Books/Book Chapters

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Knotting Things

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Objects have now become things again: the disputed topic of a virtual assembly.[1]

How does one approach Sarah Browne's *Carpet for the Irish Pavilion at the Venice Biennale* as a *thing*? This is not a banal question. Whatever the *Carpet*'s relation to specific craft skills, to sculptural form, to local industry and global economies, to the various concerns of those who gathered to make it, all of the translations, mediations and complications that have brought the *Carpet* to the Istituto Provinciale per l'Infanzia Santa Maria della Pietà can be understood only if we approach the carpet as a thing rather than as a more or less intriguing object. This question of 'thingliness' concerns how an object has been gathered together so that it can then stand apart before us, not to represent this gathering as a sign of something having taken place elsewhere so much as to translate and extend its action to another gathering, here in the Istituto. Bruno Latour claims that to write of things rather than of objects is to understand them as a network of social relations, a *gathering* around *matters of concern*.[2] Perhaps we are connected more by these matters of concern than by anything else; matters that we gather to dispute, and the things through which we gather are always in dispute also, divisive, never simply matters of fact. Hence, Latour calls for *Dingpolitik*, an 'object-oriented democracy' that will examine new and appropriate representations to display the ways in which things gather actors together.[3]

What kind of thing is the *Carpet*? How has it been assembled? Around what matters of concern has it gathered, and how many actors participated in this gathering? How does the gathering of each knot also gather all of these concerns and act now for those who made it?

Latour laments that we should need a catastrophe such as that of the Columbia crash in 2003 to demonstrate the complex gathering of things; but perhaps we don't. The *Carpet* stands before us as what we might call, without melodrama, the minor catastrophe of a redundancy in the sense that it is made of surplus wool by ex-workers of Donegal Carpets of Killybegs, Donegal. This company has a tradition of making hand-knotted pile carpets for a luxury market, especially for embassies (both Irish embassies abroad and foreign embassies in Ireland) and palaces. The factory was established in Donegal in 1898 under the supervision of Arts & Crafts designer

1 Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor–Network–Theory*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 119.
2 Bruno Latour, 'Why Has Criticism Run Out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern', *Critical Inquiry* 30 (2004): 225–248; *What Is the Style of Matters of Concern?* (Assen: Royal Van Gorcum, 2008).
3 Bruno Latour, 'From Realpolitik to Dingpolitik, or: How to Make Things Public,' in *Making Things Public: atmospheres of democracy*, eds., B. Latour and P. Weibel, (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2005), 4.

Alexander Morton and subsidised initially by the Congested Districts Board who oversaw on the part of the British government the promotion of skills and employment amongst women in some of the most impoverished, predominantly rural regions of Ireland. Since a peak in production in the 1950s the company has been in steady decline. In the past few years it has moved production of machine-knotted carpets to a new factory not far from Killybegs. This enterprise is subsidised by Údarás na Gaeltachta, an Irish government agency for the promotion of skills and employment throughout the Gaeltacht areas of Ireland. All production of hand-knotted carpets is now outsourced to the Philippines.

For the *Carpet* Browne has employed ex-workers of Donegal Carpets, all women, to knot a carpet from various amounts of surplus wool taken from the new factory. The carpet has been made on looms in the old factory, however, now the site of a craft heritage centre. This is the carpet's first anachronism: it has been made on looms that, although still in working order, now operate within the spectacle of former labour that is the heritage industry. The looms themselves became redundant following relocation of the place of work and redistribution of value in the marketplace. It is fitting, then, that Browne should select leftover wool stock for the *Carpet*, as it is a question here both of an economy and its surplus and of an economy of surplus.

Browne's decisions concerning the design of the *Carpet* are bound to the colour and weight of wool available (four colours: cream, beige, pink, and deep brown), which is directly proportional to the area to be covered (9m²) and also determines the time of fabrication. The primary problem here has been how to introduce necessity into what could be otherwise a radically subjective design based on arbitrary quantities, dimensions and colours; a necessity that displaces decision-making and assigns authorship to the gathering of a number of actors.

There is another understanding of redundancy, familiar from linguistics and cybernetics,[4] as patterning that increases predictability of meaning and enables communication. In this second sense, for a pattern to create redundancy is for it to carry no new information for an observer.

As a redundant *thing*, the *Carpet* patterns surplus: in other words, it creates redundancy (in the second sense) out of redundancy (in the first sense), so that an observer can come to know the network of relations gathered by the pattern into a singular case, an example that stands in for and makes intelligible to this observer an aggregate of events and relations when the latter are unavailable. The pattern does not stand over and above those who gathered to make it but, as an example, 'engenders and produces itself... by means of a 'placing beside', a 'joining together' and, above all, a 'showing' and an 'exposing'.'[5] The key relation here is between a singular case and what is shown through it. It is important to note the bit-part status of this pattern as an example — its relating of parts to parts, not parts to a whole, and its provisional nature — as this makes it better suited to stand in for and represent in the stronger sense what Michel de Certeau famously described as 'hidden' or 'nocturnal' production that is 'devious... dispersed, [but] insinuates itself everywhere, silently and almost invisibly, because it does not manifest itself through its own products, but rather through its ways of using the products imposed by a dominant economic order.'[6]

The *Carpet* offers to represent some of the otherwise 'nocturnal' tactical operations of those whose skills have become largely redundant but are still put to use. This representation is a more difficult task than it is often assumed to be, but one that the *Carpet* might accomplish because here representation is immanent to production, closing the gap between the production of an image and its otherwise secondary, hidden usage.[7]

This brings us to a second anachronism, that of the *Carpet* as a representative within a national institution. Browne indicates this anachronism in her initial decision to connect Donegal Carpets with the structure of the Venice Biennale, and it can only grow more striking with the gathering together of what one might call, cautiously, a *social fabric* incompatible with and irreducible to such an institution.

Browne works through similar concerns and techniques in another recent work, *A Model Society*, completed in 2008. According to the World Database of Happiness at the time

4 Gregory Bateson, 'Cybernetic Explanation', in *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*, (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1972).

5 Giorgio Agamben, 'Qu'est-ce qu'un paradigme?' in *Signatura Rerum: sur la méthode*, (Paris : J. Vrin, 'Librairie Philosophique,' 2008), 25.
6 Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. S. Randall, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), xii–xiii.
7 Ibid, xiii.

(2000-2008), Iceland was reported to have the happiest population in the world.[8] Intrigued by the question of how the representations of an apparent model society might be mediated by its members, Browne gathered responses from a survey about life in Iceland, and then knitted these into *lopapeysa* or *lopi* sweaters, familiar icons of Icelandic national identity. The sweaters were then modelled and photographed using the imagery of ideal landscapes and harmonious social relations that conventionally accompany knitting pattern brochures.

Here, a social fabric gathers together through knitting patterns. The different techniques used by Browne, the survey, modelling, knitting and a provisional gift economy whereby models were paid with the knitting pattern brochures that included photographs of them, all attempt to introduce a critical space in an economy of clichéd representations; a space, that is, to which participants are brought by divisive matters of concern that include working practices, economics, service provision, insularity, and so on. Furthermore, through Browne's project the *lopapeysa* is shown to be a various and irregular thing, untenable as the authentic national signature that it still is for many. Given the present dangers of notions of genetic citizenship there is also a biopolitical charge to this ethnography of 'second skins'.[9]

... textile images are never imposed on the surface of the cloth: their patterns are always emergent from an active matrix, implicit in a web which makes them immanent to the processes from which they emerge.[10]

At Donegal Carpets they use the Turkish or Ghiordes knot, a symmetrical knot made by drawing coloured weft across and behind neighbouring warp yarns, pulled back together between them and then cut. At every point the process is the pattern that it will become. That a textile pattern might be immanent to its fabrication, as noted by Sadie Plant, indicates the value of textile production to the construction of social connections and their representation, as evidence of a locally fabricated representation that is not imposed upon a background fabric of relations already made. Problems arise when we privilege anteriority and continuity in representations over and above those who gather to fabricate them.

The process, because it involves a gathering, is also always more than the pattern that it will become. It is telling that there is a general tendency to unnecessarily elaborate and overproduce textiles,[11] to engage excessively in gathering and fabrication. As a thing the *Carpet* gathers more than the image or emblem it carries; but also as a thing the *Carpet* exceeds those who fabricate it. To use Latour's terminology, the *Carpet* is not an intermediary that passively carries a prior representation but is, rather, a mediator that transforms what it carries and adds complexity.[12] At every point of its fabrication and its fabric the carpet assembles and transforms social connections, and it continues to act as a mediator to those who gather around it in the Istituto.

The task facing Browne has been to enable the representation of the greatest number possible of actors and translations without bringing them under a global pattern. This entails flattening representation to the horizontal plane of conviviality, negotiation, and translation; a relation of parts through a network of actors. 'Social worlds remain flat at all points, without there being any folding that might permit a passage from the 'micro' to the 'macro'.'[13] If this is the case, as Latour suggests, then it is a question of redistributing locality so that we are not left with an impossible leap from the local face-to-face interactions to global mediations and institutions. Despite the protocols of the pavilion, Browne is only one actor among many in a

8 Ruut Veenhoven, *World Database of Happiness, Distributional Findings in Nations*, Erasmus University Rotterdam. Available at: www.worlddatabaseofhappiness.eur.nl
9 Gísli Pálsson, 'A Model Genome', in *A Model Society: patterns and thoughts*, (Leitrim: cottagelab, 2008), unpaginated.
10 Sadie Plant, *Zeros and Ones: digital women and the new techno–culture*, (London: Fourth Estate, 1998), 67.

11 Ibid, 62.
12 Latour, *Reassembling the Social*, op.cit, 39.
13 Bruno Latour, 'On Interobjectivity,' *Mind, Culture and Activity*, vol. 3, no. 4, (1996), 240.

flattening, if still uneven network. Walking across the *Carpet* in the Istituto does not destroy the work but simply continues this flattening.

Browne's methods of engagement and her techniques for distributing action correspond to the much-discussed ethnographic turn in arts practices, whereby art practice passes into the expanded field of culture.[14] Methodological problems concerning fieldwork, participation and observation displace to a great extent more conventional ones of authorship and display. Browne draws upon a repertoire of methods taken broadly from the social sciences, including focus-group research, interviews, vox pop, photographic and filmic documentation, questionnaires, as well as imitating some of its forms of display and distribution.

Raising a number of still pertinent concerns arising from what he describes as 'ethnographer envy' among artists and critics, Hal Foster calls for parallactic work that frames the artist-ethnographer as well as the other. Browne's methods offer a different approach. She engages with economic relations and the reciprocation of representation with production rather than the cultural politics of alterity, whilst at no point assuming that the subjects of her research occupy the position of the real.[15] Such an assumption would discredit as a document the unedited, feature-length film accompanying the *Carpet*, a film in which Browne has attempted to place her own labour and competence beside that of the knotters without giving the one over to the other.[16]

One wonders just how consequential self-framing and critical reflexivity might be for those faced with pressing matters of concern: firstly because a contextual, reflexive questioning of the activity of rule is fully consistent with the liberal governmentality that currently dominates; secondly, and more importantly, reflexivity begs the question of the gathering of actors around matters of concern and too often leads to glorious failures or a lack of engagement altogether, as Foster himself acknowledges.[17] Instead of critical distance, then, what are the possibilities of 'critical proximity'?[18]

Finally, then, what is the matter of concern around which the *Carpet* gathers? Most obviously, local consequences of the current financial crisis: redundancy, unemployment, and the impoverishment of political action. It would be crude to burden Browne or any other artist with the modelling of political organisation in response to a crisis, financial or otherwise; but when our means of representation are so saturated and so over-determined by a discourse of economic realism, it is essential that ways are found to trace connections, to multiply actors, to demonstrate the complexity of representation, to expand forms of assembly, and finally to make mediators of what otherwise would be intermediaries. The problem of an intermediary is that it presupposes the reality of matters of fact, which would allow multiple perspectives but still leave a core reality untouched. The potential of the practices developed by Browne is that establishing connections between mediators brings those realities into dispute.

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14 Hal Foster, 'The Artist as Ethnographer', in *Return of the Real: the avant–garde at the end of the century*, (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1996).
15 On 'parallactic work,' see Foster, op.cit., 203; on the 'realist assumption,' see 174.
16 *Nota bene*. At the time of writing (March 2009), this film is still in process. All comments made are based upon conversations with the artist.
17 Ibid, 203.
18 Latour, *Reassembling the Social*, op.cit., 253.