'THE FLOW OF ACTION': KNITTING, MAKING AND THINKING

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I cannot remember learning to read. For me, a lucky child, black marks on white paper rapidly distinguished themselves and became an entry into a world of make-believe and exploration. But I do remember learning to knit. I remember sitting hunched up, striving to manipulate long, too long, slippery needles and laboriously struggling to loop recalcitrant wool on and off those blunt points. My knitting never grew in neat rows; it was distorted and full of runs and dropped stitches. I remember feeling that I was failing some test, a test my mother and my grandmother effortlessly passed as they produced itchy jumpers, socks made on four needles and, more thrilling, miniature dolls' clothes.

Knitting historians, such as Richard Rutt and Montse Stanley, amongst others, have built the foundation for scholarly understanding of knitting history and technology, but memories such as mine of making, and failing to make, knitting seem to have been little discussed.[1] This essay is therefore a preliminary attempt to use models developed by archaeologists and social anthropologists to explore making and the made. It uses ideas of gesture and manipulation to explore the relationship between the surviving knitted artefact and what it can—and cannot—indicate about the practice and experience of making knitting.

KNITTING AS ARTEFACT AND PRACTICE

The English language fuses both the activity of knitting: "I am knitting", with the resulting made artefact: "my knitting". While the techniques and the resulting textile structure are one linguistically, the knitted artefacts are the sole surviving physical evidence of an activity, which took place in the past. As such, they contain evidence which enables us to reconstruct the techniques—in this case manipulation of thread and needles—employed by the maker. Sometimes only those who understand current practice can help to understand past methods. I vividly remember learning from the animated discussion of a group of skilled knitters how a collection of small Victorian knitted 'pence jugs' had been made. This is an area where contemporaneous textual evidence fails us. Rutt lists the Victorian knitting books, which describe methods for making pence jugs but notes that such instructions are often "impossible to follow or contain alarming mistakes".[2] The makers' knowledge and embodied skill enabled them to 'unpick' mentally the evidence of making from the made artefacts.

The existence of knitting implies the skilled and repetitive manipulation of tools, albeit deceptively simple tools, in the case of knitting needles. The social anthropologist Tim Ingold argued that the making of tools implies a chain of planned and interlocking actions and exchanges: "The tool-using skills of contemporary human beings are embedded in a social process of cooperative production that presupposes role complementarity, the social exchange of tools and materials...."[3] The use of tools also implies the existence of skills and techniques, which are not just the mechanical application of external forces but also involve care, judgement and dexterity in "attentive" engagement.[4] Memory of the correct order in which knitting needles are to be manipulated to make simple or complex stitches in the right order, and judgement of the correct design is necessary to produce a knitted artefact, which conforms to socially defined norms, whether this is a hat, a jumper or a bedspread.

Gibson has observed "speech and gesture do not fossilize"; the objects created by gesture are the surviving evidence of the gesture itself.[5] However, although knitted artefacts are invaluable in understanding the outcome of practice they are limited in the degree and exactitude of the evidence of gesture they reveal. Can knitted artefacts tell us exactly how the knitter held the needles, how he or she moved their hands, how they learnt to remember the correct order in which to manipulate yarn and needles, or what they thought about the knitting? Sometimes flaws in the knitting can provide some evidence about the state of mind or the health of the maker. My own overly tight knitting revealed only too clearly the anxiety I experienced in its making, and the excess tension, which I transmitted through the needles and yarn into the knitted fabric. Dropped stitches, which she had helped to pick up again, enabled the then Duchess of York to identify a knitted scarf worn by a man in a welcoming crowd as one made by the ailing Queen Victoria: "Your scarf must be one of the six scarves... which the dear Queen was knitting before she died. They were her last pieces of work."[6]

LEARNING TO KNIT

Although hand knitting has clearly had an important domestic and economic history until the recent outpourings on the internet, few knitters have written about the pleasures of knitting and even fewer have written about the varied tyrannies of knitting or learning to knit.[7] Literary references therefore gain particular significance in reinforcing, or contradicting, such recent oral evidence for personal experiences.

Learning to knit is a vivid memory for many, whether pleasant or unpleasant. Ingold describes the learning of skill as:

> a purposeful alignment of the novice's attention to the movements of others, and a coordination of that attention with the novice's own movements so as to achieve a purposeful alignment of the kind of rhythmic adjustment or resonance that is the hallmark of fluent performance....[8]

In short, this is an intense, one-to-one experience of learning, a relationship of "body, gesture and artefact [in] a process of an intimate interaction".[9] Although sentimentalised by Victorian artists such as Hugh Carter, such experiences of learning to knit can function not just as a transmission of knowledge and skill but also of femininity and familial love across the generations:

> I was first taught to knit in school at about age seven, but did not learn how until my granny took those squeaky sweat stained pins, and those tighter than tight knots alternating with holes and said 'enough'. In between pancakes and waspy jam, she showed me the magic of 'in, over, through, and off', making loose string dishcloths in good old garter stitch, then graduating to a scarf. I remember sitting with my granny when I was about 13, and the calming effect of knitting a fuzzy blue twinset for my hormonal nonsense with the familiarity of row after row for my drowsy gran.[10]

Many women memorialise this emotional experience by preserving knitting needles and knitting bags belonging to their mothers and aunts, whether they retain or practice the skill of knitting. Even now, few European and North American women, possibly responding to long ingrained social codes and definitions of femininity, confess to hating

Despite the studio limitations, Textiles and Activism drew primarily from students enrolled in Visual Arts degrees, there were only a few exceptions, and although the class was open to all who had the one prerequisite of a foundation course in Art History, the enrollment was entirely female. While this was something of a concern for me, members of the class seemed to be largely unfazed, and in some ways used it to create a safe space in the classroom for the discussion of gender.

The gender imbalance of the class speaks obliquely to an ongoing issue in the teaching, making and display of textiles. At the end of the semester, one student wrote, "before this class I didn't realize it's not only for 'old ladies'."[2] This was, in fact, a difficult stereotype to shake. Throughout the class a number of students noted their surprise at the quantity of contemporary artists using textiles, but also remarked that even as the art world has opened to fibre and craft based arts, traditional techniques are often reframed as design or contemporary art, thereby erasing or at least obscuring female histories of practice.

THE CLASS

Class began with a consideration of Rozsika Parker's seminal text *The Subversive Stitch*, and moved through units on sweatshops, fashion and gender, textiles and postcolonialism, gender and textiles, textiles and technology, and cloth and memory.[3] Activist projects were introduced throughout, including knitting interventions by The Revolutionary Knitting Circle in Canada, and Microrevolt in the United States, collaborative projects such as the International Fiber Collective's *Gas Station Project*, the IKnit UK *Knit a River* for Water Aid, knitted graffiti such as the *Knit Knot Tree* by the jafagirls, as well as projects by artists, such as Jerilea Zemple's *Guns and Rosettes* and Lisa Anne Auerbach's *Body Count Mittens*.

Such projects were contextualised with historical examples, including the suffragists' use of embroidered banners, and the use of knitting by anti-nuclear activists at Greenham Common. The idea was to get students thinking about the ways that textiles and knitting were interpolated in their lives, and how they themselves were connected to a long history of activism, environmental and sweatshop concerns, all profoundly interwoven into today's changing economy.

What I hoped to do with this class was to "sneak activism in". Previously, I have taught courses specifically on activism and art, and have tried to bring an activist agenda to my teaching. But politics in the classroom is a precarious business. Defenses often come up at images of people putting themselves on the line for a political cause. Non-mainstream opinions tend to be described and dismissed as "biased", and the status quo is often vigorously defended even as those defending it describe themselves as different, unique and politically-aware. In their article "Teaching Eighties Babies Sixties Sensibilities," Georgina Hickey and Peggy Hargis outline some of the difficulties of teaching about collective action and social change to a generation that seems to be largely uninterested. The article outlines their frustrations with students "unwilling or unable to recognise the workings of power, privilege, and inequality in their own lives".[4] Those who most enjoy the benefits of privilege, the two authors note, are also those least likely to see the systemic structures and rampant inequalities keeping that privilege in place. Certainly, my own experience with teaching activism has largely, though not entirely, mirrored this thinking.[5]

I was banking strongly on the perception of textiles as ultimately non-threatening and distinctly familiar, in order to stage a *détournement* of my own—to use, in other words, the very stereotypes associated with textiles to keep defenses down. In doing this I borrowed strongly from a number of activist projects that similarly use knitting to contrast the pacifism of protesters with the violence of the state or forces of security.[6] Thus, although the study of textiles offers a rich history steeped in politics, I suspected that knitting needles would not hold the same kind of threat for students who reacted so strongly against placards, strikes, and tear gas. And perhaps having an awareness of the politics of cloth might bleed into other areas for those who may not have been politically interested or motivated to begin with. For this reason, the class was designed from the start to play on the kind of comfort that students might already have with textiles.

Following a project done by Canadian artist Janet Morton at the Canadian Museum of Civilization, titled *A Crafty Garden*, students began the class by transforming the seminar room into a complete mess in order to create a colourful garden of flowers, made from used sweaters and junk that people had lying around. A great deal of it admittedly came from my basement, but a number of students brought in jars of buttons, sparkles, pipecleaners and used clothing. Although several students admitted at the end that they had been somewhat anxious, fearing that their flowers would be ugly or not good enough, the main goal of the project was successful in breaking down the intimidating space of the seminar classroom, and in introducing students to one another as they discussed a series of questions based on the introductory readings.

If the first class was about community building, the second class was about building trust. This was the final week before I turned control of the class over to the students who would, from this point, create group presentations based on the readings. For this class, students prepared two things: first, they looked at their favourite outfit to see where the various items had come from and what they were made of, and second, they brought in a textile, a term that was not defined, that was of great personal significance to them. As students pulled their items out of their bags, they noted that they often developed relationships with garments, hated to part with them, or infused them with memories of particular events or people. Students brought in a hand-made bag that had been someone's first sewing project, a wrap that had been given by a much-beloved grandmother, a scarf

opposite LACEY JANE ROBERTS, *The Master's Tools (deep gouge 6th verge)*, 2008. Crank-knit yarn, hand-woven wire, steel poles, assorted hardware, 23 x 38 cm x variable dimensions. Image courtesy the artist.
left and right LACEY JANE ROBERTS, *We couldn't get in. We couldn't get out.*, 2009–2008. Crank-knit yarn, hand-woven wire, steel poles, assorted hardware, 25.5 x 76 cm. Image courtesy the artist.

The hot pink colour and soft texture of the knitted fence is an automatic queering of the usual rigid steel used in typical cyclone fence construction. The pink yarn is neon and shocking, presenting a more in your face feminine touch rather than a soft one, and harks back to the pink used in militant queer movements and campaigns, such as the work produced by Gran Fury for ACT-UP. I then made further knit fences, in shiny steel grey that mimics the original chain link, only the yarn I used is filled with glitter, giving the piece a bejeweled sparkle! In 2009–2010 I made a multicoloured version that was started using remnant yarn and evolved into a technicolour explosion.

The crank knitting machines used to stitch the yarn also require the use of the hand and occupy a space that is somewhere between the handmade and the industrial. The children's knitting machines put a magnified spin on a technique that was already considered amateur, cheap and feminine. The toy knitting machines require little skill to crank out long strands of stitches, and throw the mastery often associated with fine craft into question. The fences are entirely hand woven—the knitted tubes threaded with a thin gauge wire and looped. Many of my pieces become a dare to myself. I challenge myself to construct an easily produced industrially manufactured object by hand as a test of endurance and patience. Additionally, this piece has been shown in a variety of contexts—several art galleries, a craft show, and outside on the street—in an attempt to show that one work can be categorised in many different areas, thus becoming unclassifiable.

QUIET ACTIVISM

DEIRDRE NELSON

This is the recipe for my craft:

- Find a location, a text, or a humorous story.
- Study relevant people.
- Find a contemporary link.
- Develop an idea and study a traditional technique.
- Add a bit of humour.
- And some craftsmanship and hand skills.
- And translate into something tangible, which will be inclusive, engaging and encourage a smile.

Much of my work combines social and textile history, and retells stories relating to places where knitting is embedded into culture and history. Recently, research in locations such as Shetland and Uist have provided many stories and inspiration for exhibited textile works. While working with these communities I have become interested in quiet activism in the form of knitting groups who work quietly for a variety of charity projects. Those working do not consider themselves artists or crafts people and are not part of the fashionable 'craft-activism' movement, but possess fine traditional skills and have been working in this less overt manner for some time now. Each small piece of knitting that is created joins others to make something larger, for the good of another community.

opposite DEIRDRE NELSON, *Her Ice*, 2007. Human hair, 200 x 8 cm. Photograph by Billy Fox. Image courtesy the artist. © Billy Fox.
below DEIRDRE NELSON, *Elephant*, 2008. Elephant wool, gold thread and silk, 20 x 15 cm. Photograph by Shannon Tofts. Image courtesy the artist. © Shannon Tofts.

opposite SOPHIE HORTON, *Grège*, Cove Park, Scotland, 2004. Locally sourced lambswool, shetland wool and acrylic wool and lurex, 400 m long. Photograph by Ruth Clarke.
below SOPHIE HORTON, *Charge Over The Seas*, Bolwick Hall, Norfolk, 2003. Acrylic wool, wool and fencing, 1.5 x 66 m. Image courtesy the artist.