The Knot Age

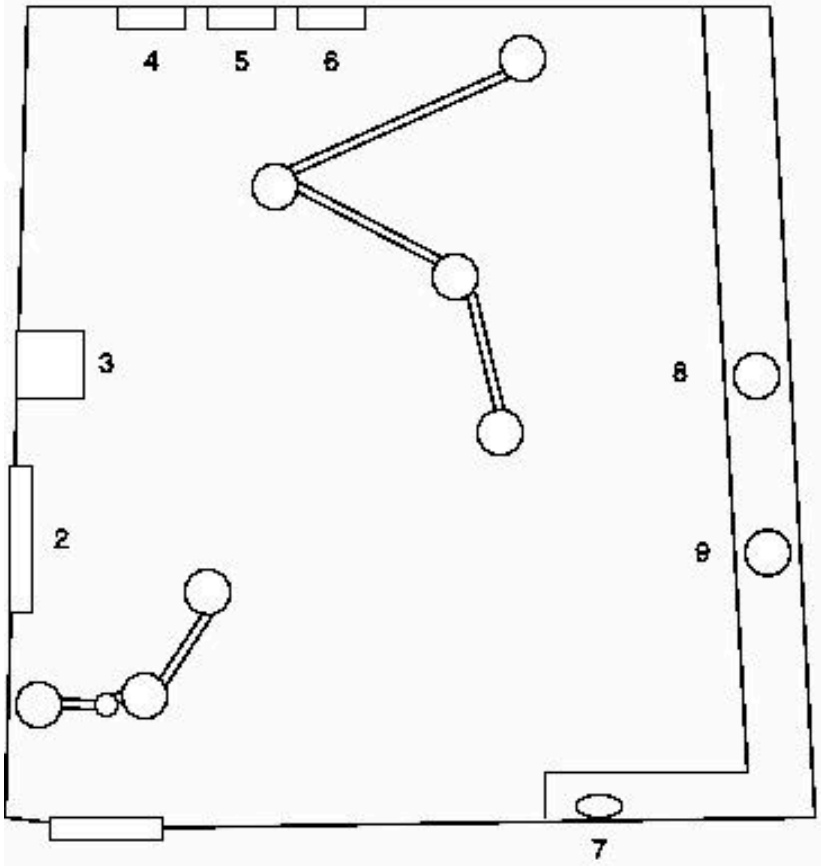
The Knot Age is an exhibition by Alice Kasahara Macrae and Freddie Wise. The exhibition is a materialisation of the language of knots through collaboratively made sculptures and drawings. Their work explores the significance in the beauty and functionality of the knot - be that at the centre of a tea ceremony or the plaits on a horse's mane. The work plays on ephemeral moments of familiarity with knots alongside their use as a lens to understand and examine the world. Welded queuing poles recall waiting in snakes at airport passport control or the smoking area outside of a club, while also standing in place as nodes on a network.

The Knot Age proposes knots as an alternative historical paradigm. It challenges orthodox categorisations of time which order epochs with reference to heavy building materials (*stone*, *bronze, iron*), and their connotations of industry, warfare, and patriarchy. As K. Le Guin details the radicality of emphasising the vessel, this exhibition, by seeing the heart of civilisation as knots and the detail of their craft creates a new way of seeing. The exhibition explores the web of knots: from weavings, motorway systems, DNA strands, tangled headphone wires and dog toys. Found knots are fossilised, unable to be untied.

Historically, knots have been used as an information storage device - memories, witchcraft and time have all been bound and recorded by knotted cord. *Quipu* knots were used by Andean people as an accounting system to log and organise, to record tax or collect census data. Similarly, in the Southern Islands of Japan, *Warazan,* made of knotted and woven rice straw, was used for data storage and as a numerical system for calculations. Knots have also stored spells and magic. North Sea witches were known to deposit winds in knotted rope or hair and sold them to sailors - undo one for a breeze or three for a gale. In the exhibition, ropes connecting metal poles within the room have areas of coloured markings. This rope was previously knotted into a *Chinese Flower Knot (image 1)* and spray painted. Unravelled for the exhibition, the work stores and records the ropes past in patches of silver and orange.

(image 1)

Accompanying the exhibition, enclosed in this booklet, are a collection of texts from friends and knot practitioners reflecting on their relationship to knotting.



The Knot Age

1: *Node Poles,* welded steel, rope, PVC paint, wover inner tubes, ink on board, and egg tempera on polyethylene foam

2: *Drawing 1,* ink on paper

3: *Missing Painting Syndrome,* acrylic and sand on canvas

4, 5 and 6: *untitled,* ink on board, and egg tempera on polyethylene foam

7. *Two Ceramics,* ceramic, wood ash glaze, smoke fired

8 and 9: *Headphones,* pine resin

9: knotted inner tubes

A Small Ode to Knots

It somehow feels strange to write about knots. Although I use them everyday, it's never in the world of words. In fact, they seem quite apart from it. Each knot I have been taught by the hands of another, for example. A few words of description, perhaps a name, but little more. Then they are used. My environment is that of ships. Lashing a jib to the bowsprit in a gale, hoisting a spar aloft, making fast a towline. This is work where words, if any, are direct, literal, and are often lost in the wind. The elemental forces tend to leave the impression and the language is not that of words but of movement and action.

To make it even stranger, a knot is often a temporary thing. Called up by who needs it in the moment it is needed. A good knot will then disappear again as soon as it is no longer required. In the meantime, it has silently laboured at its task. They are in some sense slippery. Unless you are engaged and present in the use of a knot, all you often see is a coil of rope. When looked at in a book they appear as puzzles. They seem to lose their meaning when separated from their use. I had never considered the strengths of different hitches to a spar, and had probably never noticed one, until I had to hoist a boom above mine and my shipmates heads. The intricacies of the knot gained vitality as it gripped the huge piece of wood and calmly held it above us.

Knots require some respect. Firstly, a knot is either correct or terribly wrong. They are generous, but they demand to be learnt well and will be useless if miss-tied. Poor knot tying on a boat can result in some pretty terrible situations. Also, as anyone who has been fishing can attest, ropes and lines have an incredible tendency to knot themselves. An unwanted knot in the wrong place can also have horrible consequences, think of Captain Ahab, his own line transformed into a noose in a second. Creating knots requires skill and care and so does preventing them.

As a personal reflection; I find knots to be honest things. Unassuming, but always on call. I learnt them for free, and as long as I remember them and there is rope, they will help me lift things up and tie things down forever. There is no monthly subscription required. A true convivial tool.

Charlie Barker

Dolere

Overnight: a grief came

knocking

on my door.

The night was

dark, frost-bitten.

My shadow and I

moved through the bedroom

toward the door

as one

like a ribbon

bound, imprisoned, perfect, symmetrical.

Grief, a knot

tying our last embrace,

the eternal snag,

snapping history shut for good.

Dreaming of you dancing

at a party, full of colour, psychedelics,

when you plastered

a tab of acid

over my heart.

And I woke

to the knocking.

Eleanor Tennyson

Thinking Net, The Images of Thought

Like memory, which deteriorates or becomes selective over time, images fade and become part of a system of identifiable forms. These could eventually gain collective recognition. Images are today what tools were ages before “now”. They are useful little colour compositions that help us identify, think, and remember. They are a body that seems one but means much. A system of numbers and pixels accumulated to generate something that we can use as we speak.

There is one other thing that is somewhat like a tool, somewhat like a body, somehow like a computer, that functions in numeric passages, following a rigid structure, but creating something fluid. That could be called a loom, or the motion of weaving. Several threads cross over to create a new urbanism, a map of networks that, by influencing each other, influence the whole. The fabric is in itself a world of ‘cross-influenced matter, where the transit from one thread to the other is a continuous rhythm of construction, sequencing, and change. Like people, a bunch of paths cross over, communicate, and exchange, all to create the cloud made of net that surveys us and from which we all depart from and navigate within. We all seemingly create the map of infinite connections and unthinkable compositions in a variety of ways that then speak by themselves. The fabric of life.

The loom is a field in all aspects, a field where things come to burst, to change, or to die. A battle field of made-decisions, with two soldiers, the weaver and the intent. Digital, virtual, data, rigid equations in their origin; Images, physics, reality are flexible at last. The numbered-named pedals conducted by the pressing dance of the feet compose the progressive sound of the warp. So this is about the rendering orchestra. The ’visual-virtual’ impressions that it encompasses and the allowance for the ever-changing substance of reality to be born and to prosper so naturally uncontrollable.

Maria Appleton

Untying

Language shapes the way that we think, confining our understanding to narrow concepts. The confusing identity of a thing can be quickly grasped when it is merged with the symbol of something known, creating metaphorical understanding. But saying that something is something else can flatten as much as it can add depth – forcing the unknown to conform to our way of (mis)understanding the world. Similarly, adjectives and similes only allow us to understand something in relation to what we already know. This matters when, say, the alien thing we are trying to understand is living systems, and our reductive language leads us to completely misunderstand the fundamental dynamics of life.

It's often said that complex problems, such as environmental ones, are knotty. And, well, they are. But they are also so much weirder. Although knots capture entanglement, emphasise relations, and tap into ancient cultural symbolism relating to life and "nature," they are a totally inadequate concept for describing systems that lie beyond the traditional spatial and temporal scales of human understanding, and, like all reductive language, they reproduce a harmful way of thinking. The reasons why I think this span ecology, ontology, and the study of complex adaptive systems, all of which I will touch on briefly to untie the knot metaphor.

Living systems are complex adaptive systems. But what does complexity really mean? It's not the same as being complicated. Knots can be complicated, but they are never complex. A complicated problem can usually be dealt with mechanistically, by simply pulling the right part of the rope. A complex problem cannot; the rope you pull coevolves with and resists your hand, and the rest of the writhing mass of entangled fibres react algorithmically to, and coevolve with, the displaced rope – suddenly the knot you thought you were untying is a different kind.

Let's imagine you managed to "untie" an ecosystem. You wouldn't be left holding a straight piece of rope, but rather an entirely different knot, or possibly nothing at all. That's because living systems exhibit non-linear dynamics, flipping from one state to another when pushed in just the right way for an uncertain amount of time. If knot 1 is a forest, you pull at a part of it hard enough and it's suddenly a different knot – knot 2 – a grassland. Or, if the climate is dry, the rope itself crumbles to dust and all that remains is a desert, as the only things allowing water to enter the soil were the tree roots you just removed.

Living systems are self-organising and self-sustaining. Unlike a rope, every living component of a complex system is also the environment for something smaller. Life cyclically creates the conditions required for life to exist. Trees slow the wind, cast the shade, draw up the nutrients, drain the water, and make the relationships required for more trees to exist, along with all other life in a forest ecosystem which also sustain the life of the forest. This is an example of reciprocal causality – something definitely not to be found in knots.

This all tells us something about knot ontology. Clearly a living system is not really like a knot because it is self-organising and constantly changing, while a knot of rope behaves with linear predictability. Yet, we still use knots to describe the living world and treat it accordingly. This suits the "Western" ontology of static and discrete being which claims that reality is formed of substances. In contrast, the dynamic

systems within and around us point to a process ontology of becoming, in which all things are ever-changing and understood in relation to one another. But why does the ontological basis of terminology matter?

Well, in the tradition of being, reality has been divided up into physical and non-physical stuff by dualists. The non-physical was then jettisoned in the creation of the scientific worldview. The former allowed the privilege of non-physical soul or consciousness to be held exclusively by humans, and the latter facilitated the rejection of consciousness and the reframing of reality as inert matter to be manipulated and exploited. Although it shouldn't, this way of viewing the world has moral implications which many blame for ending the Holocene and causing mass extinction. In contrast, an ontology of becoming doesn't divide reality; mind and matter are the stuff of the world, and therefore it is a belief that is more compatible with respectful and caring value systems conducive to the continuation and flourishing of life. The problem is, much of our language reproduces the static, linear understanding of being – like the use of "knot" as ecological metaphor. Knots are technological, and without the knowledge required to understand the knotty aspects of living systems without reducing them to that, we risk hiding the profound weirdness of life from ourselves. Clearly we need new words and metaphors for understanding a more complex, perpetually unfolding and transforming world. This is an urgent job for artists and poets.

Simon Handy

How to Hang a Banner

One year ago, alongside my newly formed group of activists, we decided to hang a banner above the Paris ring-road as part of a global mobilisation against the oil giant *Total Energies*. With the help of twenty hands, two huge banners had been painted, riveted, and knotted to multiple ropes to prepare the late outside hanging. A few hours later, friendly hands gave us bridge door access. Both banners were hung within a minute.

We went back down, we spread out. It was a success, we thought.
Two hours later, two unknown men were seen untying knots. They then left with some of the rope they had set free.
Ten hours later, there were no more banners. They had been uninstalled.

A waste of material, time and energy, and a legal risk for less impact. But it was the first action for us, and the start of a reflection on our strategy, especially on our *investment versus impact* ratio. How could we ensure a minimum level of durability over time? How could we hang banners while making them hard to uninstall ? The question soon became : how can we easily hang a banner on top of a street light from the floor, solidly, while difficult to dismantle?

A few months later, 3 AM.
A tennis ball flies over a lamppost; the rope hung to it draws an ellipse in the air. The ball hit the pavement; the rope settled on the horizontal bar of the light.
We now can exchange the ball with the banner and raise it, but we first need a knot. A knot that's easy to remember, simple and quick to tie in the stress and gloom of night-time action. A knot that slides easily over a dozen metres before tightening irrevocably onto its target, resisting wind and friction. Knots are designed to constrain – to constrain a sail, a body, a neck – and this one has the same purpose, while liberating: to constrain a banner from falling, to enclose it on street furniture and to reclaim public space.

The banner is now up and high. We pack up.
A black car with tinted windows pulls up beside us. A police squad gets out. One of us tries to get out, and gets caught. Taser in hand. They check our identity, they search for the links that bind us together. The tension drops quickly when the office explains to us that they cannot really charge us regarding French law: the banner is not insulting, does not deteriorate anything, and is not hung on a protected monument or building.
They let us go with all our equipment and the last banner to put up tonight. Lucky little white activists.

They had plastic handcuffs in their back pockets. Plastic knots.

Lo

Growing Knots

Knitting is a tradition that is born out of the earth, out of what was already there. Knots in knitting recreate and reinterpret twists, loops and bows found in nature. As well as inspiration, the natural environment has provided knitting with the necessary physical materials, whether that be wool, cotton or silk. I am of the understanding that knitting is a process that is truly akin to the earth. Knitted pieces are more than just objects as they grow organically.

To explore this idea further, we first need to try and define the difference between an object and an organism. Usually, this is an easy distinction to make. It is generally understood that an object is something that is made and an organism is something which grows. However, knitting manages to blur these usually well-defined boundaries. Generally, a maker will work on the surface of a material to create something new. In doing so the work and the material can be understood in isolation from one another; an inside and an outside is created. This is where knitting diverges from other practices, as the surface of the material and the finished article are created in unison. This tight interweaving that occurs between the yarn and finished knitwear means that the division between the source material and the knitwear is lessened. The knitting grows from the ground simultaneously with its material.

Like the original material, culture is also entangled, woven and nestled into finished knitted pieces, allowing the wearer to be held by both the earth and their heritage. This is evident in the aran jumpers historically produced on the Aran Islands off the west coast of Ireland. Traditionally, these jumpers were made using unscoured wool which had particularly high levels of lanolin oil that occurred naturally in the sheep. This made the pieces waterproof, protective and the perfect uniform for fishermen. The resilient material is the earth's offering, but culture is also braided into the jumpers through the symbolic patterns, such as ropes and diamonds. The former would have played an integral role in the fisherman's work and the latter would have been used to symbolise the bounty they hoped to bring back to shore. The combination of these intricate patterns and the specific qualities of the yarn tell a narrative of a particular place at a particular time. Nature and heritage are intertwined and made resilient in these pieces.

Knitting holds so much power as it allows us to bring something that already exists in nature to be turned into something wearable. In this process, nature is transformed into the man-made and culture becomes impossibly intertwined. This enables knitwear to straddle the boundary between a living organism and an object.

Imogen Denton

Thinking in Knots

Philosophy unravels the knots in our thinking; hence its results must be simple, but its activity is as complicated as the knots that it unravels.
Wittgenstein

Thought, beholden to certain requirements and pressures, can find itself in knots. Philosophy proves this.

If we understand philosophy as a living record of our attempts to seek perfections, then the knots Wittgenstein uncovers, and sets out to unravel, are the stubborn record of our limitations in these pursuits, and the limitations of the requirements and pressures that direct our thought in this direction. An awareness of these knots arises out of the unwelcome stumbling, freezing, and confusion we find ourselves in, from time to time, within a philosophical problem. Knots confront us. They drive us to ask questions we feel we can't answer or to produce answers to questions we feel we don't properly understand.

It's easy, perhaps natural, which is to say human, for this rough-knotted ground to be threatening, unwanted. Corbusier voices these instincts: "in the old-world timber beam there may be lurking some treacherous knot". It is familiar in philosophy to seek smooth thinking, where theories are constructed on firmer, cleaner ground, away from the treacherous knots of our 'old' world — the drive towards, or requirement of, crystalline purity.

Only, out of such purity we cannot breathe, and we cannot think the human world. As Wittgenstein presents our condition: "We have got on to slippery ice where there is no friction, and so, in a certain sense, the conditions are ideal; but also, just because of that, we are unable to walk. We want to walk: so we need friction. Back to the rough ground!" I think of this as being turned around by the knot, travelling along its twists to return, in contrast to seeking to overcome its treachery.

If philosophy, and art, are to express as clearly as they can the world, and to direct the understanding and attention of others to their world, then they cannot avoid knots, even if they ultimately seek to unravel them.

Therefore, philosophy guided by knots, turned by them, requests a kind of return to, or recovery and reclamation of, our ordinary life. To understand the knots in our thinking, we must trace the very steps taken to get to the very place we ended up. This involves burying oneself in the complication and unravelling it. Knots stand for a philosophy of going back to the rough ground, of turning over our ordinary lives, and thinking here not over there.

We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time. (T.S. Elliot)

This brief dialogue of the knot – between avoidance and return – helps highlight the contradiction that is the knot. It is a representation of things collected together and also of paths choked. It teeters between unity and blockage. Such dialogue is a recognisably human dialogue, seen and heard in the conflicting yet natural appeal, in philosophy and elsewhere, of rigidity and fluidity, complication and simplicity, permanence and transience. For the freedom to and the freedom from. If, for Wittgenstein, philosophy's results are simple, these contradictions must be understood as making up the terrain over which its activity of unravelling knots is conducted.

Daniel Simons