Chapter One

*A thread in the labyrinth, reflecting on Ariadne’s tale*
thread (noun)¹

1. fine cord made of two or more twisted fibres, used in sewing and weaving
2. a length of thread
3. a fine strand of solid material, trickle of liquid, or wisp of gas
4. the continuous helical ridge on a screw or pipe
5. one of the filaments of a spider’s web
6. a continuous unifying element running through a story, argument, discussion, or series of events
7. one of a series of messages in an Internet discussion group (forum), commenting on or replying to a previous message
8. the course of human life, believed by the ancient Greeks to be spun, measured out, and cut by the Fates
9. a thin seam of ore or coal

thread (verb)²

1. to pass something such as thread, photographic film, magnetic tape, or ribbon through a hole or gap in something else
2. to string beads or pearls on a thread
3. to move along carefully, following a winding route
4. to produce a thread on a screw or bolt, or within a material into which a bolt or screw may be inserted
5. to distribute something at intervals in something else
6. to form a fine thread when dropped from a spoon (refers to sugar syrup)

² Ibid.
The story of Ariadne and her ball of thread has been known to me for decades. However, until recently, it had been just one of many mythological stories buried at the back of my mind, almost lost amongst jumbled snippets of historical, cultural narratives. Now her thread and the journey of the labyrinth seem multi-layered and endlessly fascinating to me, metaphorically interwoven and almost insurmountably entangled with my own artwork and interests in philosophy. The more I learn of how others have interpreted this story, the more engrossed I become, “…many have wandered the labyrinth already. Yet the fascination remains, the challenge is one too tempting to refuse, and the journey is still one well worth making.”

Ariadne, was a princess, the daughter of King Minos. They lived in the palace of Knossos in Crete(Armstrong 2006). A place renowned for a pioneering legal system, but also “…notorious for the bizarre and transgressive acts of some of its inhabitants… a place of extremes and contradictions. Justice cohabits with tyranny, and darkness with revelation.” Underneath the palace there was a complex and deadly maze, built by the master designer Daedalus, to house the Minotaur, who fed on the human flesh of Athenian sacrificial victims. When Ariadne fell in love with Theseus, the Athenian prince leading the third sacrificial group, she decided to aid him in surviving the labyrinth. She gave him her ball of thread to fasten to the entrance, to unravel and mark his passage. Then, after killing the Minotaur, he could retrace his way back out of

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4 Ibid.
5 The Minotaur was a ferocious creature with the body of a man and the head of a bull. The offspring from her mother’s, the queen’s, lustful infatuation with the King’s prize bull, so the Minotaur was Ariadne’s half brother.
6 A regular sacrifice of seven youths and seven maidens were demanded from Athens, to be fed to the Minotaur, as compensation for the murder the Cretan Prince Androgeus, (Ariadne’s older brother) by the Athenian King, Aegeus. Crete was a much stronger military power than Athens so the Athenians had no choice but to comply.
“... the tricks and windings of the building, guiding blind steps with a thread.”\(^7\). In accordance with Ariadne’s desires, the lovers left Crete and sailed to the island of Naxos. But there on the beach, their romance ended; Theseus abandoned Ariadne while she slept, even though he had promised to marry her in Athens. Angrily she cursed Theseus’ ship as it sailed away, “Surely I rescued you when you were turning in the middle of death’s whirlwind”\(^8\). The god Dionysus, heard the cries of the forlorn heroine and dramatically descended upon the island in his chariot pulled by cheetahs. He then proceeded to woo, rescue and wed Ariadne himself. As a wedding gift to Ariadne, Dionysus set her crown of stars in the nights sky “as the Cretan Crown, you will often guide a wandering ship”\(^9\).

Navigation depends almost entirely on one trusting another’s memory, following the directions and markers recalled by others. Similarly, memory was heavily relied on to sustain the ancient Greek myths. For centuries the very existence of these myths relied on the teller’s memory, each time a myth was retold orally, the narrator’s reinterpretation added another layer to the generational embellishment. Ariadne’s thread was a guiding device, overcoming the challenges and shortcomings of memory, as there was almost no way to memorise the paths of the labyrinth. Indeed, Daedalus\(^10\) who designed the labyrinth nearly became lost there himself, “Daedalus filled countless paths with wandering and scarcely himself managed to get back to the threshold: so great was the building’s trickery.”\(^11\) Thus, the ball of thread is also known as a *clew* or *clue* – hence a clue to

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\(^8\) Ibid. (translation of Catullus 64.149-51)

\(^9\) Ibid. (translation of Ovid Ars Am. 1.5-58)

\(^10\) Daedalus, the exiled Athenian craftsman, later famously flees Crete, with his son, Icarus, on wings made of wax and feathers. Minos searches for Daedalus and tricks him into revealing himself by offering a reward for anyone who can wind a thread through the spirals of a seashell.

solving the labyrinth. It seems Theseus’ memory, when unaided by the thread, was frequently unreliable\textsuperscript{12}, his thoughts and intentions “…left him as clouds driven by a blast of wind leave the airy crest of a snowy mountain.”\textsuperscript{13}

Throughout ancient Greek mythology, Crete is a place where history has a tendency to repeat itself, echoing the winding labyrinthine pathways beneath the ruler’s palace. These Grecian cyclic trajectories are further reflected in the circularities and repetitions that course throughout the entirety of Roman history.\textsuperscript{14} Indeed, this metaphor can expanded into more recent history, as the Roman Empire’s insatiable expansion; cycles of wars, destruction and conquests have been repeated in European colonisation around the world. Even today multi-national companies continue to retread similar exploitative paths. It is as though humanity is trapped in persistent cycles of labyrinthine confusion.

However, the use of the thread in the labyrinth also suggests hope. Perhaps this cyclic tendency does not have to ring with finality, lost in inescapable, endless repetition of gloom and doom. If we can see these historical patterns in our contemporary situations and learn from past mistakes, tracking errors

\textsuperscript{12} Theseus is again catastrophically forgetful when returning home to Athens, neglecting to change his ship’s flag from black to white thus signalling that he had survived the labyrinth. Consequently, his father, the King, believes that Theseus has been murdered by the Minotaur and in his grief suicidally hurls himself off the lookout cliff.


\textsuperscript{14} Ibid.
and dead-ends, then perhaps some future cycles of catastrophe may be averted. The philosophical writer, Henry Geiger, considers the labyrinth as a metaphor for daily life. Like the Athenian victims who “wander in circles, with no knowledge of how to escape. So do all men and women feel, time and again… But where is the modern equivalent… of the slender Ariadne's thread? Apparently, the thread that leads out of the labyrinth has … little to do with formal religion or with any kind of certainty. There is no way to avoid, here, a continual jumping back and forth from metaphysics to psychology, and from philosophy to the turmoil of contemporary existence.”

As much as I agree with him, I think the concept of finding ones way out of the labyrinth is missing the point of the labyrinth itself. The labyrinth is life. It is the world we live in. According to Friedrich Nietzsche there is no path out of the labyrinth, there are only paths within the labyrinth. It is the labyrinth of the human condition “to affirm human life is to value living within this labyrinth, rather than to attempt to escape from it.” Nietzsche’s writings are rich with allusions to the metaphor of the labyrinth, he saw himself as a digger below the surface, an alchemist who turned suffering into philosophising. He claimed that pain acted as a thread into his labyrinth and helped him to navigate it. Indeed, if one was to give pain a colour, it would probably be red, the colour of my threads.

Red is the color of blood.
Red is the color of pain.
Red is the color of violence.
Red is the color of danger.
Red is the color of blushing.
Red is the color of jealousy.
Red is the color of reproaches.
Red is the color of retention.
Red is the color of resentments.

The red thread in the labyrinth is like an umbilical cord, a connection to the beyond, as the salvation of this cord-thread sustains life within the subterranean labyrinth; within mother earth, like a womb. Situated underground, the labyrinth can also be read as a grave or used as a metaphor for the underworld and death. Many have

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15 Geiger, H. (1964) Theseus in the labyrinth. MANAS Reprint Volume, 4 DOI: [my emphasis]
18 The Inferno, in Dante Alighieri’s Divine Comedy, describes labyrinthine inescapable cycles of hell.
linked the journey through the labyrinth with psychological or spiritual progress, with meeting the unconscious or God and with the resolution of problems\textsuperscript{19}. Christianity has traditionally connected labyrinths and spirituality in the physical embodiment of a single unicursal labyrinthine path that can be walked in spiritual contemplation, the most famous of which is in the floor of Chartres Cathedral\textsuperscript{20} near Paris. But these unicursal paths have no need for a guiding thread; you cannot lose your way, there are no choices in the form of forked paths or dead ends.

In 2007, I installed a work titled \textit{Life-support}, using copious metres of red knitting yarn interwoven within two grapevine trellises. Over the following months the vines grew into lush living, almost labyrinthine, tunnels, completely enveloping my trajectories of thread. After the grapes ripened, the green leaves and tendrils gradually

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\textbf{Fig. 4.} Kath Fries, \textit{Life-support}, December 2007, knitting yarn, vine and trestles, detail view, total installation approx 5500 x 600 x 150 cm
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\textsuperscript{20} Such labyrinth paving designs where commonly built into the naves of European churches during the medieval period. Walking the labyrinth was symbolic of undertaking a pilgrimage. It was a meditative time for reflection as one walks through each of the four quadrants several times before reaching the centre. It is a questing, searching journeying experience following the hope of becoming closer to God. For further information on the labyrinth paving design in Chartres Cathedral see Kern, H. and J. Saward (2000), \textit{Through the labyrinth: designs and meanings over 5000 years}. Munich, Prestel.
turned brown, dying back to reveal the linear patterns of yarn, which had remained intact beneath the canopy. The red yarn was tied between the trestles in a heartbeat pattern, suggesting rhythm, repetition and pulse. The stretching stands of red yarn reached out in trajectories that echoed the growth of the twining green vine tendrils.

The contrasting dominant colours of the installation, red and green, suggested an almost symbiotic relationship between the thread and the vine. The seasonal cycle of growth was fascinating to observe, focused around the continuous yarn. Although it was not my intention at the time, I now see the threads’ as navigating through the tunnelled vine’s seasonal cycle, echoing Ariadne’s thread leading through the labyrinth.

During our lives we each build around ourselves a maze of memory, of hopes and fears, made up of circumstances, experiences, thoughts and emotions. We navigate our way through the world as we find it, in all its multilayered complexities, possibilities and histories. Despite new ways of articulating our positions, the philosophical questions around the meaning of human existence remain much the same. This is perhaps why these ancient stories continue to ring true and repeatedly
reveal layers of meanings to new generations. The Greeks considered living an experience of being in partial bondage but one where “…every human experience provides ingredients which may be transmuted… with the help of some sort of Ariadne's thread… the whole ‘meaning of life’ should be understood as a progressive series of awakenings.”

21 Geiger, H. (1964) Theseus in the labyrinth. MANAS Reprint Volume, 4 DOI: [authors emphasis]
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