

Afterword **Jools Gilson**

As this book of 13 chapters goes to print, it is 13 years since *The Knitting Map* was made in 2005. A fitting spell for a conundrum of excessive femininity. So let me make 13 critical points:

1. Dreaming on a cliff in East Cork in 2003, I imagined knitting taking place high up, women above us, half seen, in a tangle of falling knitting, of wires, and yarn rising to meet them. In my mind, it was quiet, contemporary, and unsettling.
2. In 2005, they sit chatting in the half-light of the crypt. Their animated talk an adjacent grammar to the labour of their hands. They laugh often, greeting visitors, as they enter the long hall. But in their hands, the labour continues, uninterrupted. They seem enchanted – those hands, able to remember complex mathematics with extraordinary speed, and without effort. Their fingers are a blur of winding wool around two needles. They keep an embodied count of where to bring the wool forward, and where backward, when to turn the cable, or how to reverse the blocking. And still they talk on. The women who knitted *The Knitting Map*, there at the top of Summerhill North in Cork.
3. I'm standing in the rain outside the crypt of St Luke's with Tom McCarthy, waiting for the President of Ireland. When the cavalcade arrives, it blocks the narrow lane of O'Mahony's Avenue. Men in uniform precede her and then here she is! We greet her, and bring her inside, and when she sees *The Knitting Map*, she *gasps*.
4. Whilst I had often done interviews with journalists in print and radio before *The Knitting Map*, nothing prepared me for what it meant to be the author of a work perceived as a major local and national controversy.
5. In this book, there are monsters that make me grin – monstrous cartographies and femininities, growling in the troubled dusk.
6. In the tumble of meanings that *The Knitting Map* came to perform, the similarity of the map to an aerial view of the Irish rural landscape astonished me. We chose – greens, creams, greys and blues, even mauves falling into lilacs as our palette, and in the process of developing an abstract map, the work became ghosted by the powerful presence of the Irish countryside, what Fiona Barber calls "the sensuous embodiment of landscape."
7. When I remember you from that year, you felt like a guardian. You were always there, witnessing, and collecting stillness as a way to remember movement. You held me and what I was doing in that quiet way you have. There was something about your shyness and that camera that wound you into what I was doing. Where would those performances be now without you?
8. Remember an artefact of holes remembering wholes, remembering actual and metaphorical whales spouting their water, at the edge of the map.
9. I stood there often in those days of the install, when I was alone with that great heft of femininity. After the curators had carefully hung the work vertically, and were off upstairs arranging the Albers. I stood there, and watched the wind rise across the

lower meadow where the Glucksman stands. It was a strange thing to be in the presence of this contested textile, to be undone by the presence of it. I stood there in my knee pads, having a break between bouts of pleating, folding the work into this new space, noticing the drift between wool and leaf.

10. You listened and cajoled me into thinking through *The Knitting Map* more deeply, to write and write again; annoyingly and grinningly assured that all this trouble was because of its terrible and wonderful power. I didn't believe you, I was just bloody sick of the thing. Tired of snotty phone calls from journalists, from another version of it being lost. But you were steady and reminded me that it would come again. That there would be another time for this work, another decade than this long one.
11. "And when they sat down in the evening to knit and weave, they did so with an odd eagerness. As they set about it, needle to needle or in front of the small looms, they started, slowly, to laugh. They began with small gurgles, and sudden little snorts. As they got up to speed however, so their laughter turned into shrieks and howls, until all of them wept with hilarity, rocking with the rhythms of their thread entrancing. The noise was deafening - needles clacking furiously, the stamp of loom pedals, the bang of the over-rod, and above all this whoops and cackles and flesh shaking at the wild game of it all. After half an hour or so, the women were exhausted and ceased their weaving and knitting, collapsing one by one in various piles before the fire. They slept soon after, a sleep strangely quiet after the outrage of their laughter. And in all of this, none of them spoke a word, although she could see how they looked at each other, with a blazing in their eyes." Jools Gilson-Ellis, *mouthplace* (1997)
12. And remember opening the coffin shaped boxes of *The Knitting Map* at the storage centre in Kinsale in 2015, how we uncovered their wound memory held between cedarwood, and the spiral of memory. Remember the time in the mortuary in 2006, when we went looking for the thing lost, knowing it was kept there, in the dim light, amongst piles of costume in plastic, and pieces of set, from long gone theatre, the trace of sweat lingering. Remember how we went, driven by hearing the map announced as 'lost' on the morning news as we drove into work. Remember how we sat in our office in the Triskel, and fielded those phone calls from elderly women, who'd heard that we had been so careless about their year of ordinary labour, knotted by their own alchemy into that powerful troubling thing that pushed at the underbelly of how meaning is made. Remember how we listened, and reassured, told them it wasn't lost at all, that they were making up stories, and no, we didn't know why. Remember how we called the Arts Officer at the City Council, just to confirm that the map was indeed where we had left it in the store. There, close to the rivers of this island city, of this raining watery place, where meanings slip sometimes, lose their moorings, where visitors turn in the deluge between rivers, unsure of their north and their south. Remember how we found *The Knitting Map* amongst the piled ephemera of performance, but on our way we turned past the small room where the china mortuary table still lay. Royal Doulton, remembering bodies, and a different time. This book is a living thing that tells stories and weaves wonder and re-members *The Knitting Map* as a locus for meaning-making that troubled a city, that nudged at the underbelly of memory, that refused to get on the mortuary table, that resisted burial of multiple and persistent kinds. This book is a story and art history and a lodestone for a thousand older women knitting and grinning. This book is for the knitters, for the unsung, the tea made, the

granddaughter minded, for the tending of scraped knees, for the ironing of school shirts, for the remembering of birthdays, the holding of grief, and the picking up of pieces.

13. Richard and I write tangled in the flight of swallows. And this seems a fitting place to end, in the thrilling arcs of swallows, - harbingers of impossible things, things full of a vertiginous wonder.