



*In the loop*

KNITTING NOW

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# In the loop

## KNITTING NOW

*In the Loop: Knitting Now* challenges oversimplified definitions of contemporary knitting to reveal the diversity and popularity of knitting today. Invited contributors range from practitioners and educators, to historians, conservators and curators, representing research from Australia, Britain, Canada and the United States. Lavishly illustrated, this book explores knitting from perspectives that shed new light on a craft that has too often been dismissed as a retro hobby.

The artists, activists and designers included in *In the Loop: Knitting Now* do not create knitting that conforms to our typical expectations of what can be made with needles and thread. Across four themed sections—"Rethinking Knitting", "Narrative Knits", "Site & Sight: Activist Knitting" and "Progress: Looking Back"—a diverse and eclectic range of voices challenge the stereotypes of knitting.

*In the Loop: Knitting Now* seeks to acknowledge and expand the contribution knitting makes to a vast array of disciplines, including contemporary and traditional crafts, modern literature, fine art, feminism, activism and history. Conceptual and material investigations are used to document the vibrant diversity of approaches now used to produce and discuss knitting today.



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TWISTS,  
KNOTS &  
HOLES:  
COLLECTING,  
THE  
GAZE &  
KNITTING  
THE  
IMPOSSIBLE

CLIO PADOVANI & PAUL WHITTAKER



This essay comes in two parts. The first part proposes an elaboration in thinking about what we have come to know as the act of knitting: an extension in our understanding of the taxonomy of knitting and its categories. The second part aims to expose what might be at stake in an extended definition of contemporary art that unconventionally makes use of the practices of knitting.

Knitting is now a medium and even a reference of choice for many contemporary artists. By way of illustration, Rosemary Trockel has employed the knitted sign, Louise Unger has sculpted body-like forms through the knitting of steel wire and Mike Kelly has used knitted toys in his performances. That said, the work of these artists and others like them, contrasts strongly with the longstanding domestic traditions of knitting. Margi Geerlinks' photograph of a woman holding knitting needles, from which hangs the half finished knitted body of a young girl, exemplifies well this point. Dressed in white, the transfixed woman stares out from the photograph, while a thread of wool snakes down from the knitted body and pools into a ball on the floor. The pictorial alliance of a woman, child and the practice of knitting might conventionally suggest a content of motherhood and the familial. In this image however, these alliances, arranged around the partial form of the knitted body, appear not familial but monstrous. The act of creation, rendered inert by the photograph, appears here more self-driven than a selfless act of life giving: more Dr Frankenstein than a Madonna and child.

If we accept that Geerlinks' photograph is by virtue of content and reference worthy of classification in the codex of knitting, we also accept that by merging art and craft, concept and function, this work and others like it, challenge the convention of knitting. These works transform our understanding of knitting by making knitting more than a practice of knots and loops of thread: they promote the question, what is it to knit?

Susan Stewart offers a key to how we might address this challenge to the taxonomy of knitting. In *On Longing*, Stewart considers how objects collected and stored in museums, whether public or private, mediate experience in time and space. For Stewart, such objects engender interest because "when objects are defined in terms of their use value, they serve as extensions of the body into the environment, but when objects are defined by the collection, such an extension is inverted, so the environment is subsumed into the scenario of the personal."<sup>1</sup> The implication in Stewart's thinking is that collections are constructions or compositions, and that "the ultimate term in the series that marks the collection is the 'self', the articulation of the collector's own 'identity'."<sup>2</sup>

If we follow Stewart's lead we may hypothesise that the components that make up Geerlinks' composed image—the photograph, the background, the posed figure, selected attire, knitted form and the spool of wool—offer the possibility that knitting, for Geerlinks, supplements more than the composition of an image. What Geerlinks can be construed to have done, according to Stewart's thinking, is collected and composed with parts or signifiers, including a knitted

object, so as to communicate her message; like a three-dimensional textile, she has knitted together, in time and space, personally significant objects, and organised those conceptual, sometimes literal threads necessary to promote her ideas. In doing so, she has proposed an emergent narrative and herself as a significant term in the collection: the maker, or knitter, of monstrous tales. Geerlinks' image, elaborated by way of Stewart's model, proposes that what we have come to know as the act of knitting might reasonably include the practice of collecting; knitting as the collection and construction of narratives—narratives in which the artist is a primary factor, but not always, necessarily, the creator of disturbing tales.

If we can rethink and extend the process of knitting to include the practice of collecting, what might be at stake in an art that knits by way of collecting; art that unconventionally explores the boundaries of the knotting and looping of threads?

Louise Bourgeois is a prolific artist known for her intense psychologically driven sculptures, installations and drawings. Her work draws upon her childhood memories and the complex emotions involved in familial relationships. The Daros Collection of Bourgeois drawings completed between 1994–1995, published under the title *The Insomnia Drawings*, offers a number of images that interestingly represent and reference the making of a textile. Take for example, *Le Cauchemar de Hayter*, an ink on lined paper drawing. This drawing does not appear to be a representation of a particular object but instead suggests, through its overlapped meandering lines with peaks and troughs, a looped pattern, a kind of knitted doodle.

When considered by way of the writings of Jacques Lacan, Bourgeois' unconventional textiles serve the purpose of suggesting the gaze as a pertinent critical tool through which we might identify and explore what is at stake in an art that knits unconventionally. Referring to the work of Catherine Yass, the psychoanalyst Parveen Adams quotes how Lacan describes, in the process of psychoanalysis, "that which from time makes a stuff of it [what is said] is not borrowed from the imaginary, but rather from a textile, where the knots speak of nothing but the holes which are there."<sup>3</sup> This means that no matter how much material the patient enunciates, there is always something missing in the process of analysis. What is described circles around a hole.

All textiles, even knitted doodles, are composed in part of holes or gaps and this allows both Lacan and Adams to identify the textile as a metaphor for the subject's experience during analysis. The hole around which Lacanian analysis circles is the gaze, and the gaze stands for the object that can never be attained. "It is a [hole] in the subject's seemingly omnipotent look": a gap that "marks the spot at which our desire manifests itself in what we see."<sup>4</sup> The gaze is the cause of desire rather than the object towards which desire tends and as such it is a hole that sets the drives in motion.<sup>5</sup> Fantasy allows the subject to relate to the unattainable gaze or hole by constructing a scene through which we, as subject, can take up a relation to its impossibility.







The film theorist Todd McGowan argues that it is the excess in the fantasy image that marks the hole or gap of the gaze and that the excess of the film image may be seen in "unconventional camera work, obtrusive editing, or in the content of the film, when [for example], the dominant story line is unexpectedly interrupted in a surprising or shocking manner".<sup>6</sup> The cinema influences many contemporary artists, and photographic and digital practices utilise much the same means of communication as Hollywood. In the same way that contemporary cinema can be critiqued by way of fantasy stained by the excesses of the gaze, so can, we might argue, contemporary arts which similarly construct a fantasmatic appearance. The compositions of fantasy scenes, whether in film, paint, fabric, knitting or collections, offer an opportunity for narrative interpretation and discussion of the gaze as a concern of making.

Louise Bourgeois' *Red Room (Parents)*, and its companion piece *Red Room (Child)*, both 1994, offer the viewer an installation experience that might very well be described as the fantastic product of a highly suggestive collection and its interwoven narratives. The works constitute two installations of objects housed in two cell or zoetrope-like structures made from old doors. They are experienced by the viewer moving around the apertures between the doors and investigating from different vantage points the objects placed within.

Inside the enclosed space of *Red Room (Parents)* we find an arranged display of a bed and furniture. Yet everything in this room is not as it at first appears. More pertinently, this room appears conditioned by the double. The bed is double, the chests of drawers are double and a large oval mirror doubles the contents yet again. In this world of reflections the bed is made and the pillows are plumped up and ready for use. This is, however, no place of rest. Although orderly, this bed does not lend itself to relaxation. The room is a stage-set for the imaginary action of its occupiers: the absent and imagined parents.

Although similarly installed as a hidden space screened from the viewer, the character and suggestive quality of *Red Room (Child)* is very different. Where the room of the parents is cool, orderly and distant, by virtue of the reflective doubling, the room of the child is comparatively disordered, immediate and compelling. The collected objects, arranged and displayed around the walls, vary in their material but are compelling by virtue of their colourful unity. Key to the scene is an industrial thread stand that holds several spools of red thread. As Rainer Crone and Petrus Graf Schaesberg write:

If the smoothed out sheet [of the parents bed] is concealing chimeras of hidden desire, lust, and sensual pleasure; if its dense weave is imbued with the complexities of an unrestrained, unbridled imagination; if a solid warp and weft of complicity knots together this sheltered world of conventional, traditional, acceptable sentiments; then the thin, breakable thread in the child's room reveals the unfinished process of creative construction, a loosely-structured world of possibilities.<sup>7</sup>

In these stage-sets for the imagination, from where might instances of the gaze, the excess of vision, look back at us and prompt our desire to know, interpret and fantasise? If we remember Geerlinks' excessive image, here the monstrously deformed red glass hand and forearm, placed in tender proximity to smaller child-like versions, might promote interpretation through the excesses of the body. There are however two other instances of real excess that might properly be considered examples of the gaze; one is formal, the other an unexpected, unexplainable alien interruption to the predominant fantasy scene.<sup>8</sup>

At a formal level the zoetrope-like wooden door structure of both installations offers an excess of vision in two ways. First, the many vertical gaps between each door invite new and different perspectives, although the excess of vantage points reveals only more partial or occluded looking, and does not illuminate previously unseen detail. Secondly, when viewed outside and from a distance, the straining eye of the viewer sees an outside punctuated by many holes; an excess of holes that obscure the external world through the fantasy of the interior.

The alien object that interrupts the interior scene of the installations is the pink rubberised and elongated form, which hangs from a hook on the industrial thread stand. This pink form has a matt sheen and smooth surface, occasionally punctured by long pins. Its form alludes to organic matter and the body. It is excessive because of its infinite capacity to suggest interpretation. This is an object that can be many things and simultaneously nothing. It is suggestive of ham, sexual parts, body limbs, even a bladder. For Lacan, that which drives desire—the gaze, object, the "real"—is outside language and inassimilable to symbolisation. It is that which resists signification because it is impossible to integrate into the symbolic order, and this accounts for its traumatic quality. Based on this definition, Bourgeois' pink rubber intrusion may, through its incomprehensibility, be understood as a truly impossible object.

The aim of this essay was two-fold, to propose an extended taxonomy of knitting and to explore what might be at stake in unconventional contemporary art practices that knot and loop with threads. Susan Stewart's thinking about language and objects has enabled us to propose that more elaborate thinking about the act of knitting might reasonably include knitting as collecting; the collection or composition of diverse objects selected and arranged to promote a narrative thread; a fantasy of the 'self'. The metaphor of the hole in textiles similarly allows us to utilise the Lacanian gaze to critique an example of this extended classification of knitting and establish what might be wagered in such modes of making. From the study of Bourgeois' *Red Room* installations we can speculate that these works offer the risk of an encounter with the gaze. We may conclude, therefore, that in an extended taxonomy of knitting, what is at stake is not only the perpetuation of a self-fantasy but an encounter with the unassimilable; the impossible.