



## Statement at the Opening Preview

### Threads of Empowerment: Conflict Textiles' International Journey Exhibition

Ulster Museum, 20 June 2024

*Roberta Bacic:*

Today, 20 June 2024, we have come together at Ulster Museum to celebrate the start of our exhibition *Threads of Empowerment: Conflict Textiles' International Journey*.

Each of us present here are part of this interwoven community.

Many of you have joined us from the start and others along our journey.

Thank you all.

Why Threads of Empowerment?

We chose the word empowerment because we genuinely believe in the power of the needle, the thread and the scrap of material as communication. These are a way to hear new voices and speak new languages, a unique way to communicate memory, testimony and resistance to political violence.

When words are not enough to express lived experiences of violence, stitching and sewing has emerged as a language, empowering more people to share their stories and experiences.

We believe in these voices.

Conflict Textiles and the Conflict Textiles Trust are now custodians of some 400 pieces that embody these stories. We exhibit these all over the world.

I express my profound gratitude to the *arpilleristas*, sewers, and artists who are here today through their works. We share this space with all the comrades and companions who have made these works as acts of sharing and resistance.

I want to also share my deep appreciation, especially to our partner, the Ulster Museum, who has chosen to bring this language to so many people by supporting this Exhibition. It is hugely significant that these 29 pieces hang in the Ulster Museum, which reaches many different and diverse publics.

Thank you for helping us be surrounded by *arpilleras* today that cross borders of social class and cultures from Chile, Peru, Argentina, Mexico, Zimbabwe, Basque

Country, England, Ireland, Catalonia and Germany. They speak for themselves. Yet they also compel us to respond to the lived experiences of those who have suffered from the shanty towns of Santiago de Chile to dry rural areas of Zimbabwe.

I invite you to look at them, listen to what they say, and respond.

They are not only a language but also a way to enter a common, and sometimes challenging, conversation.

I now hand over to Professor Gillian Robinson, Conflict Textiles Trust, Ulster University, and friend.

*Gillian Robinson 20 June 2024:*

Thank you. It is such a pleasure to be here.

In 2007 my colleague Brandon Hamber, now John Hume and Thomas P. O'Neill Chair in Peace at Ulster University helped transport the first conflict textile to Northern Ireland. The next year I worked with Roberta, Brandon and colleagues to establish a web presence for the collection. We could not have imagined we would be standing in the Ulster Museum some 15 years later, opening a nine-month exhibition of 29 textile pieces!

How did this happen?

The first answer is Roberta Bacic, Curator of Conflict Textiles. We all know her energy, passion and dedication to growing the collection. With her activist spirit and values that focus on the struggle for human rights and giving voice to those who often do not have a public platform she has worked tirelessly to ensure these textiles are recognised and valued.

The second answer is all those who have joined us on the journey of recognising *arpilleras* and textile needlework as art. Many of you are here today.

Conflict Textiles is now part of a network of galleries and community centres with permanent collections, including, among many others, the Ulster Museum, Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes in Chile, Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofia in Madrid, and previously at the V&A and TATE Modern in London.

Our community partners are equally key to this. Many are hosting satellite exhibitions to this larger exhibit we are launching today: The Regional Cultural Centre, Letterkenny; Causeway Coast and Glens Museum Services, Tower Museum, Derry; Linenhall Library; Fundació Ateneu Sant Roc, Badalona, Catalonia; the ARK exhibition at Queen's University Belfast, McClay Library; and the three permanent exhibition sites at Ulster University Libraries.

Through these public and private spaces, the textiles live and speak daily. Their voices never rest.

Conflict Textiles has also worked hard to improve and share archive practices. We keep and trace the material history, stories, travels, and activities of each textile. We are indebted to our colleagues Dr Martin Melaugh and Mike McCool at CAIN, Ulster University, who developed and host the online archive.

Going forward, the Conflict Textiles Trust has signed an MOU with Ulster University, which has committed us to work together to find a permanent and sustainable home for the collection in the Northwest of Ireland. We look forward to this next chapter.

But for today – the final word must go to the Ulster Museum – our long-term partner and friend. We have collaborated on many past events, including the permanent exhibit in the Troubles and Beyond Gallery.

Today is the pinnacle of our collaboration.

It is not possible to thank everyone who has made this possible but on behalf of Conflict Textiles Trust, we must recognise Senior Curator of History Karen Logan, who has worked with us for many years and who pulled the thread and has woven all this together. Together with her colleague Kim Mawhinney and many others and their professional expertise they have turned our dream into a reality. Sincere thanks.

Finally, thank you all for coming tonight – we value it immensely.

We look forward to sharing this Exhibition with you and others over the coming months and the many exciting conversations that will follow.

--Ends

To find out more about the *Threads of Empowerment: Conflict Textiles' International Journey*, [click here](#).