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From Function to Fashion to a Contemporary Art Process, Journey's Within a Fisherman's Rib Jumper

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This paper investigates a number of journeys discovered within a fisherman's rib jumper. The thread of each journey was unravelled whilst considering the notion, *Could a process of unmaking become a form of making*. This question framed a process lead studio research that centred on haptic experimentation. The vehicle chosen to investigate this question was that of the unravelling of a knitted garment. Along side a studio investigation, a number of threads were followed that connect a 1980's fashion garment with historic coastal fishing economies in the United Kingdom. Connections were also unravelled between the machine construction of the garment and the growth of mass production in 1980's Britain and between the Australian wool economy and British manufacturing during the 1980's. The paper will conclude by introducing a number of contemporary artworks that resulted from the studio investigations into the notion, *Could a method of unmaking become a form of making?*

My interest in unmaking arose after many years of managing its regular occurrence in much of my traditional textile handwork. I have explored many different forms of textile hand-making, but the one thing that all the processes shared was, at times, high degrees of frustration, with my regular need to unravel mistakes in my chosen making process. After a series of particularly intense struggles with making then unmaking, I began to consider what might happen if *I worked with* a process of unmaking, placing it at the centre of my studio research, rather than being frustrated by its presence. The outcomes that follow combine a nine-month journey of both studio and theoretical investigations into unmaking.



Figure 1: Fisherman's rib jumper, neck detail, (Source: Christine Wiltshier, 2015).

I chose to begin my investigations into unmaking by working with a ready-made garment, a Fisherman's rib jumper, (Fig.1) to enable my attention, from the very beginning, to focus on the haptic nature of the unravelling process. I hoped through focusing my attention on the haptic movements of the unravelling threads, to investigate possible interactions between

hand eye and thought, that can occur, at times when working with hand centred processes.¹ In choosing a previously owned garment I was also keen to explore the potential 'used' clothing might hold, influenced by the work of Peter Stallybrass, particularly his essay *Worn Worlds: clothes, mourning and the life of things*. In this essay Stallybrass explores in detail connections between cloth and memory, both the memory of the material itself and that of its wearer. In particular he describes the notion that clothing, "is transformed by maker and wearer alike"² and that memories of this transformation are held within the cloth. In considering Stallybrass text, I wondered if a form of transformation might occur when a piece of clothing was being unmade, rather than being made and if this were possible what form might this transformation take? As the first threads of the jumper tentatively loosened, other questions were added to this enquire, including, who might have made this jumper, how might they have made it and for what purpose?

These questions circled through my thoughts as the first few rows of stitches unravelled, and the how of the jumpers making surfaced, as I realised that although I was unmaking a Fisherman's Rib pattern I had never, in my limited knitting experience, constructed this stitch. Researching how the stitch might be made, rather than unmade, lead me to June Hemmons Hiatt's knitter's almanac, *The Principles of Knitting* in which Fisherman's Rib stitch is classified as both a decorative form of (brioche) pattern, but also a pattern that creates a reversible and thermally efficient cloth. These qualities are due in part, Hemmons Hiatt suggests, to the cellular nature of the stitch's construction. One method of creating Brioche patterns is to use a simple knit below technique. In this technique every second knitted stitch is worked into the stitch below rather than working into the stitch on the needle itself. This process allows the stitch on the left hand (holding) needle to unravel as it is being worked from below, by the right hand needle, creating the brioche pattern³. This process is shown below in Figures 2 and 3. Knitting the Fisherman's rib or Brioche pattern in this manner, it could be argued, involves unmaking becoming a form of making.



Figure 2: Brioche stitch, working needle in stitch below
(Source: Christine Wiltshier, 2015).



Figure 3: Brioche stitch, holding needle stitch unmaking.

¹ LeeUfan, "The art of encounter." In *The Craft Reader*, ed. by Glen Adamson. (New York and United Kingdom: Berg, 2004), 548-551.

² Peter Stallybrass, "Worn worlds: Clothes, Mourning and the Life of Things," In *The Textile Reader*, ed. Jessica Hemmings. (London and New York: Berg, 2012), 68-77.

³ June Hemmons Hiatt, *The principles of Knitting Methods and Techniques of Hand Knitting* (Sydney: Simon & Schuster, 2012), 187-189.

As I continued to unravel the Fisherman's rib stitches, reflecting on the presence of unmaking in their construction, I began to consider the patterns Fisherman's rib name. Wondering if fisherman had some how worked with this stitch, perhaps creating their own garments with this flexible but dense stitch? After all, I pondered, working on and around water, in all manner of weather, would require a special form of garment, one that allowed for both flexibility of movement and warmth. Might the Fisherman rib pattern, with its thermal and flexible qualities combined with the water repellent nature of the woollen yarn, typically used in knitted garments, be named after working fishermen?

Professor Sandy Black, in her publication, *Knitting, Fashion, Industry, Craft*, connects knitting by hand with preindustrial coastal fishing communities of the British Isles and describes the functionality of knitted garments, including their thermal and waterproof properties. Black also describes the economic benefits that hand knitting brought to these often subsistence economies. In these communities fishing was a seasonal and predominantly male occupation (women and girls were involved in preparing the catch for sale, once it reached land). Although knitted garments, including jumpers, were worn by fisherman knitting was the domain of women and girls, who knitted both for family and for payment, usually undertook the process itself. The portability of knitting, Black suggests and the minimal equipment required to knit also allowed the women (and girls) to undertake knitting alongside seasonal occupations such as herring gutting and croft farming, as well as the daily domestic duties of the home⁴ (Fig.4).



Figure 4: Knitting whilst peat carrying, (Source: Shetland Museum, 2016).

For example, on the Shetland Isles, an archipelago off the northeastern tip of the British Isles, women of all ages and marital status were involved in knitting. Described as an “occupation of necessity”⁵ by gender historian Lynn Abrams, the women knitters of Shetland were also at the centre of a complex economic network, involving fellow islanders, mainlanders and

⁴ Sandy Black, *Knitting Fashion, Industry, Craft*. (London: V&A Publishing, 2012), 51-60.

⁵ Lynn Abrams, *Myth and Materiality in a Women's World Shetland 1800-2000*. (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005), 99.

visiting fishing boat crews, all connected by the making, bartering, selling and trading of predominately knitted hosiery, and later lace work shawls, rather than jumpers.⁶ Similarly women in the coastal communities of Cornwall, in the very south west of the British Isles, knitted to support their families. Mary Wright in *Cornish Guernseys and Knit-Frocks* describes how Cornish coastal waters supported a strong, but again seasonal fishing industry, which at times took men away from their communities for long periods. Wright also states that many Cornish fishermen journeyed to the booming fledgling colonies of Australia and New Zealand for work, leaving families, to fend for themselves and the knitting of jumpers or guernesys as they were known locally, was one of the ways they achieved this, (Fig.5). Interestingly the focus of Cornish knitwear production was the making of jumpers rather than the hosiery favoured by Shetland knitters and as the women knitters were paid per completed garment, Wright notes, that complex patterns, used in the making of jumpers for family members, were gradually simplified for commercial production suggesting the possibility that Fisherman's Rib was one of the patterns that became more frequently used.⁷

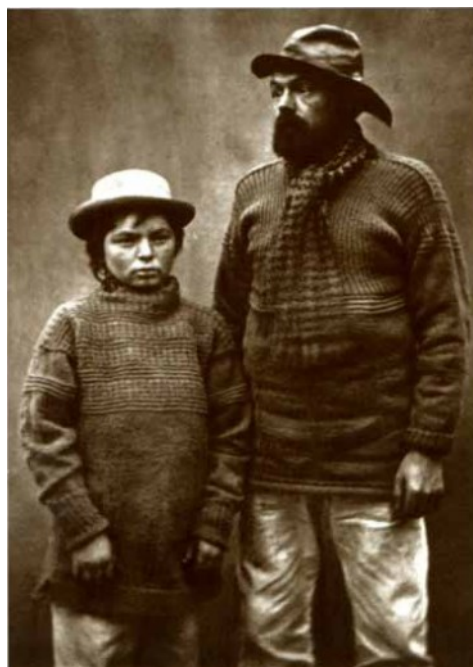


Figure 5: Cornish fishermen wearing knitted frocks, (Source: *Cornish Guernseys & Knit-frocks*, 1988).

Returning to the threads of the unravelling of the Fisherman's rib jumper, the historic images of the harshness of daily survival, in the fishing and knitting communities, filled my thoughts. Might there be a thread of connection, I wondered, between the economic necessity to refine traditional knitting patterns and the rise of machine manufacturing and the eventual development of mass-produced garments for a global rather than a local market?

The Fisherman's rib jumper chosen to explore the notion of unmaking was purchased, as a fashion garment, in Britain where I was living, in the early 1980s. During this time period manufacturing industries through out the British Isles were undergoing radical changes, which eventuated in the closure of large swaths of manufacturing industries, including those based on textiles. The resulting job losses were documented nightly, county-by-county, on

⁶ Abrams, *Myth and Materiality in a Women's World Shetland 1800-2000*, 84-121.

⁷ Mary Wright, *Cornish Guernsey & Knit-frocks*. (Worcestershire: Polperro Heritage Press, 2008), 1-30.

the national television news.⁸ Searching for possible connections between the jumper's construction and this time of unmaking in British manufacturing industries, I examined the construction of the garment pieces more closely. Noticing on the inside of the garment that the jumper pieces were joined together using a machine overlapped stitch. This process and the release of multiple loose threads, from the garments unravelling seams,⁹ suggested that the Fisherman's rib jumper was completely machine-made, possibly using a method where by individual garment pieces were cut from a large piece of machine made 'Fisherman's Rib cloth' and were then machine stitched together to form a jumper, (Fig 6-7). The close examination of the unravelling seams also provided a connection between this mass-produced garment and global markets through the presence of a small industry label that stated, *Made in Britain from Australian wool*.



Figure 6: Detail of machine overlapped jumper seams



Figure 7: Jumper seams showing multiple threads unravelling
(Source: Christine Wiltshier, 2015)

In his text *The Australian Wool Industry*, Hirsch Munz describes the growing and exporting of wool in Australia as an “industry almost as old as the colony itself” and that Britain, in the early years of the fledgling Australian industry, was the sole purchaser of the Australian wool clip, which was used in the burgeoning British textile mills from the industrial revolution onwards. Munz also discusses the notion that Australia's early growth and prosperity was the result of ‘Riding on the Sheep's back’, although profits from global wool markets could often be fickle.¹⁰ Particularly once countries such as China and Japan joined Britain as strong markets for Australia wool. For example in the early 1980s profits from wool sales fluctuated under the influence of depressed global economies.¹¹ However by the mid 1980s the markets instability changed as Australian wool was embraced by many international fashion houses. This global fashion connection reached its zenith during Australia's 1988 Bicentennial celebrations, during which Australian and International designers created contemporary garments, using Australian wool that explored Australian landscape and culture. The highlight of this collaboration was a fashion show held at the Sydney Opera house, details of which were published global.¹²

⁸ Irene Hardhill, “The Recent Restructuring in the British Wool Textile Industry,” *Geography* Vol. 75 (1990), accessed September 2, 2016, URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40571842>. 203-210.

⁹ A single unravelling thread usually denotes a hand knitting process.

¹⁰ Hirsch Munz, *The Australian wool industry* (Sydney: Angus and Roberson, 1950).

¹¹ I R Thomas ed. “Challenges facing the Australian sheep industry in the 1980s and beyond,” Proceedings of the Australian Sheep and wool refresher course, Melbourne, Victoria, November 24-28, 1980.

¹² Barbara Hitches, comp. *Wool in Australia 1938-1988*. (Victoria: Australian Wool Corporation, 1988), 48-51.

During the mid 1980s the Fisherman's rib jumper made a journey to Australia, accompanying me as I settled in Sydney. However due to the subtropical climates of our new home the jumper languished mainly in storage for years, that is until it was rediscovered for this research into unmaking. In between following threads that investigated the how why and where of this jumper, my studio unmaking explored connections between memory, yarn and unravelling. Working in a domestic environment, somewhere between the darkness of late evening and the diffuseness of early dawn, my solitary unravelling became an experimental form of making, in which I reframed familial textile memories and combined them with the white noise of domesticity. Later I continued to explore the haptic nature of unravelling, bringing a mindful attention to the process, which resulted in a reflective stream of consciousness writing. The artworks that unravelled from this experimental form of making were also guided by the notion that a documentation of process can become a form of making. The artwork, *In a Dark(ened) Room*¹³ is based on this notion and is a performance based video projection, (Fig.8) which references the jumpers nocturnal unravelling, both visually and through the captured white noise of domesticity. The video moves from close up detail to long shot images of the repetitive art of unravelling, drawing attention to the haptic qualities of this process. The video installation is accompanied by a collection of spoken word monologues that also experiment with documentation as a form of making, through describing the unravelling process and combining this with re-remembered textile memories, using poetic prose.



Figure 8: *In a Dark(ened) Room*, still image from, single channel video projection, (Source: Christine Wiltshier, 2015.)

¹³ <https://vimeo.com/144269425>.

The most recent artwork to have evolved from research into unmaking as a form of making, is an on going installation series, entitled; *Break in Connection, Inconsequential Conversations*, (Fig.9,10,11). This work considers the absence and presence of familial conversations and their unique relevance to the individual family. Documented in hand written red ink, on lengths of unravelling cloth, everyday memories of the past and present are interwoven with those wishfully imagined. Each fabric memoir, in between installations, is carefully rolled and stored with a paper reference. Each handling of these memory bundles displaces tiny amounts of ink and fibre particles, gradually erasing the collected memories, the process expressing the tangled complexity and transient, ephemeral nature of memories.



Figure 9 & 10: *Break in Connection, Inconsequential Conversations*, installation details, (Source, Christine Wiltshier 2016).



Figure 11: *Inconsequential Conversations*, installation view, See Street Gallery, Sydney, Australia, (Source, Christine Wiltshier, 2016).

At the beginning of this research paper I posed, amongst many questions, one that asked might a form of transformation occur during the unmaking of a cloth garment? in response to Peter Stallybrass suggestion that the wearing and making of clothing can be a transformative experience. As individual threads unravelled from the knitted jumper, they retained the memory of this process and this notion of memory contained within threads became the vehicle with which I explored a number of journeys held within this Fisherman's rib jumper and in the process transformed a functional, but barely wore fashion garment into a history laden object and a contemporary art making process.

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