



Review of Textiles, Community and Controversy: The Knitting Map, edited by Jools Gilson and Nicola Moffat

London: Bloomsbury Visual Arts, 2019

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Book Review

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***Textiles, Community and Controversy: The Knitting Map*, edited by Jools Gilson and Nicola Moffat, London: Bloomsbury Visual Arts, 2019**

This book comprises 13 fascinating essays exploring the production, exhibition, storage, and reception of *The Knitting Map* artwork. For those unfamiliar with this project, this massive community-produced knitted artwork was commissioned in 2003 and exhibited in 2005 as part of the European Capital of Culture: Cork. The essays view *The Knitting Map* through various lenses, as a map, artwork, textile, media controversy, monster, community effort, and against the very particular backdrop of Irish contemporary art and women's history. Although tightly focused on the artwork, discussion touches pertinently upon the "big questions" of gender, age, class, technology, nationhood, and community, making this a timely publication in the current political climate. The book is edited by Jools Gilson, the artist, scholar, and broadcaster who directed *The Knitting Map* project, and Nicola Moffat, an independent scholar, poet, and artist, both working in Cork. Contributors are drawn from across the arts, academia, and journalism, providing diverse perspectives. In the light of this some grouping of chapters around common themes of approaches could have

helped the reader navigate through the interpretations.

The essays could be organized via three core themes and I have found it useful to describe the book using these groupings with the aim of helping the reader to better see the overall contributions the book makes. The first set of essays view *The Knitting Map* as a piece of contemporary artwork. Fiona Barber, Reader in Art History at Manchester School of Art, explores the colors of the *Map* and the way it is embedded in the Irish landscape. She sets the *Map*, as a piece of installation art, against a backdrop of Irish artwork since the 1980s. Instead of in terms of the physical knitted object, Jessica Hemmings, Professor of Crafts and Vice-Prefekt of Research at the Academy of Design and Crafts, University of Gothenburg, tracks knitting as a tool of performance artists to consider the value of the act of making in contemporary art. Fascinatingly, she also provides an insight into the current locations of the knitting produced during these performances, closeted away under artists' beds or unraveled for further use. This theme makes a valuable contribution by emphasizing the

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rightful consideration of a community artwork or piece of craftwork as contemporary art.

The second theme highlighted by essays in this book concerns the “life” of *The Knitting Map* in terms of what it meant and means to viewers and commentators before, during, and after its production. Hemmings’ focus on the act of knitting echoes Gilson’s framing of the artwork and its subsequent “life” in the media is about not the physical object the knitters produced, but the making, handling, and viewing of it. As an intention the project is framed as feminist by writer and activist Lucy Lippard in terms of the aims of the project instigators. This chapter reads well alongside Bernadette Sweeney’s sensitive portrayal of Gilson’s “seed performances” in photography and reflective writing, as both give an insight into the activities and conversation surrounding the project in its early stages. Now an associate professor of theater and performance studies at the University of Montana, Sweeney was previously based in Ireland, and photographed knitting performances undertaken by Gilson to introduce performative knitting to Cork before *The Knitting Map* was born. These authors consider the relationship between intentions behind the artwork and how it was understood by the city of Cork (although I’m learning through this book that these perhaps cannot be separated), something that is relevant to all artwork.

The Knitting Map was covered extensively by the media before, during, and for a number of years after its production. Media reception is explored thoughtfully and pointedly in three chapters in the book, from the perspective of a Journalist in

Rachel Andrew’s chapter, and in further chapters by Deborah Barkun, Associate Professor of Art History and Ursinus College, and Sarah Foster, a lecturer at Crawford College of Art and Design, Cork. These chapters explore what we can learn from media coverage about prevailing attitudes towards women, women’s work and craft, and public funding, “the extent to which knitting as a mode of making was denigrated as something lumpenly amateurish, amusingly feminine and profoundly unserious” (Foster, p. 151). This is valuable in highlighting the prevailing ways particular aspects of society may continue to be denigrated and underestimated by the media.

Jo Turney, Associate Professor in Fashion and Design at Winchester School of Art, University of Southampton, presents a welcome chapter showing how knitting is deeply embedded in women’s history and associated with the everyday. Turney considers the semantics of knitting in cultural memory. It is the consideration of cultural significance that makes local historian and city councilor Kieran McCarthy’s chapter also stand out against other chapters. He chronicles a related project, *Voices of Cork*, an oral history project using knitting to prompt and facilitate storytelling, enabling *The Knitting Map* to “speak.”

The third theme that was evident from reading this text are contributions from authors that “read” the performativity of the knitting as a map; considering who is empowered or silenced through mapmaking (Moffat), how to map is to bring into being the imagined (artist and writer Róisín O’Gorman), and how mapping can document a sense of place beyond the literal (producer, educator,

and researcher Richard Povall). The latter two authors both introduce additional “voices” into their chapter by means of differently formatted sections to represent ideas or feelings that are perhaps too nuanced or perhaps too delicate to be represented in straightforward academic writing. I felt the introduction of multiple voices and tones throughout the book was successful and could even have been taken further, reflecting the myriad of voices that have contributed to *The Knitting Map*’s meaning today. The editors achieve this in their chapters by way of Gilson’s use of personal letters in footnotes and Moffat’s use of alternative formatting to highlight sections of prose and poetry written by the author and drawn from fiction and nonfiction.

The book’s primary strength comes from its honesty and frankness, for example Gilson’s discussion of the risks involved in the project is thought provoking. Although highly academic, the book is full of creative and personal ways to draw the reader into the world of the map, or rather the people who made and continue to make *The Knitting Map*, in the widest sense. Were I to be greedy I might wish the book had better addressed my particular interest in the cultural significance of knitting, although this is covered adequately. I would also have liked some additional full-page photographs that would add to the depiction of the lushness and scale of the artwork as the book cover does so well.

As a piece of scholarship this book feels participatory, thanks to the diverse disciplinary backgrounds of the authors and the subtle experimentation with weaving academic and personal tones together. The

book describes itself as aimed at students and researchers of fine art and textiles, and artists. I would develop this audience to specifically include those interested in

contemporary and participatory art practices, curatorial practice, and, more widely, feminist historians and those interested in the challenges and opportunities inherent in

community and civic arts. The book would be helpful for students in these disciplinary areas as a demonstration of creative academic writing as well as for its subject matter.