationship between femininity and power in an Irish context – it gave cartographic authority to working-class older women from Cork, for a year.

The process of conjuring the energies of a city's climate into an abstract cartography meant that in an important sense the women involved in making *The Knitting Map* were knitting the weather. Such a communal gesture brought frosts and floods, and heat into the domestic and ordinary act of knitting. It opened its close, domestic and feminine associations to the literal and metaphorical sky. *The Knitting Map* also allowed the mathematical complexity of knitting difficult stitches to be brought into proximity to a frantic city, clogged with traffic and queues, and crowded streets. In keeping track of shifting numerical combinations to produce, for example, an open honeycomb cable,<sup>2</sup> these women reworked the *actual* digital information about busyness being sent up to them from the city, and they did so by integrating this data with their hands (their digits) in processes of communal hand-knitting. *The Knitting Map* allowed the prevailing cultural peripherality of middle-aged women to make a collectively original and beautiful thing, and in doing so remapped their own apparently tangential geography.<sup>3</sup>

Tidal streams flow towards a direction.

Winds flow from a direction.

*Navigation: An RYA Manual (Culiffe 1992: 102)*

Tw2RW: Slip next stitch onto cable needle and leave at back of work,  
knit one, then purl one through back of loop from cable needle.

*Debbie Bliss, How to Knit (1999: 158)*

## Yacht master<sup>c</sup>

I am a Yacht Master, but I cannot sail. I have a certificate from the Royal Yachting Association with my name on it. I have only once been in a yacht, and when we were out at sea, dolphins suddenly surrounded us – they were underneath us, and leaping beside us. They wove such playful curves again and again, that I was undone with the joy of it, stumbling from one side of the small boat to the other to look at them. The old man I sailed with had sailed all his life, and had never seen such a performance. In class I had become enchanted with extraordinary maps of the sea called charts, and a new language: ‘chart datum’, ‘dead reckoning’, ‘isolated danger mark’. We learned about meteorology,

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c. 18th January, 2009

Dear Róisín, I'm writing this facing south, close to the wood burning stove in the Swallow House, on an icy day in January. Through a little window to the right of the stove, I can see the sea above a stone wall I built two summers ago. Counting summers in the frost, I navigate my writing to meet its heart.



navigation and collision regulations. I took notes and drew coloured diagrams. And when it came to the exam, I got the best mark in the class. But as I say, I cannot sail, but I am a Yacht Master. And all of my hankering for navigation of one sort or another is held within this story of respected qualification and unexpected marine joy. What more could I ever master about being in a vessel in the sea than those creatures sent leaping in my heart?

So I came to *The Knitting Map* already enchanted with navigation. Making a map seemed an ordinary and straightforward thing to me. Making such a map out of wool, with the collaboration of several thousand women, and information about the weather and city busyness as its enervating cartography, seemed a sensible sort of gesture. I love maps because they purport to tell you how to get somewhere, which seems to me ridiculous. Getting somewhere is always a conundrum of analysis and surprise, rain and strange forks in the road cloud one's vision as a matter of course. We all lose our way, even when we arrive safely in good time. So it isn't that I am suspicious of maps, it's just that for me, maps and charts are delicious in their ability to resist and recoil and affirm our ability to get to a destination. I am a Yacht Master, but I cannot sail. And when I try to learn, dolphins assault my attempt in playful cacophonies of curves. Marine joy. But I love charts, and I can plot a course for you if I have the strength of the prevailing wind, and the times of high tide, and I know who should give way if two vessels meet, but I have never done these things with real boats. So what kind of navigator does this make me? And what kind of cartographer?



**Figure 1.3** Exhibition of *The Knitting Map*, The Ganser Gallery, Millersville University, Pennsylvania, USA, 2007. half/angel.



Good navigation can be achieved only by experience. Imaginary passages worked on the dining room table, help to build up speed and proficiency in chart work, but they cannot be a substitute for practice at sea . . . Practice does not make the waves any smaller, the driving spray less penetrating or the motion less violent . . .

*Navigation: An RYA Manual (Culiffe 1994:12)*

## Practice at sea

Not everyone shares my irreverence of pictorial topography, and all kinds of maps that I assumed failed me as I brought my wickedry out from its poetic enclave and onto the street. Others often assume that maps will have a direct relationship to the layout of their referents. So it was that along with some of our knitters, a gleeful Irish press assumed that because *The Knitting Map* mapped the city, that it would be literal; one in which the shapes of streets, and the actual place of the river would be reproduced, so that they could have a fine joke on our behalf and conject about what would happen if someone dropped a stitch: ‘What worries me is that if one of them drops a stitch, there goes Knocknaheeny’ (Buckley 2004: 11). Knocknaheeny isn’t a neutral suburb in this jest – it is on the north side of Cork, and a byword for poverty, crime and violence.

Yarn overs are most commonly used in lace patterns where you are creating a hole by making up stitches where some have been lost by working them together.

*Debbie Bliss, How to Knit (1999: 99)*

## Enchantment<sup>d</sup>

Knitting is an enchantment of the hands and fingers, a moving latticework of wool and winding and tension. So that in our hands we see complexities fall away from us as something that is parochially called knitting. But in the secret glad grins we share when no one’s watching and the gentleness of being guided into the mathematical intricacies of this unsettling and enchanting craft of the hands, we learn differently. Apparently, we do nothing, sitting there, chatting away, breaking for coffee and scones, but something is telling in the eagerness with which we get back to our labour of textiles and hands and fingers and wool. Tangling affect with yarn and needles we trace and make our connection through story, gossip, argument and laughter.

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d. 20th January, 2009

Dear Róisín, today an African American man will be inaugurated as President of the United States of America, and I am sitting in front of the warming stove in the Swallow House writing to you. There is a heavy frost, and I can still see my breath inside this little writing house. I ran in the twilight this morning. My hands moving towards the pain of cold before my beating heart warmed them again.



**Figure 1.4** Jools Gilson preparing *The Knitting Map* for exhibition in the Ganser Gallery, Millersville University, Pennsylvania, USA, 2007. half/angel.

And let me tell you about the densities of colour, the drench of lilac drifting up from the crypt floor. They call it Amethyst and Heather, and here it is turned into the dimensional hexagons of a honeycomb cable, or the tiny one-by-one cables running like orderly veins into basket weaves, and then shifting into the duskiness of Devon Blue, and here again drifting into the virtuosity of a moss zigzag – seed textures jumping sideways and back again. These mauves and muted blues intensify when the weather is wet and wild, so that the finished map has swathes of such colours marking the storms of April 2005, their texture, their organisation of knots made by the movement of the city itself, pedestrian and

motor without distinction. So that busy Saturdays in midsummer send us cabling like nobody's business, and quiet wet Wednesdays have us mossaing our single knit and single pearl, row after row, with contemplative ease. As we knit rain, lilacs attend our labour.

And what seems like a hundred tones of creams, light browns and greys; Glencoe, Ivory Cream, Naturelle, Sand, Nutmeg, Cinnamon, Biscuit, Stone, Putty, Sandstorm, Storm Cloud. They are called neutrals, but they are not. Tiny threads of grey-black in white, perfect cream, something darker; the warmth and muted pinkness of Nutmeg and Cinnamon. I turn in their heft, day after day.

And the greens – a milky aquamarine, something grassy, and another tinged with khaki.

I am ravished by colour, and I see the same happen sometimes inside visitors, the shock of moving from the damp dark entrance, into the light and labour of the work itself. It happens like a kiss, or rain. It is before language, even as I try to write it. It is colour and vastness and the shocking apprehension that it has been knitted by hundreds and soon thousands of hands.

In Philadelphia, Margaret and I sit amongst it, arranging the folds and drifts and enormity of its complexity. We do so shoeless and often choked up, crouching in the midst of it. There are drifts of it, up the walls, in pleated folds, and sometimes stretching wide and flat, and then rivulets dividing and meeting again. There is just so much of it, that it undoes people of their perception of hand-textiling. So that it is both an abundance of knitting and a cacophony of absence.<sup>4</sup>

A submarine carries its steaming lights much lower than a vessel of her size is required to do . . . at night this gives the impression that she is much further away than she actually is.

*Navigation: An RYA Manual (Culiffe 1994: 5)*