

Wool is 44% Carbon

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WOOL IS 44% CARBON

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Abstract

Carbon Footprint is one of the Lovely Weather Donegal Residencies projects initiated by Leonardo/Olats and the Regional Cultural Centre of Donegal. It is a process-based work using Inishowen sheep wool and hand spinning as the primary metaphors to articulate the intrinsic relationship between climate change and economics. This project works to rejuvenate the use of local wool and low-tech/slow-tech making by returning the site of production to the individual. This frames the material and making as political acts, de-coupling the link between green house gas emissions and gross domestic product.

In the fall of 2009 I received the call for submissions for *Lovely Weather*. An examination of my own “Donegal sweater” served as the seed from which the project blossomed (Fig. 1). A glance at the tags revealed the garment’s deceit. Made in Thailand for American Eagle, this sweater had no connection to Donegal other than in name. As an icon of Donegal, the sweater existed past the place, and I wanted very much to re-engage this object with its roots. I planned to rephrase it so it would demonstrate its continued relevance in contemporary discourse, not simply in the area of clothing, but in representations of landscape, commodity, and climate change. This initial desire grew into Carbon Footprint/Carbon Fingerprint, a project highlighting the value of using local wool as a means of developing local economy and recontextualizing wool as a form of carbon capture.

A contemporary fiction of difficulty surrounds many activities once com-

Fig. 1. My Donegal Sweater. (Photo © Seema Goel)



monplace. For example, few people still make their own bread, and yet we cannot imagine a day without this staple. Similarly, spinning wool into yarn is thought arduous and labour intensive, but it is a task of remarkable simplicity. The task of transforming wool into yarn can be done with nothing more sophisticated than a stick and a weight. My mentor in the wool world, Mary O’Rourke, begins her spinning workshops by declaring that anyone can spin “with a stick and a potato if that’s all you’ve got.” So I suppose this project then is about a stick and a potato. This ongoing work is slowly transforming 30 kg of wool (about 12 cubic metres) into yarn and felt. The participants are many and varied, from all age groups and many professions. From politicians to farmers to school children, over 300 residents of Inishowen and Donegal have engaged with the piece over the months of its development.

One of the virtues of this work is the re-injection of value into wool. Wool is a zero-profit undertaking for farmers and is treated almost as a waste product. This year’s market price was 75¢ per kilo. While the sheep here aren’t bred for wool, their fleece is still absolutely serviceable. A hank of homespun washes clean to that distinctive creamy white so iconic of Aran sweaters. The wool itself functions as a portrait of Inishowen made literally of the earth, air, and water of the area; it represents the landscape completely. Though sheep are everywhere, few people had ever used the local wool. A large part of my task was to re-engage the community with the product.

My first connection with the community was through a series of spinning workshops in three of the larger villages and in several schools. This resulted in Spin-in, a one day art-action where community members spun Inishowen wool into yarn on drop-spindles in front of empty shop fronts in Carndonagh (Fig. 2). For one stormy day, the town centre was bustling with people in front of the empty stores, re-activating these spaces. As one person remarked, “Even though there’s a recession on, there is still work to be done and work to be had.” In a Gandhian ploy, we used spinning as an act of independence, achievement, ability, and resistance.

Subsequent to this, the Carbon Footprint Studio emerged as a hub for activity around wool and the associated craft processes. Workshops began immediately with locals offering their knowledge and skills to teach each other about felt-

ing, dyeing, spinning, knitting, and crochet. Developing a life of its own within days, the Studio continued to run for 10 weeks and assisted in spawning a new wool-craft co-op in Inishowen, which continues to offer public sessions of spinning and knitting in the community. For my project, local community members knit the spun wool into socks, translating the data from Malin Head meteorology station and other climate change data into something tactile. The socks, an intimate and personal object, become the layer between the wearer and the ground, re-establishing a sense of place in the garment and a softer cycle of manufacture and consumption.

Fig. 2. Kathleen O’Hara Farren and Laoise Farren. (Photo: Paul McGuckin)



The final gallery piece included the socks and other garments knit by the community and became an installation of constant addition. Modifying an antique, hand-cranked sock-knitting machine to advance digital images on a monitor, I invited the viewer to be part of the larger project of wool transformation. The images were of a person hand-knitting a scarf from the homespun wool, and the hand cranking action advanced the frames to create a simple animation sequence controlled by the viewer’s participation in knitting an endless sock in the gallery (Fig. 3). This action not only includes the viewer in the work, it connects the individual actions into a much larger collective whole that continues the work.

This project is about spinning, wool, carbon capture, carbon sources, people, economics and Inishowen, but it is really



Fig. 3. View of gallery installation.
(© Seema Goel)

about a community reinforcing itself. Wool becomes yarn through two processes—the draught (or pull), and the twist. With these two actions, individual wool fibres are intertwined, transforming the material from something fluffy and weak into something with more tensile strength than steel. In this case the project pulled at an issue and bound together a group of people, strengthening their determination to engage with the planet in a mindful way.

A bit scratchy against the skin and smelling slightly of sheep, the hat describing the anti-clockwise spiral of a hurricane hugs my head (figure 4).

An artefact from the Carbon Footprint/Carbon Fingerprint project, and the anti-thesis of American Eagle's ersatz Donegal sweater, it is one of my dearest garments. Inishowen wool is made of Inishowen.

Fig. 4. Hurricane Hat (© Seema Goel.
Photo © Andrea Goutier [1].)



Testimonials

The older people tell me they haven't seen a spinning wheel in action since they were children and are delighted to see the tradition being kept alive while some of the young people who called into the studio had never even picked up a pair of knitting needles, never mind seen a spinning wheel in action.



Fig. 5. Community Contact—Ruth McCartney (Carbon Footprint Studio Manager). (Photo: Paul McGuckin)

The use of the drop spindle returns to idea of industry to the individual and this is an aspect of the project I find really empowering for the locality. In a place with such a high rate of unemployment and where the economic downturn is so apparent via the empty shops that line the streets it is wonderful to see people come and reactivate those spaces. For locals to see this type activity taking place in the centre of town is hugely encouraging. I also think that seeing activity and rejuvenation in the locality is a great incentive to participate and to continue individual action outside of the project. It can be daunting to try to take on issues like climate change and economic crisis at an individual level, but this project makes you realise that simply making a change in the way you think and the things you buy can effect change.

I have been amazed at the response we have received and the interest that is shown even by people just wandering into the studio out of curiosity. Every person that I have spoken to has been moved by it in a different way, and hearing their stories has been the most rewarding part of the work for me.

In the words of - Dr. Rowan Fealy (ICARUS—Irish Climate Analysis and Research Units, National University of Ireland Maynooth): “One of the key issues with communicating the science of climate change is the overwhelming scale of the issue and the resultant sense of isolation. As a consequence, there is a lack of connection between climate science and the individuals whose lives are likely to be most affected. In seeking to lessen this gulf, the Carbon Footprint project has taken a traditional product, that of wool, and spun it with a new twist, incorporating the science into socks . . . and has succeeded in making the intangible a little more tangible” [2].

References and Notes

1. Goutier (2008), < <http://stringinmotion.blogspot.com> >, accessed 1 June 2010. Image reproduced with permission of the artist.
2. Personal correspondence with the author.