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Chapter 1

Navigation, Nuance and half/angel's 'Knitting Map'

A series of navigational directions . . .

Jools Gilson

This 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.

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 a 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.[1]

◈

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 enamored 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 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 which 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: 7th 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.

1.ladies knitting portrait.tif

Risking Flight

[2] *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 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 re-work 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,[3] these women re-worked 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 re-mapped their own apparently tangential geography.[4]

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

[5] 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, 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?

2. edge shot city hall.tif

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?

> 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

6 Knitting is an enchantment of the hands and fingers, a moving lattice work 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.

3. wool ripple PA.tif

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 zig zag - 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 organization 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 mossing 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.

4. jools kneeling PA.tif

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.[7]

> 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)

Cables

5. close up.tif

[8] And here are knitting's most precocious feats – the cable! Look! Here they are tumbling; complex arrays of plaits and twists, wide and narrow beside each other, racing to the finish, their mossed foregrounds and stockinged backgrounds, blurring in the thrill of the chase. O!

The twist and the turn! The leap and the dive-behind! The gymnastics of yarn, tempted into dashing frivolity by urbanity itself! And yet, and yet - the choreography of the cable is not the same kind of darling for digital technologies at all! The digerati are irritated by cabling, longing to hide it away, keep it secret, or even be done with it altogether. When the President of Ireland chose to visit *The Knitting Map*, detectives came ahead of her to search our space – the crypt of St. Luke's Church. They chuckled politely when I told them that we were glad they'd come because knitting can be very dangerous. But the *really* funny thing, is that they thought I was joking. And then I unlocked the door that led behind the wooden amphitheatre, so that they could inspect the underside of the wooden circle where we knitted, and where Richard had hidden all the cables from the digital screens that brought the information about what knitting pattern to stitch and what colour yarn to use, into the hands of our knitters. The detectives walked along the wooden curve, and stared at the cacophony of cabling, coloured leads from ten computers leading to ten screens, each computer being fed information from Richard's digital hub, which itself received information from four city centre CCTV cameras (for the complexity of stitch), and our weather station (for the colour). Two detectives in suits stare at hundreds of cables curling into their sockets, and others leaping away irreverently to hard drives placed in an unruly line, and more still feeding the digital screens on the amphitheatre, and others again escaping away altogether. Momentarily, two detectives with little wires behind their ears, teeter on their heels, at this sudden spectacle of convoluted complexity beneath the quiet line of women knitting above. I offer them tea, which they politely refuse, but my question brings them to their senses, and they briskly walk along the curved space, before leaving our underworld to check for rain.

You are a skipper of a yacht at anchor in Dover in 6.0m depth of water.
It is Mean High Water Neap. A crew member drops a winch handle overboard.
What will be the depth at Low Water when you send him down to get it?

RYA Coastal Skipper & Yachtmaster Offshore Exercises (1995/6: 4)

9 **Plot**

I plotted. I did plot. There was plotting, and it fell – fat plots from a grey sky, dashing us with hope. Can you hear it falling? Hope plots. Hundreds of them, thousands even, going out of focus in the movements of fingers winding wool, and shaking the balls of yarn to give them more leverage, in the counting of stitches, in the placing of wool between needles, in its being pulled back, tucked under, in its being wound around, in its being left off to pick up later, in its cabling. O how we cabled! Can you see my plot now? Can you hear the sound of plotting? What a course I navigated! What a plot! I am cabling internationally! In and out and winding behind. I haven't lost the plot. At all.

Double moss in storm cloud (a kind of grey).
Busy. Normal Monday group and school visit.

The Knitting Map Log (2005: 18th April)

Speculative Practice

Slowly, over ten years, Richard Povall and I (the directors of half/angel) learnt how to do something in our art practice which was based on radical and irreverent speculation. This was a kind of improvisation with failure as a professional practice. We both needed its possibility, and like children, didn't believe in it. Developing impossibilities was the core of such work, in which we developed ways to imagine dissolving memory in water (tiny sensors in pools of water triggering recorded samples of a community remembering the ocean), or projecting poetic text onto falling rice, or haunting spaces with voice ghosts that moving figures might find (*The Secret Project* [1999], *Spinstren* [2002] and *The Lios* [2004]). So that imagining the

women of a city rising up and knitting the weather and movement of a city for a year did not seem an unusual thing, it only seemed grander in scale and time. And our project didn't stay either in the space of poetic language, or in the world of conceptual art practice (as either dance theatre or installation), but instead strode boldly into the space of the actually popular, and a real community both of knitters, and of Cork City. We strode blindly, because we had learnt to trust such speculation as a sturdy beginning for our work. All of our work began with a poetic idea nudging technology sideways. We had always not known how our practice would 'work', but we perennially rode on the tide of its poetic core, and found a way. We were fluent at listening to our process without demanding a result too quickly.

The Knitting Map was different in this sense, because we were unable to rehearse the twin processes of collating city data / translating into a knitting pattern, and the organisation of a community of knitters. We had to spend part of the year of *The Knitting Map's* making developing the *process* of its making; there was no rehearsal, or residential retreat. The idea that we might develop how the project would work technically and administratively during its year of making was enormously challenging to some of our staff and volunteers. Some of them equated not knowing exactly how everything would work from day one, with weak management. Their model of hierarchical organisation was sometimes powerfully entrenched. Working with speculative technology over a decade in collaboration with Richard meant that we developed digital systems that were an *idea* of what might work. These were systems that might only become fully themselves through practice, through processes in which we often failed, but which used such failure as buoys; as critical markers that allowed us to navigate towards what we yearned to make. We were fortunate during the 1990s to have long-term residencies, which allowed us to develop such art and performance practice over weeks and months.[10] This was powerfully embodied work, with each

performance system being ‘tuned’ to the movement of a particular dancer. As privileged and educated artist scholars, our corporeal and linguistic discourse was developed in the havens of contemporary art practice, and within the theoretical playgrounds of postmodern thought. We have always been nomadic with our disciplinary boundaries, deeply interested in the ways in which form binds up meaning or sets it free, and so, transgressing another disciplinary border and venturing in such ambitious optimism out of the worlds of literature and conceptual performance practices, and into the everyday, seemed another leap like so many we had taken before. But we were mistaken in this.

11 Richard and I brought our nuanced collaborative skills to *The Knitting Map* project, and watched as they slowly failed. Invisibly but palpably, more popularly accepted structures of relating made themselves felt. We began to understand that what we did was not that understandable. Bemused by the complexity of the project itself, the fact that its participants were largely middle-aged working class women, and the several hundred thousand euro that funded it, the local and national press began to snarl, at the same time as international visitors and press were often enchanted by the scale, democracy and aspiration of the work.[12]

> White over red over red over red indicates a vessel constrained by her draught and thus severely restricted in her ability to deviate from her course.
>
> *RYA International Regulations for Preventing Collisions at Sea* (Anderson 1995: 24)

Whilst some of our staff and knitters would not or could not collaborate with us in understanding and communicating the speculative and open-ended nature of *The Knitting Map*, we also began to learn that this didn’t matter in such a project, in the critical ways it had driven our small-scale performance and installation work. The work operated on different

levels for different people. Our error, our failure, was to assume that we could collaborate with a city and a community using similar skills that we had honed in the retreats of contemporary art practice. Community is messy and disorderly, as are the cities which they compose. We came to accept that what happened during our year of knitting *was* the project, and eventually understand that such an audacious work could not have been completed without struggle and challenge.

> Sound in fog may travel erratically causing some confusion and anxiety if the limitations in picking up fog signals are not understood.
>
> *Navigation: An RYA Manual* (Culiffe 1994: 79)

Knitterly Knowledge

6. ladies knitting landscape.tif

13 Our knowledges of playful plurality, or symbolic and literal empowerment, of making women the custodians of a wildly ambitious cartography, were not ideas that were easy to communicate, and yet many of these knitters understood their participation as a civic contribution of great material and symbolic worth.[14] For many of these women, their involvement in *The Knitting Map* was their first involvement in an arts project. Whilst the context and aspiration of this work may have been difficult to grasp, these women drove the project with skills which were powerfully familiar to them – knitting, and the social ability to make space warm and un-threatening. Many of them knew far more about knitting than either Richard or I. We had experienced performance and installation works which felt powerfully challenging and difficult to visit, even to the initiated. We wanted to make the space of *The*

Knitting Map welcoming and inclusive, and our formidable group of knitters were as skilled at this aspect of the work as they were with knitting. This hosting of the work, this bringing of people in, showing and explaining the work, this offer to participate, to have tea, structured the form of the work as powerfully as the knitting itself.

> Loom is defined as the diffused glow observed from a light below the horizon owing to atmospheric scattering.
>
> *Navigation: An RYA Manual* (Culiffe 1994: 76)

The women who knitted *The Knitting Map* knew how to read and break code into a complexity that made singular things (sweaters, hats, blankets, scarves . . .) They knew about the social value of gift giving, they knew the weight of time and care intrinsic to the knitting of garments and other textiles. They also knew its bad press, its lodgement in the public psyche as a joke about another appalling sweater made by granny as a Christmas gift. Many of them had experienced the shift of knitting from economic necessity to expensive hobby. They also knew of knitting as a solitary activity, even as they might knit whilst watching television with others. In their bones, they knew of knitting as profoundly feminine, as the domain of the female, so that even as boys and men might knit, they only did so with a troubling frisson.[15] They knew about the critical importance of tea breaks and lunch. They knew how to talk and laugh and sometimes guffaw. They also knew how to defend their beloved project when it was attacked, which it repeatedly was. They called up talk shows and spoke their minds, they demanded journalists and directors of festivals visit *The Knitting Map* for themselves, (often after they had criticised the project without doing so), they wrote letters, and knocked on doors. They disarmed us of intent, by acting as if they owned the project, which of course, they did.

◈

‘An Army of Knutters’

(Mythen 2005: 10)

Debates about *The Knitting Map* rattled on in the Irish media for months and years (2003 – 2015), and came quite soon to repeatedly refer to the project as ‘controversial’, something that floored my colleagues and I, as well as our community of knitters. *The Knitting Map* was blatantly not itself the site of *conventional* controversy; its directors had not used the public funding as security on a loan to buy land, or embezzled it to pay for holidays, cars or jewelry; the project involved no public slaughtering of chickens, child pornography or vile language. What then, had failed in this process of public pedagogy?

‘. . . a useless monstrosity’

(Mythen 2005: 10)

There are two things that are remarkable about this response to *The Knitting Map*; first that the project was not in any way conventionally controversial *in itself*, and second that this response was peculiar to Cork and Ireland.

‘daft’

(Mick Hannigan, Former Director of Cork Film Festival, quoted in Lynch 2005: 25)

But controversy there was. This was fuelled by angry speculation about the level of *The Knitting Map*’s funding. We received €258,000 over three years to realise this project,

funding which primarily paid for a staff of five, office rental, and the renovation, fitting out and running of an arts centre for a year. We were forbidden by our funders to reveal the level of this funding to the media during the years of its development and making, a gesture which fuelled speculation and controversy.[16] But this was not the whole story.[17] The negative media on *The Knitting Map* so rarely referred to the actual work itself, that it sometimes seemed as if it had nothing to do with it. It was as if the lattice work of meanings that *The Knitting Map* laid down in public met with social, political and historical moment in such a way as to allow something difficult and damaged to see the light of day. And this something was about Cork and Ireland in 2005, about the powerful injuries of history, about the troubled relationship to wealth, and about who has public permission to be valued, and to be an artist.

‘a pack of oul’ biddies knitting’
(Lynch 2005: 26).

The public alchemy of *The Knitting Map* within Cork and Ireland, was not what I had anticipated. What I had imagined was still within the work, available to be witnessed; gentle, slow; tangling tides and skies with yarn; marking the ebb and surge of presence with knots. But within Ireland, a different kind of alchemy attended its production. The scale, duration and femininity of *The Knitting Map* became a provocation. Metaphors are kinds of magic tricks; they work by something being able to represent something else. One of the reasons that the temporal, spatial and gendered excess of *The Knitting Map* were intolerable within an Irish context, was because of the failure of metaphor. For a contingent of an Irish audience and the Irish media, women knitting cartographies couldn’t mean anything else except ‘a pack of oul’ biddies knitting.’ (Lynch 2005: 26)

‘If you see an old woman in a fairy tale, be very very careful.’

Jools Gilson-Ellis, *Spinstren*, dance theatre production, 2002

I have often tried to make the invisible labour of femininity powerfully present; in 1997 I hung 10,000 sewing needles from red thread from a gallery ceiling, (*mouthplace* exhibition, Triskel Arts Centre, Cork, with Richard Povall). The response to this work was oddly gendered, many women wondered out loud about the vastness of the labour of threading so many needles, and those men who visited wondered more quietly about what they perceived as the violence of the work.

Kieran McCarthy, a local historian, published a book in 2005 based on interviews with people who worked on or were connected with *The Knitting Map*, called *The Knitting Map Speaks* (McCarthy 2005). This is an important document, and in it, one of the commissioners of the work, the Irish poet Tom McCarthy reflects on the media controversy:

> Historically, *The Knitting Map* to me is also an important reminder of the importance of women’s work. I remember that during Cork 800 a fantastic anthology was brought together by the Cork Women’s Poetry Circle; it was called *The Box Under the Bed*. That work, which would be considered women’s work, was visible to the public eye and in many ways the story of women’s action in the city was anthologised. When that small anthology was published, it was attacked in the press. It was actually mocked. *The Knitting Map*, twenty years later, has also been subject to attack. It interests me about Irish and Cork society that when women’s work is made visible, it somehow attracts negativity from sources in the media. Why is it that women’s activity attracts negative feeling in the media?

(McCarthy, Tom 2005: 124)

[18] Removed of nuance, and bound up in the literal act of knitting, the most powerful response to *The Knitting Map* within Ireland was an astonishment that so much money and time had been dedicated to something that didn't matter and was such an irrelevance.

' "I'm sure it's valid in its own way," concedes Mick Hannigan with a smile.'

(Lynch 2005: 26)

Because the project was a flagship one, this was also bound up with a powerful sense of not wanting to be represented internationally in this way.[19] This may seem difficult to imagine outside of Ireland, but our failure to communicate the aspiration and layered meanings of this work to an Irish and especially a Cork audience, meant that it remained lodged in understanding as literal knitting, and the association of homey craft with a bygone Ireland, was something that was unbearable in a flagship project for Cork 2005. Historical moment did not or could not allow for such craft to be used as a way to radically rework meaning. The historic feminisation of Ireland by colonial Britain exacerbated this response.[20] Having been symbolically female as a term of abuse, being represented internationally by an excess of femininity fuelled public rage. It did not help that both directors of the project (myself and Richard Povall) were English. What this work mapped then, was not so much a year in the life of a city, but its underlying injuries, - symbolic, colonial and sexual. And its most powerful cartography was its iteration of old history, not as something 'way back when', but as something stridently present in the contemporaneity of 2005.[21]

◈

The Knitting Map then, was a web which made the prevailing assumptions within Ireland about value, art, women and feminine labour visible and palpable. *The Knitting Map* made a space for older, working class Irish women to make meaning, and the bad press in some sense tried to put them back in their place. But I have the knitting. Rolled up in four boxes, and hidden safely away in Cork. And I have taken it to America, where I unleashed it in a gallery. I watched as its alchemy crept up the spines of our visitors, I watched composure come undone. And it does this because it is a thing made slowly together (*thousands of us*), a feminine thing, it is time, time of seconds, and days and weeks and months and now years. And it is a kind of lodestone for potential time, and an assertion of unutterably powerful presence, so powerful that to bring it to the light of day, could cause a city, and sometimes a country to rise up in fury. But I have it, and even though it isn't mine, I guard it, because there will come a time, when I will unroll it again.

They didn't know that she was female, all they knew was that the young sailor had a knack for using the chip log. Casting the wooden panel, weighted on one edge, out into the dark sea, she listened for the sound of it entering the water. As it did, she turned the hour-glass, and let the line slip through her dextrous fingers. She counted knots, watched the hour-glass, and listened to the gulls. She can smell tobacco, and knows they are watching her.

And in this way, they knew how fast they travelled, and when they might arrive.

And when they did arrive just as she had quietly predicted, they were unsettled, and glanced nervously at her slight figure looking out to sea.

One knot equals one nautical mile per hour.

7. long shot city hall.tif

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[1] **13th October 2008**

Dear Roisin, 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.

[2] **27th November, 2008**

Dear Roisin, a north wind today, fierce as a slap, whipping up clouds with brilliant sunshine, so that pushing the buggy up the boreen 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.

[3] This was one of the most complex of all our knitting stitches: "Open Honeycomb Cable (knitting pattern where K = knit, and P = purl): The pattern begins on the wrong side, so work 1 row knit before starting. Row 1: K2, p8, k2; rep to end. Row 2: P2, C4B (slip next 2 sts onto cable needle and hold at back of work, k2, k2 from cable needle) C4F (slip next 2 sts onto cable needle and hold at front of work, k2, k2 from cable needle), p2; rep to end. Row 3: As 1st. Row 4: P2, k8, p2; rep to end. Row 5: As 1st. Row 6: As 4th. Row 7: As 1st. Row 8: As 4th. These 8 rows form pattern. Repeat." (Matthews 1984: 63).

[4] This section is adapted from Barkun & Gilson-Ellis 2007.

[5] **18th January, 2009**

Dear Roisin, 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.

[6] **20th January, 2009**

Dear Roisin, 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.

[7] *The Knitting Map* was exhibited at The Ganser Gallery in Philadelphia in April / May 2007. Margaret Kennedy worked on this exhibition for *half/angel*.

[8] **23rd January, 2009**

Dear Roisin, today it is bright and still. There is a wet chill in the air, and I write this facing West. It is a little warmer than when I last wrote, so I can sit at the table in the Swallow House. Today, Vittorio came out whilst I

dressed the children and lit the stove for me. It is burning peat, old natural peat, not the polite brickettes you can buy from supermarkets. So I sit facing West in the little writing house with a view of blue sky and an empty raised bed, a naked damson tree and a tumbled stone wall. And I burn Irish earth to keep warm. Ancient Irish earth, burning slowly.

[9] **26th January, 2009**

Dear Roisin, the fire difficult to light this morning here in the Swallow House. Everything a bit damp. The orange peel we dried to parchment to use as firelighters in the house, have taken in moisture, and feel like peel again. I'm facing north to warm my back close to the stove. At least I can't see my breath any more. The children have colds – chesty coughs and runny noses, so we had a broken night last night, Jacobo with me, and Vittorio sleeping downstairs near to Natalie. I had soft hair rubbed in my face at 3am, as a little boy giggled for glee that he was in bed with me. I am also full of cold, and battling it with Echinacea and blood oranges. Peter Foynes and Vittorio made marmalade yesterday, so that our kitchen was turned into a citrus sauna, as they tried to boil Seville oranges for hours on our cantankerous stove, which loses heat in the wind. Later Peter and I go down to the sea wall to see if we can see a date Toddy assures us he knows is there. But there is nothing but a wild grey sea, so that as we stand on the beach we gaze into a wall of grey amidst a pinkish afternoon glow.

[10] These were - STEIM Studios, Amsterdam, The Netherlands (Jun & Sept 96); Institute for Choreography & Dance, Cork, Ireland (ICD) (Oct 97, Apr 98, Jun 99); The Banff Centre for the Arts, Canada, Dept. of Media and Visual Arts (Mar/Apr 98, Aug/Sep 98, Apr 99 & Sep/Oct 99).

[11] **28th January, 2009**

Dear Roisin, facing East into a misted up window. It's mild, so I sit without my coat at my desk with the lamp on, breathing into this precious space of writing and solitude. And for the first time this week, I can't see my breath. Yesterday I took the children to play group in Aghada looking out onto a glassy estuary across to Cobh. Natalie played happily with buggies and babies, and eventually accosted a real baby from a mum to sit on her lap. Jacobo drove the red car he adores and then sat and ate his snack before and after every other child . . . Later Natalie is exuberant at Anna Beth's house singing out songs loudly with Fifi, as the three of them parade round the kitchen island. Anna Beth and I conspire to catch-up between bouts of nappy changing, snack fetching and refereeing.

[12] Artistically, The Directors of Smartlab Digital Media Institute (London, UK), Arts and Culture at The Council of Europe (Strasbourg, France), The European Cultural Foundation (Amsterdam, The Netherlands), Dance City (Newcastle, UK) and the Chair of Visual Arts at Millersville University (Pennsylvania, US), were all struck enough by their visits to *TKM* in 2005 to invite half/angel to develop further projects with them. These were, respectively, Lizbeth Goodman, Robert Palmer, Gottfried Wagner, Penny Rae, and Jeri Robinson-Lawrence. Positive international media coverage of *TKM* included *Der Standard* (Austria, Alioth 2005), *Helsingen Sannomat* (Finland, Sipilä 2005), *Stavanger Aftenblad* (Norway, Andreassen 2005), *Wysokie Obcasy* (Poland, Pankόw 2005), *Newzy.fr* (France, Guilcher 2005), *BBC News* (UK, Davis 2005), *The Guardian* (UK, Glancey

2005), *Vogue Knitting* (UK, Fawcett 2005) and *Simply Knitting* (UK, Bradley 2005). *TKM* was also the subject of a chapter in a PHD thesis in 2009 (Sotelo 2009).

[13] **30th January, 2009**

Dear Roisin. Rain. No writing yesterday because Vittorio had to go into work, and it was Thursday, so there was the Cuidiu (Irish Childbirth Trust) coffee morning. I've been secretly calling it Quidditch, because parenting seems just like playing hockey in three dimensions on a broom. There were fresh scones and jam and cream and tea, and the children disappeared off to play in another new play room. And lovely women, and much laughter. Somewhere in the blur of Quidditch, lunch with two toddlers in a café, shopping for supper, and all the hauling in and out of cars that that entails, I wrenched my shoulder muscles, somewhere deep inside. So I'm sitting here writing with a heat pad on my sore shoulder listening to the rain and writing to you. I've just re-lit the fire because it went out. Rain.

[14] In an article written in 2006, Alan O'Riordan reports on a public forum about *The Knitting Map*, organised to coincide with the exhibition of the work in the Millennium Hall, Cork as part of the Midsummer's Festival. He wrote - "The Knitting Map became a symbol of Cork 2005's perceived failure. By its unusual nature, it became a caricature for a grateful media to lampoon; and, in the climate of recrimination which ran through the year, it was an easy target." But he also writes: "From the knitters' own enthusiastic testimony, nobody could doubt that the map meant a great deal to the people who worked on it . . ." (O'Riordan 2006). See also: http://www.rte.ie/archives/2015/0824/723181-cork-knitters-make-giant-textile-record/ from the RTÉ Archives (RTÉ is Ireland's national television station). This short clip, includes interviews with some of the knitters of *The Knitting Map*.

[15] Men *were* involved in knitting *The Knitting Map*, and were always welcome. But in the end, they were a tiny minority.

[16] It was probably also the case that when *The Knitting Map* was commissioned in 2003, the Executive of Cork 2005 expected their budget to be far higher than it eventually was, so that funding for the project ended up as a much larger proportion of the overall budget than was intended.

[17] For example, Daniel Libeskind's *Eighteen Turns* was installed as a temporary exhibit in Fota House as part of the programme for Cork's year as European Capital of Culture in 2005. This stunning architectural caprice cost almost the same as *TKM* to have as a temporary exhibit (May – Dec 2005), but did not attract a whisper of criticism over its funding.

[18] **11th February, 2009**

Dear Roisin, difficult to light the fire this morning. I am out of small logs, and so have to light the stove with peat. It burns slowly, reluctantly, sending smoke billowing sleepily over the fields. Stunning day - bright, still and cold. Madge, a neighbour and dear friend, died yesterday in her 98th year. She was born in this house in 1911 and we loved her, and her gorgeous dialect from another time, her stories about dancing down at the Lios, and her twinkling smile.

[19] The history of cartography in and of Ireland is closely bound up with Britain's colonial project to claim its territory as its own. See Brian Friel's play *Translations* for an exploration of the poetic and political impact of this history (Friel 1981). Sometimes this history has had violent personal consequences for the cartographer; in the early seventeenth century, Richard Bartlett, an English army officer under Charles Blount (Lord Deputy Mountjoy), depicted the taming of Ulster and the unruly O'Neill in cartographic form: 'Barlett seems to have been beheaded by Donegal militants who in the words of one account, 'would not have their countrie discovered.' (cited by Smyth 2007: 17, from Andrews 2008, then in progress).

[20] For a discussion of this depiction of Ireland as feminine in relation to colonial Britain, see Tovey, Share & Corcoran 2007, and Cairns & Richards 1988.

[21] **12th February, 2009**

Dear Roisin, there is a touch of spring in the air today. Last night we waked Madge down at her home in Ballykennealy. I am taken through to the back bedroom where Catherine our beloved neighbour and friend, and Madge's daughter sits close to the coffin. I hold her tight and sit between her sisters, and chat. I dash home for supper with the children, and then back again for the removal. The small cottage is heaving, and dozens of cars line the small road. I go inside briefly, and Richard hands me whisky. Later, sitting in the packed church, I look down the long aisle at Madge's coffin to see the photograph of her I gave to Catherine for Christmas placed on top of it. This beautiful image of this old woman with light in her eyes sitting in my kitchen briefly undoes me of my outsider-ness.