

**Freddie Robins**

**Conference paper**

**Counterculture Crochet - Cosy**

**Goldsmith's, University of London, 6th July 2012**

This paper will be based around a selection of my own knitted works. It will reflect on my use of knitting to explore and subvert the pervasive issues of the domestic, motherhood, gender inequality and the craft/fine art divide. Issues that are still pertinent over thirty years after Su Richardson was producing her crochet and mixed media works for *Feministo: Portrait of the Artist as a Housewife*. I didn't see the exhibitions. I grew up in a family that did not engage with art or go to exhibitions. I first discovered Su's work in the early 1990's when I saw the book *Women and Craft* in a second hand bookshop. I was drawn to it because of Su's crocheted *Burnt Breakfast* on the cover. It brought to mind a bag that I had knitted from a pattern by Alan Dart, which was published in the girls' magazine *Jackie* in the late 1970's when I was a teenager. I still had the bag, I still had the pattern so I bought the book.

***Knitted Homes of Crime***

**2002 Hand knitted wool, quilted lining fabric, knitted by Jean Arkell**

**Installed at firstsite at the Minories in Colchester**

This work is comprised of seven hand-knitted tea cosies in the form of houses. But these are not the sweet, benign objects that they appear to be. These are the homes of female killers or the houses where they committed their crimes. When someone commits a heinous crime, such as murder, they are damned, when a women commits it she is doubly damned, once for committing the crime and once for going against her sex. Women are supposed to be nurturing and life giving. The murderers that I used are all women that killed alone, women that killed without the participation of a man. Some of the victims are women, some men, some children but not the killer's children.

When I exhibit these works I also include text, which tells the stories of the murders and the amount of time it took to knit the houses. The inspiration for the forms came from my collection of vintage and contemporary knitting patterns and knitted objects. I have a number of knitted tea cosies representing quaint, stereotypical country cottages. The idyllic country home. My knitted tea cosies are true representations of the houses in question. I found some photographs of the houses in books, others I had the addresses for and went and photographed them. I then made knitting patterns from the photographs.

As with many of my hand knitted pieces this piece was knitted by someone else, in this case Jean Arkell. I sampled and wrote the patterns and then got Jean, a very skilled and fast knitter to make them. The pieces were then returned to me and I embroidered the detail and made them up into the finished cosies. We made one house per month for 7 months. We worked by post with me also sending the story of the crime along with the pattern and yarn. I am very aware of the undervaluing of anonymous skilled labour and always fully credit and pay anyone whose skill and hands I use in the production of my work. This includes credits on gallery labelling and in printed catalogues.

In the course of my research into the stories behind the murders I was constantly amazed by the derogatory terms that were applied to many of the women. *Charlotte* (14 ½ Hours) “enjoyed a drink and had a reputation as an amateur prostitute in the local pubs. Apparently her toothlessness and lice did not put the men off”. I was also intrigued by the very domestic nature of most of the killings. *Ethel* (10 hours) the occupier of this semi-detached house put strychnine in her husband’s corned beef sandwiches. A supposedly nurturing act of preparing food and sustaining life becomes an act of extinguishing life.

*Christiana* (20 hours) injected chocolate creams with strychnine in an attempt to poison the object of her desire’s wife but sadly ended up poisoning a young boy.

It was here that I discovered the saying “When poison is found the murder’s gowned”

*Styllou* (22 ½ hours) is a much more violent case but the murder was still committed through the use of a domestic object. *Styllou* killed her daughter-in-law by hitting her with the ash-plate from the stove, she then strangled her and then set her alight! It also transpired that the last two women to be hanged in Britain, Ruth Ellis and *Styllou* Christofi committed their crimes in the same road. South Hill Park, Hampstead. It seems that the vortex of evil resides in a residential road in north-west London.

### ***How to make a piece of work when you’re too tired to make decisions***

**2004, woollen yarn, dress pins**

This piece of work was conceived of during the first few months of my daughter’s life when I was lying in bed at night, over tired but unable to sleep. I had optimistically arranged to go to Berlin on an artist’s residency when my daughter was going to be 6 months old. I was unable to stop crying let alone concentrate on making work. I knew that when I did manage to make work again it

would no longer be possible for me to approach it in the same way that I had before. My studio practice was built on continuity of time and thought, which was no longer available to me. My work is technically challenging and even during my pregnancy I had found it increasingly difficult to make the necessary decisions, let alone do the required mathematical equations. For sometime prior to this I had also been considering how I might go about making abstract pieces, up until this time all my work has been of a figurative nature. My work had also been increasing in scale and I wanted this to continue. With much less time available to me the only way that this was possible was to make smaller components which, when placed together, would form a large work. This piece aimed to address all of the above. It took the decision making away from me and let it rest on the throw of a dice. It also enabled me to make work in very short periods of time where continuity of time or thought was not necessary. I could make work when I was tired or even give the dice and instructions to someone else and they could make it for me, no pattern necessary!

Although in the past I have adopted a very controlled approach to my studio practice I have always loved serendipity. The idea of making something through chance held great appeal for me.

I used 3 dice, one to decide the colour of the yarns that I would use, one to give me numbers for stitches and rows and the other to decide the actions such as “hook up side of knitting”, “turn knitting” or “decrease 1 stitch fully-fashioned at the beginning of each row”. Each individual piece was made using 10 actions. The instructions, numbers dice and actions dice were modified after several experiments to give more consistently successful results. The finished piece is on going. The arrangement of individual pieces can be changed and it can be added to at anytime. The instructions and dice are open to modification should it become necessary or should I feel like it. As Constance Spry, the infamous educator, florist and author, said, “Accept no rules”. I’ll come back to Constance Spry later.

Here the piece can be seen installed in the Crafts Council's exhibition from 2005 *Knit 2 together: Concepts in Knitting*. An exhibition that I co-curated for them alongside Katy Bevan. The pieces are pinned out with dressmaking pins like some form of woollen taxidermy.

More recently I have discovered an organisation called Enemies of Good Art.<sup>i</sup> Formed in April 2009 Enemies of Good Art seeks to investigate the possibilities of combining art practice and family commitments. In particular it seeks to encourage participation by parents and their children in a series of public discussions and art based events. They take their name from the writer Cyril Connolly<sup>ii</sup> who in his 1938 novel, *Enemies of Promise*, an exploration of why he failed to become

the successful author of fiction that he had aspired to be in his youth, asserted that “there is no more somber enemy of good art than the pram in the hall”.

***IT SUCKS*, 2005 Hand knitted 2-ply Shetland Lace Yarn, hand knitted by Audrey Yates**

My work often employs humour and text to communicate messages. I like to play on words to make visual suggestions. In the past I have made hand knitted banners containing phrases such as,

*DO I FIT IN, WHAT ARE YOU LOOKING AT and I'M SO ANGRY.*

In this piece commissioned by the Pump House Gallery in Battersea, *IT SUCKS*, I subverted the traditional hand knitted Shetland Lace christening shawl to communicate the very mixed feelings, not all together positive, that I had upon the birth of my daughter and becoming a new mother.

Knitting has been a source of income for women in Shetland for many years and continues to be so for some today. In the past when the men were at sea, it was up to the women to run the croft. Women spent their days growing crops, caring for the animals, carrying peat from the hills for the fire and gathering winter fodder. Any free time was spent in knitting with the items made, most commonly elaborately patterned jumpers or lace shawls, either used as essential clothing for the family or to be sold as a way of boosting the meager family income. The recent renewed interest in knitting has not come from financial necessity and is associated with relaxation<sup>iii</sup> and fun. Having to knit for a living cannot be relaxing or much fun, like my experience of new motherhood, it sucks. The baby literally sucks too of course.

*IT SUCKS* was commissioned for *Ceremony*, an exhibition held at the Pump House Gallery in Battersea in 2005. It was an exhibition that I initiated and co-curated alongside the resident curator, Sandra Ross. Janice Jefferies was also involved with the exhibition, as a consultant during the research and development stage and later writing an essay for the catalogue. I mentioned and quoted from Constance Fry earlier as she has become an important figure for me since seeing her exhibition *A Millionaire for a Few Pence* at the Design Museum in 2004. Sandra and I went to the exhibition as part of our background research. *Ceremony* was born out of a discussion about the relevance, application and value of craft skills in today's society and the need to platform contemporary craft in visual arts venues, especially in London. Constance Spry's exhibition and the negative reactions that it received encapsulated the kinds of attitudes that we wanted to challenge. Spry considered herself an artist, and believed that other women might express themselves artistically, too, using flowers as their medium. She made a pastime for the gentry more widely accessible, and encouraged artistic expression among women of all backgrounds. The exhibition at the Design Museum came 44 years after her death and inspired

incredulous reactions from those involved in the more industrial sector of the design world. When James Dyson, most well known for his range of domestic vacuum cleaners, resigned his chairmanship of the Design Museum later that same year, he reportedly cited this exhibition as the 'last straw'.

His objections were echoed by another famous designer of domestic products, Sir Terence Conran. The art of designing a flower arrangement is apparently a much lesser thing than the art of designing the vase that might contain it!

With *Ceremony* an idea that we kept coming back to was the way that unique crafted objects play an integral role in the execution of traditional rites of passage, from the knitted christening shawl to the gold wedding ring and finally the floral funeral wreath. As well as exploring the rituals themselves, this exhibition provided a glimpse of the diverse range of craft practices and techniques used by contemporary practitioners. It gave exposure to under-valued skills such as knitting, embroidery, quilting, cake decorating, wreath making and floristry and brought into question the traditional hierarchical domains of fine and applied art.

In this installation shot *IT SUCKS*, the work by me, a mid-career artist is shown alongside two other white works, the quilted satin *Love, Honour & Obey* by Serena Korda, an artist at the beginning of her career, and the veteran artist, Rozanne Hawksley's glove wreath *Pale Armistice* loaned from the Imperial War Museum Collection.

For the final two weeks of the exhibition the *Cast-Off* knitting collective, led by Rachael Matthews, took up residency in the gallery to produce their *Knitted Wedding* where I was cast as the knitted bride and my husband Ben the knitted groom. The wedding itself was the finale of the exhibition. Literally hundreds of people took part in producing the knitted items for the wedding and even more turned up on the day to participate in the open, no invitation necessary celebration. This event ignited mass interest. It appears that everyone loves a wedding and everyone loves to knit. A common art for a common rite of passage. This event has an enormous legacy and received mass popular press coverage. We appeared on ITV's *This Morning* with Phillip Schofield and Fern Britton and in the Christmas special of *Ask the Nation*. The Knitted Wedding also featured in many publications, most notably *Now* magazine and *The Daily Express*. The event was even papped, with photographs appearing on online photographic agencies pages alongside photographs of A-list celebrities. Craft raised to the giddy heights of celebrity or selling its soul for 5 minutes of fame.

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<sup>i</sup> *Enemies of Good Art* [www.enemiesofgoodart.org](http://www.enemiesofgoodart.org) Formed in April 2009 by artist, Martina Mullaney and journalist and television researcher, Ana Shorter, later joined by artists Jemima Brown, Cat Phillipps and Lizzy Le Quesne.

<sup>ii</sup> *Cyril Vernon Connolly* (10 September 1903 – 26 November 1974) was an English intellectual, literary critic and writer. He was the editor of the influential literary magazine *Horizon* (1940–1949) and wrote *Enemies of Promise* (1938), which combined literary criticism with an autobiographical exploration of why he failed to become the successful author of fiction that he had aspired to be in his youth.

<sup>iii</sup> *Dr Herbert Benson*, Director of the Institute for Mind, Body Medicine at Massachusetts General Hospital and Associate Professor of Medicine at Harvard Medical School has carried out many clinical trials involving Mindfulness and has found that it can evoke the relaxation response to bring down blood pressure, heart rate and help to prevent stress related illnesses. He's even found that it can improve fertility and mentions knitting as one of the activities capable of evoking the relaxation response. This is the same relaxation response that is elicited when someone meditates.