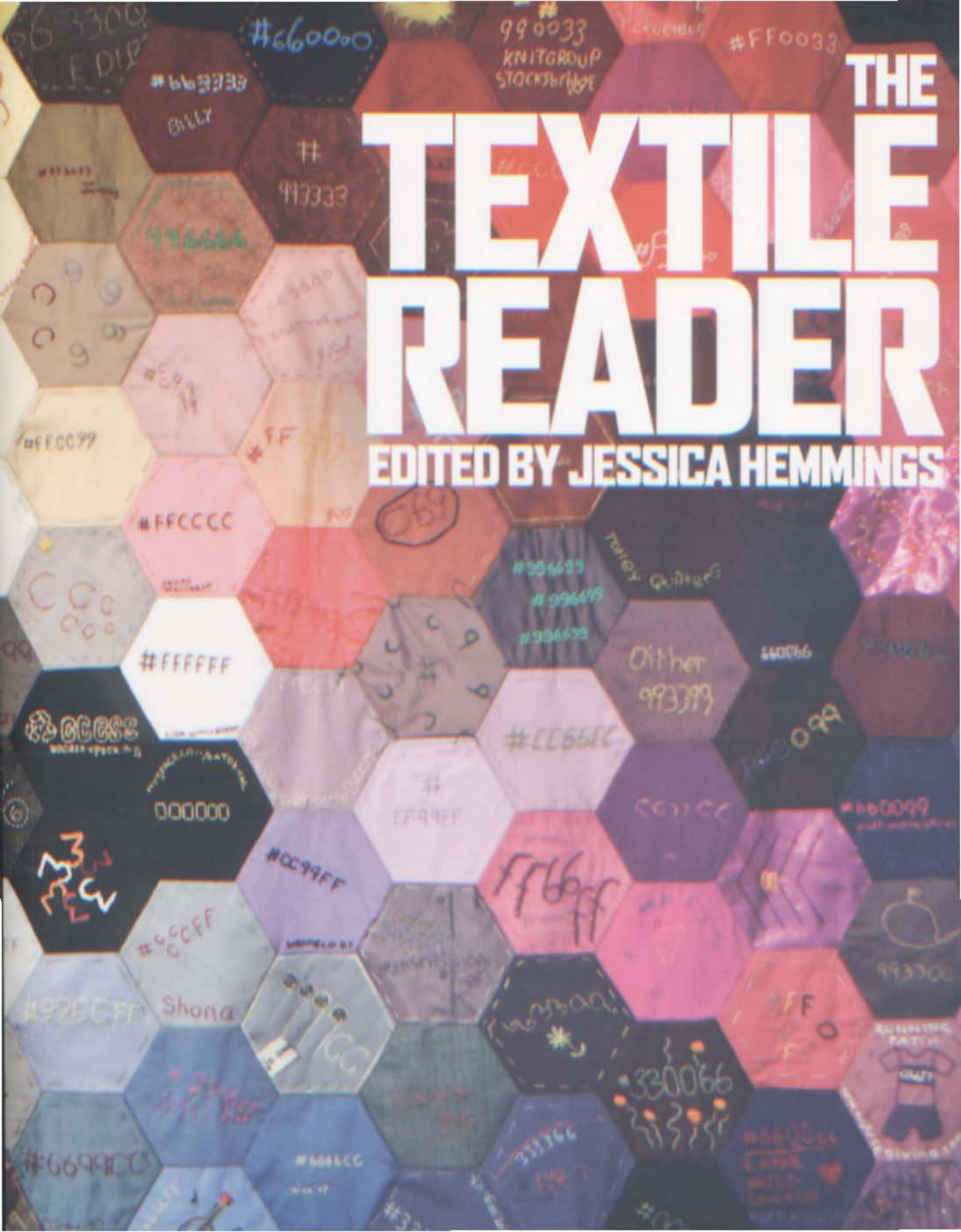
THE
TEXTILE
READER
EDITED BY JESSICA HEMMINGS

Jessica Hemmings is Head of Context and Deputy Director of Research at Edinburgh College of Art, University of Edinburgh. She writes articles and exhibition reviews for publications including *Crafts*, *Selvedge* and the *Surface Design Journal*, and is author of *Yvonne Vera: The Voice of Cloth* (2008), *Warp & Weft: Woven Textiles in Fashion, Art and Interiors* (2012) and editor of *In the Loop: Knitting Now* (2010).

The Textile Reader is the first anthology to address textiles as a distinctive area of cultural practice and a developing field of scholarly research. Revealing the full diversity of approaches to the study of textiles, *The Textile Reader* introduces the theoretical frameworks essential to the exploration of the textile from both a critical and a creative perspective.

Content is drawn from a wide range of genres – blogs, artists' statements and fiction, as well as critical writings – and organized in themed sections covering touch, memory, structure, politics, production and use. The content of each thematic section is separately introduced and concludes with a bibliography for further reading. *The Textile Reader* is an invaluable resource for students of textile design, textile art, applied arts and crafts and material culture.

Selected authors include: Anni Albers; Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari; Sarat Maharaj; Rozsika Parker; Sadie Plant; Peter Stallybrass; Alice Walker; and Catherine de Zegher.

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TESTING ORTHODOXY: COLLECTING, THE GAZE, KNITTING THE IMPOSSIBLE

Paul Whittaker and Clio Padovani

Editor's introduction: Dr. Paul Whittaker and Clio Padavani suggest that the structure of knitting—the basic loop and, more important, the void at the center of that loop—can be understood as a system for seeing the world. The pair test the psychoanalytic "gaze" and the notion of "collecting" as systems for the analysis of knitting. The knitting they write of is extreme and often unsettling, present in the difficult photographs of the German artist Margi Geerlinks and the complex large-scale installations of the late French artist Louise Bourgeois. Here, the innocuous structure of the loop is used to pull together a range of theoretical thinking. At the heart of the inquiry is the seemingly simple question "What is it to knit?"

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This essay tests the orthodoxy of knitting by proposing an elaboration in our understanding of its taxonomy and aims to establish what might be at stake in an extended classification of the practice of the knotting and looping of thread.

Originally a domestic activity, knitting is now a long-standing practice that encompasses the handmade and industrial manufacture of a complex range of utilitarian products: knitted things that serve a practical and often decorative purpose. For centuries handcrafting techniques and machine technologies have been utilised across the globe to create a diverse range of accessories and items of clothing often differentiated by different cultural and climate requirements. The European aristocracy first wore fine woollen knitted stockings in the thirteenth century. Fair Isle techniques were utilised to produce warm utilitarian sweaters for the peoples of the Scottish Isles in the seventeenth and eighteenth century, and in the twentieth century, machine-knitted fabrics have been utilised to enhance the function and appeal of automotive interiors.

Knitting has, as well as a utilitarian history, a strong social tradition. This can be demonstrated by, but not limited to, a variety of examples where the practice of knitting has contributed to the development and maintenance of a prevailing social

Source: Paul Whittaker and Clio Padovani, "Twists, Knots and Holes, Collecting, the Gaze and Knitting the Impossible." First published in Jessica Hemmings (ed.), *In the Loop: Knitting Now* (London: Black Dog, 2010) pp. 10–17. A revised version of the original essay is published here. Reproduced with permission.

order or ideology. In the pioneering history of America, as wagon trains extended the frontier of civilization, women knitted on the move, in covered wagons, to ensure their family was protected from the elements. Again in America, during the eighteenth-century resistance to British colonial rule, the American Daughters of Liberty supported the dissidents by utilising homespun yarns to produce knitted domestic clothing to compete with and replace the need for fashions made from 'modish bolts and bales from England'[1]. The role of knitting in support of the patriotic fervour of the Bostonian rebellion is amply demonstrated through this extract from a letter posted at the time.

'You may keep your goods . . . Thank God we have a glorious country; we can subsist independent of the whole world . . . A spirit of economy and industry has wonderfully diffused itself thro' this whole province . . . This daughter is constantly employed in spinning; both myself and wife, and all my children, wear clothes of her industry alone, all our stockings and gloves. My girl spins, and my wife assists in knitting . . . I cannot buy a pair of English woven stockings here under 6s[hillings] sterling a pair; & I firmly declare, that 1 pair of mine is worth the whole three.'[2]

Reminiscent of the American Daughters of Liberty, the twentieth-century British knitting circles offer another example of knitting in the service of opposition. During the World Wars the women in the United Kingdom were encouraged by the government to form knitting circles and produce warm clothing for the troops. Due to the short supply of raw materials underused garments were often unpicked and re-knitted to produce socks, balaclavas, sweaters and gloves. The actions of the knitting circles not only fulfilled a very practical need but also instilled in the protagonists a collective sense of contributing to the war effort.

Although the practice of knitting encompasses a complex range of products and a rich, social political history, its diversity is underpinned by a simple orthodoxy, one underlying law: the knotting and looping of a thread.

According to Jacques Lacan, the Law is not judicial legislation but instead a set of fundamental principles. It is the set of universal principles which underpin and govern 'all forms of social exchange, whether gift giving, kinship relations or the formation of pacts.' The Law regulates and prohibits our pleasure and excess and it is 'maintained by way of language, symbols, signs, the different modes of representation through which communication is maintained'.[3] Lacan states;

> Law, then, is revealed clearly enough as identical with an order of language. For without kinship nominations, no power is capable of instituting the order of preferences and taboos that bind and weave the yarn of linage through succeeding generations.[4]

For Lacan, the Law is inscribed in the order of the symbolic and, as such, both the Law and the symbolic constitute a radical alterity, an otherness that cannot be assimilated. The symbolic is an all-encompassing complex universe of language, social protocols and authorities through which the individual subject emerges. The Law and symbolic mediate our experience of reality by establishing the principles upon which society is based; the principles that work to maintain the social order: the prevailing ideology. If the Law and symbolic constitute the regulatory control of the subject, the process through which subjects enter into ideology and become subjected to its constraints involves, as Althusser states, 'concrete individuals misrecognizing themselves as subjects by taking up a socially given identity'.[5] In other words, for Althusser, as for Lacan, it is impossible for the subject to access the real conditions of existence due to their reliance on the symbolic; the language, ideals, signs, and representational forms that constitute the Law and which mediate existence. The symbolic, also referred to by Lacan as the big Other, pulls the strings. The subject doesn't so much speak or express itself through its assumed social position. It is instead "spoken" by the symbolic structure with which it identifies.

This is not to say that the subject's assimilation of ideology is complete or whole; or that the scope of available ideological identities is not complex. On the contrary, by necessity all ideologies include a point within their structures that they cannot account for or represent; and, in addition, ideology is never fixed, it is instead constantly in a state of being redefined.

In a way not very much removed from the practices of the Daughters of Liberty who knitted to communicate and practically effect a resistance to the strictures of a colonial ideology, knitting is today a practice or medium of choice for many contemporary artists who seek to explore, comment upon and promote new thinking about society and their understanding of it. By way of illustration, Rosemary Trockel has made pictures from machine-knitted woollen material that depict familiar signs and logos such as the hammer-and-sickle so as to ironically promote a feminist comment; Louise Unger has sculpted representations of body-like forms through the knitting of steel wire that force their audience to reconsider the veracity of the everyday object; Mike Kelly's soiled hand-knitted toys and blankets foraged from thrift stores, confront the values and systems of familial authority through their uncanny qualities and the suggestion of repression and Margi Geerlinks creates emotive photographic portraits that force a reconsideration of maternalism. For example, in *Young Lady One* a girl framed by a homely setting sits knitting in a familiar pose. Despite the context of the scene however, this girl's needles produce not a scarf or mittens but craft, instead, the fragment of a woman's body, a maturing breast. In *Untitled*, a transfixed woman dressed in white stares out from the photograph. In her hands she holds knitting needles from which hang the half finished knitted body of a young girl while a thread of wool snakes down from the knitted body and pools into a ball on the floor. The pictorial alliance of woman, child and the practice of knitting might conventionally suggest a content of motherhood and the familial. In these two images, however, these alliances,

Figure 17.1. Margi Geerlinks, *Untitled*, 1997–1998. Edition of six each, cibachrome, plexiglass, and dibond, 99 x 73.5 cm, 178 x 124.5 cm. Image courtesy of TORCH gallery.

arranged around the partial form of a knitted body, appear not familial but monstrous. The act of creation, rendered inert by the photograph, appears in these images to be more self-driven than a selfless act of life giving: more Dr Frankenstein than a Madonna and child.

These artists and others like them, utilise knitting in a way that might be reasonably understood to contribute to the social history of knitting but in doing so their work exceeds strongly the craft, utilitarian or the social conventions of knitting. If we accept that Geerlinks' photographs are 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, her works and others by Trockel, Unger etc. challenge the conventions of knitting. These works

transform our understanding of knitting by making knitting more than a technique of making that creates desirable objects with practical use value or a practice of knotting and looping of thread that is the expression of a social order: they promote the question, what is it to knit?

Susan Stewart offers a key to how we might consider the challenge that works made by artists such as Geerlinks offer to the definition of knitting, but also provides a stepping-stone to addressing what it means to knit. In *On Longing*, Stewart meditates on 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 [they] are defined in terms of their use value, they serve as extensions of the body into the environment, but when [they] are defined by the collection, such an extension is inverted, so the environment is subsumed into the scenario of the personal.' The implication in Stewart's thinking is that collections are constructions or compositions, and that 'the ultimate term in the series that constitutes a [collection] is the "self," the collector's own "identity"'.[6]

We may hypothesise, if we follow Stewart's lead, that the components that make up Geerlinks composed image of the knitted baby; 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 obscene tales.

If we can rethink and extend the taxonomy 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 tests the boundaries of knitting's principle orthodoxy, the Law of the knotting and the 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 and 1995, published under the title *The Insomnia Drawings*, offers a number of images that interestingly represent and reference the making of a textile. For example, *Le Cauchemar de Hayter*, an ink on lined paper 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 knitted doodle.

When considered by way of the writings of 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 [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.'[7] This means that, no matter how much material the patient enunciates there is always something missing in the process of analysis and that what is described there 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: the lost object. '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.'[8] 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.

Fantasy allows the subject to relate to the unattainable gaze by constructing a scene through which we, as subject, can take up a relation to its impossibility. The form of the fantasy image intercedes between the subject and the gaze or lost object but 'it allows the subject to relate to the lost object as an object that is simply out of reach'.[9] Although the subject may not gain the object in the fantasy, 'the subject can imagine obtaining it as a possibility, even if not for the subject itself'.[10] For psychoanalysts, fantasy is an imaginary scenario that fills in the gaps, holes or lost objects that permeate ideology. Fantasy 'serves as a way for the individual subject to imagine a path out of dissatisfaction produced by the demands of social existence'.[11] By distorting social reality through an imaginative act, fantasy creates both an opening to the impossible object and simultaneously allows the subject to take pleasure in an otherwise unattainable enjoyment.

The film theorist Todd McGowan argues that it is the excess in the fantasy image that marks the hole or gap of the gaze. He argues, by way of reference to the cinematic image, that the excess of the image may be seen in such factors as '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'.[12] A scene near the end of David Lynch's *Blue Velvet* exemplifies McGowan's argument. In the scene, the naked and badly beaten body of Dorothy Vallens (Isabella Rossellini) appears within an idyllic neighbourhood and Jeffrey (played by Kyle McLaughlan) is confronted by the ex-boyfriend of his new girlfriend Sandy. This scene does not, however, turn on the envy driven violent confrontation of the two men, but the appearance, 'as if from thin air', of Dorothy. At first, she is an undecipherable blot that no one—including the spectator—notices, but when her presence is detected it disorientates the scene completely. Her form disturbs the fantasy of the small town mis-en-scène by interrupting the predictable with an excess of embodied desire. The naked body speaks of the normally hidden extremes of sex, violence, fear and loathing and as such, found here at the level of the imaginary, represents an unexpected encounter with the Real.[13]

Although McGowan might identify the cinematic image as especially supporting of fantasy, we might also accept the premise that fantasy is a condition of other art forms. The cinema influences many contemporary artists and common 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 that 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 fantasy product of a process of knitting through collecting. The works constitute two installations of objects; each arranged in a circular cell-like structure made from old doors. The pieces are experienced in cinematic fashion by navigating apertures in the door-structures. These apertures focus the look of the viewer and facilitate the unfolding narrative of the scene by virtue of the viewer's movement.

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 all. 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. Central 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 parent's 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.'[14]

In these stage sets for the imagination, from where might the lost object marked by an excess of vision, look back at us and prompt our desire to know, interpret and fantasise? If we remember Geerlinks' excessive images, 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.[15]

At a formal level, the zoetrope wooden-door structure of both installations offers an excess that stains our vision in two ways. Firstly, 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 do 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, 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 *a*, 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 be thought, through its incomprehensibility, a truly impossible object.

The aim of this essay was to test the orthodoxy of knitting by proposing an elaboration in our understanding of its taxonomy and to establish what might be at stake in an extended classification of the practice of the knotting and looping of thread. 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 allowed us to utilise the theories of Lacan to critique an example of this extended classification of knitting and establish what might be at stake in such modes of making. From the study of Bourgeois' *Red Room* installations we can speculate that what is at stake in these works is potentially an encounter with the gaze. We may therefore conclude that in an extended taxonomy of knitting what may be at stake is not only the perpetuation of a self-fantasy but an encounter with the un-assimilatable: the impossibility of the lost object.

AFTERWORD

As we have seen, the Law and the symbolic mediate our experience and maintain the social order by regulating pleasure and governing how we interact with reality. Despite the prohibitions of the Law however the gaze can, in certain circumstances, stimulate fantasy and in so doing expose an encounter with the lost object. An encounter with the lost object constitutes both an opening to the impossible and an opportunity to take pleasure in that which is unattainable because it is beyond the symbolic. For Lacanian psychoanalysts, the transgression of the regulated pleasure principal of the Law or symbolic has powerful implications for the subject. Firstly, the subject mediated by the symbolic is conditioned to bear only a certain amount of pleasure. Consequently, when the subject goes beyond the limit set by the symbolic, pleasure becomes pain. Lacan calls this "painful pleasure" *jouissance*. Secondly, a traumatic encounter with the gaze may not only constitute an experience of *jouissance*—the pleasure and pain of exceeding the authority that mediates experience. It might according to McGowan entail the potential politicisation of the subject. He writes:

'Ideology constantly works to obscure the traumatic [Real] of the gaze because this [Real] threatens the stability of the social order that ideology protects. This stability depends on the illusion of wholeness and the power to account symbolically for everything. The [gaze] marks a point of failure, not just of the subject's look but also of ideology's explanatory power. That is to say, the [gaze or Real] traumatizes not just the subject that encounters it but also the big Other as well. The hold that symbolic authority has over subjects depends on the avoidance of the traumatic [Real] that exposes the imposture of all authority. When the subject experiences the traumatic [Real], it recognizes symbolic authority's failure to account for everything. This is the key to the political power of the gaze. Though the encounter with the gaze traumatizes the subject, it also provides the basis for the subject's freedom—freedom from the constraints of the big Other.'[16]

If we follow the thoughts of Lacan and McGowan we may proffer an additional speculative and radical afterthought to our conclusions regarding the testing of the orthodoxy of knitting. The social political history of knitting traces many occasions of gentle resistance: handcrafted oppositions to authority. A practice that tests orthodoxy and the Law of the knotting and looping of thread can suggest however, the capacity to not only contribute to a cause or raise political awareness, but the opportunity to not be "spoken" by the symbolic structure. It can effect an occasion of freedom.

NOTES

1. Macdonald, Anne L., *No Idle Hands: The Social History of American Knitting*, Ballantine Books, New York, 1998, p. 28.
2. Ibid, p. 30.
3. Evans, Dylan, *An Introductory Dictionary of Lacanian Psychoanalysis*, Routledge, London, 1996, pp. 98–99.
4. Lacan, Jacques, *Ecrits*, Routledge, 1977, p. 66.
5. McGowan, Todd, *The Real Gaze: Film Theory After Lacan*, State University of New York Press, 2007, p. 2.
6. Stewart, Susan, *On Longing*, Duke University Press, 1993, p. 162.

7. Lacan, Jacques, trans. Parveen Adams, chap 6, *Time and the Image*, Manchester University Press, 2000, p. 61.
8. McGowan, Todd, *The Real Gaze: Film Theory After Lacan*, State University of New York Press, 2007, p. 6.
9. Ibid., p. 24.
10. Ibid., p. 24.
11. Ibid., p. 24.
12. Ibid., p. 28.
13. The Real is the undifferentiated state that exists prior to the subject's insertion into the symbolic. The world of words creates the world of things but in doing so also creates the Real. The Real is the domain outside of the symbolic. The Real is the impossible and beyond capture by the symbolic. For this reason the Real has a traumatic effect on the subject. The gaze and object *a* have a Real effect.
14. Crone, Rainer & Schaesberg, *Louise Bourgeois, The Secret of the Cells*, Prestel, Munich-London-New York, p. 104.
15. We are indebted here to the exegesis of the different properties of the staged fantasy scene, Todd McGowan, *The Real Gaze: Film Theory After Lacan*, State University of New York Press, 2007.
16. McGowan, Todd, *The Real Gaze: Film Theory After Lacan*, State University of New York Press, 2007, p. 16.