

# The Department of Repair: An Expanded Form of (Re)Making

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## Abstract

The Department Of Repair, a six week project at Camberwell Space, Camberwell College of Arts, intended to contribute to the emergence and sustainability of repair cultures, and explore the dynamic force of damage. It consisted of an initial exhibition and series of generative workshops, followed by a static exhibition including workshop outcomes, a presentation and other events. The aim was to create a temporary hub for showing, enacting and discussing repair as part of the making process. Within this project the my scope was broad and included making the actual project – curating the exhibition, furniture, publication and so on; making an exhibit; witnessing and narrating the project itself and reflecting on it.

In this paper I will introduce The Department of Repair, and discuss the forms of knowing embodied by it. As a maker, it became method, outcome, probe and stimulus, used the gallery as material as well as site, embodied know-how and gave space for sharing and manifesting more know-how. I will discuss how it was created through the knowing already in existence – the knowing known; then the forms of knowing that came from it – the knowing made; and lastly the un-knowing it highlighted.

**Keywords:** Repair; making; community; sharing; knowing

## 1. The Department of Repair: An Expanded Form of (Re)Making

In this paper I intend to introduce my practice based PhD project, The Department of Repair, and discuss the forms of knowing embodied in and through the project. Through several of the exhibits and workshops I will discuss how it was firstly grounded and created by the knowing already in existence – the knowing known; then the forms of knowing that came from it – the knowing made; and lastly the un-knowing it highlighted.

As a maker, I occupy a space between design and craft, usually making one off pieces and small series, exhibiting, facilitating workshops and curating. My practice is informed by discourses of sustainability, designerly ways of thinking, and active social engagement. I do not think we should have to repair everything we own and keep everything forever, but I do think that longer-life objects should be repairable or have a repair system built in before recycling, and that the act of repair should not necessarily be within a neoliberal framework of closed off information and proprietary rights. Capitalist culture instructs us to discard and buy new, however, the act of repair protests against this, objects to it and demands a new route. Mal-disposal of things (broken or not) has lead to out-of-control materials leaching and leaking from landfill into natural systems, disrupting the eco-system. Things designed for obsolescence could be considered to have been 'born bad', and our discard practices reinforce this. From this stance, everyday objects are my material, medium and motivation.

In January and February 2015 I led the curation of The Department Of Repair, a six week project at Camberwell Space, Camberwell College of Arts, intending to contribute to the emergence and sustainability of repair cultures, and explore the dynamic force of damage. The first three weeks consisted of an exhibition and series of generative workshops run by makers. The second three week period was a static exhibition including the workshop outcomes, a presentation and other events. The project included a digital and physical wall for contributions of repair stories, and a tool wall displaying old and new repair technologies, from an iSclack to a darning mushroom, all available to try. The aim was to create a temporary hub for showing, enacting and discussing repair as part of the making process. Within this project the scope of my practice was broad and included making the actual project – curating the exhibition, furniture, publication and so on; making an exhibit; witnessing and narrating the project itself and reflecting on it afterwards.

An initial act of object disobedience comes in the form of a break. When something breaks, even if done deliberately, it calls itself to our attention, requests an interaction, touch and communication. This break might even be a regular occurrence - as some systemic 'breakages' such as traffic jams become familiar in their routineness (Trentman, 2009) – the object breakage might also be familiar, think of the handle breaking off a cup. However routine the break may be, it

leads us to what Graham and Thrift (2007) call the 'decisional burden' of repair: we must, if nothing else, sweep up the shards of a broken glass.

The dynamic force of damage generates space and opportunities for inventive (re)making on several levels. Stephen Jackson posits that 'repair occupies and constitutes an aftermath', saying 'repair is about space and function - the extension or safeguarding of capabilities in danger of decay' and 'it accounts for the durability of the old, but also the appearance of the new', with breakdown often being a site for innovation (2014 p.223). The complexities and dualities of repair, functioning as both old and new, end and beginning, creation and destruction, feature in many descriptions of the properties of repair. Elizabeth Spelman, in her cultural overview concludes that 'to repair, then, is to enact a complicated attitude towards the past and pre-existent: Repair is conservative but also interventionist; humble but also presumptuous; it honours some moments of the past while erasing others' (2002, pp.125-6). From the many definitions and ideas surrounding repair, I have made my own working definition which is as follows: repair is an attentive act that can occur before or after a break, which makes something work in the way that is needed.

Through the making of The Department of Repair I explored this generative and creative space, with breakage as starting point and siting repair in making. As a maker, it became method, outcome, probe and stimulus. The Department of Repair embodied knowing, gave space for sharing and manifesting more knowing, and highlighted un-knowing.



*Figure 1. The Department of Repair, Camberwell Space, January 2015*

## 2. Knowing Known

Exhibiting artefacts by a selected group of practitioners was intended to generate discussion around socio-material practices, highlighting different approaches to repair as well as its conceptual and pragmatic reaches. For the exhibition, mostly tangible and analogue objects were chosen, which visibly demonstrated the application of hand-making as a form of repair, acts towards environmental repair. This project was a discussion of one aspect of repair, and, as curators we utilised visibility of repair as stimulus for conversation and making, and to clearly communicate its sometimes obscured information.

To give order to what we were doing we grouped the exhibits as structure of materials, methods/systems, agents and narratives. This seemed to group the know-how embodied by these objects and repairs, where narratives of objects and owners informed the act of repairing, agents guided it, and used their material and method/system knowledge to make the appropriate choices.

tomofholland's Mum+Dad sweater demonstrated know-how of darning methods, and textile restoration, and is what Richard Sennett (2009) calls a static repair, being restored directly back to a working state. However, knowledge of its layered narrative was offered through the obvious mixing of materials, colours and textures, and its darns demonstrated both skill and a can-do attitude.

Michael Marriott's Thonet stool defined the agency of repair on several levels, specifically showing dynamic repair, which Sennett describes as potentially altering function, upgrading as well as fixing, and possibly mixing tools or techniques (2009). He intervened with discard and redundancy through salvage and applied skills, and revealed an aesthetic agency through redesign. Found with a broken seat and repaired strut, its previous narrative is unknown but its discarded status indicates that the decisional burden of repair is a personal one. The seat was a break too far for someone: the material breakage made to a social/emotional breakage too. Marriott's 'rationalized repair' (Harper, 1987), purely replacing the seat panel, is made dynamic through application of pattern and the introduction of a hand hole in the seat. His knowing, of seating design and of materials, is shown through this upgrade.

Speaking of kintsugi, a Japanese technique for ceramic repair using lacquer and gold powder, James-Henry Holland (2008) says

Mending utensils is not cheap, and not all damaged objects receive such ministrations. The owner has to decide that the piece has sufficient historical, aesthetic, personal or social value to merit a new investment. The expense of repairing might be similar to that of acquiring a hakogaki, but a newly-mended utensil proclaims the owner's personal endorsement, and visually apparent repairs call attention to this honor.

(Hakogaki is a form of certification of importance)

Maiko Tsutsumi's work, smoothing an ikea table top by appropriating kintsugi, but using wax instead of lacquer and gold, showed knowledge of traditional craft practices, a boldness in her contemporary approach and politically questioned financial and use value(s) through her work.

My pieces in the exhibition, a series of repaired crockery, discussed environmental issues such as the potential of paper plates to be more eco-friendly than ceramic and engaged with historical, everyday methods of restoring ceramics such as boiling them in milk.

With the repair intervention acting as placard, slogans not shouted, but darned, patched, glued and polished, these objects embodied material knowing and skills, they were personal, political, active and rebellious, making care, labour and skill visible. The objects showed know-how and boldness, applying techniques to unusual objects, and state that we can, we will, we are, through choice and necessity, repairing and reusing our things.

By showing my own work in the exhibition, I reflected on my expanded making practice dualistically, exposing and garnering the critical response to my studio practice and to my curatorial practice. The gallery became an extension of my own studio, opening the doors of my practice wide.

### 3. Knowing Made

The knowing embodied and created was what Alexander Styhre would call 'messy' (n.d.). As researcher, curator and maker, this conceptual tool gives me a way of acknowledging myself as driver in my research. I brought my aesthetic to the whole project and my experience to the observation ('witnessing') of it. My reporting of it ('narrating') inevitably has my experience of it intermingled through it.

Although broken objects often come negatively to our attention, removing them from the position of dirty or garbage by repairing unsettles the one-way relationship of practitioner to thing or material and begins to teach the practitioner about its material self. Through the a series of workshops exploring repair practices as part of making practice, and drawing on alternative and experimental educational models, we began this subversion from negative brokenness into positive, community lead, knowledge sharing opportunities. I also wanted to continue the Camberwellian discourse of hand-making and materials, while giving space for 'talking back' – which Ivan Illich describes as a way to 'control and instruct the institutions in which [learners] participate' (1973). It was important that the workshops were free and accessible so participants had choice in how to engage, when to arrive, and how long to stay. 'Loose parts' (Nicholson, 1972) in the form of tools, materials and space for use, structure and play contributed to learning activities.



*Figure 2. Second Sitters workshop, The Department of Repair, January 2015*

Second Sitters reupholstery demonstration developed into a participatory experience, with everyone working on one chair. On their 2nd day, a participant 'talked back', bringing in her broken chair seat, and repairing the experience according to her wishes. This developed a deep cooperation through shared work, and the practical repair of her chair created a bank of other, new know-how for all participants. Time invested here will likely be reinvested in later acts.

When repair information is held back by companies, it de-empowers and forces the user into being a consumer (Wiens, 2012). The workshop from The Restart Project, a social enterprise encouraging repair of electronics, hacked boundaries in a 'deschooled' (Illich, 1971) manner, building on the skills of participants and staff and exposed a material form of

knowing and not knowing. It happened that during the workshop, one of their repair agents smashed and then replaced his phone screen. The repairability was of interest to one visitor, who described mobile phones as 'monoliths' and asked if design decision affect the ability to enact repairs. The reply came that, in some senses, different design solutions (such as smallness) can make repair harder but not impossible - if one wants to repair something, one will. This reinforces the idea that maintenance and repair offer interesting opportunities and challenges. Not all breakages can be predicted, and as Glenn Adamson (2013) says, the chance to explore repair occurs because things have been made, and those things sometimes need working on. By opening objects perceived to be un-openable and showing their repairability, they also opened other possibilities to those attending.



*Figure 3. The Restart Project workshop, The Department of Repair, January 2015*

Through the workshops I made a temporary learning site for myself where a discourse of matter and form, of community and social/human interaction, and a bricolage of agents, methods and materials came into play. The workshops showed that, in that setting, interest in repairing was in part centered around technique rather than specific objects, and that some visitors preferred to watch rather than to actively participate, however that did not seem to lessen their experience.

#### 4. Un-Knowing Shown

The repaired phone represented knowing and not-knowing - as monolith it was an unknowable object, however with a bit of existing know-how, more know-how came about – the knowing expanded. The repaired mobile phone re-became the monolith, and in that sense did not offer the information to others, appearing un-openable, and thus un-repairable. The visibility then is key to offering knowing, the decisional burden of repair making appears at two points in object lifecycles – in designing and in using. If the designer does not visibly acknowledge repairability in the material-self of the object, how can that information pass on, how can repairability be communicated?

In his darning workshop, tomofoholland suggests that, when contemplating textile repair, the most important things to match are first colour and texture in yarn choices, and that a material match is a much lower priority. However, mixing fibres can make it much harder to recycle post-user. But does this matter if you are extending the life of the textile in the first place? This question expands through repairing, how does the concrete practice of repairing affect the less tangible post-user life?

The visibility of the project, of the repairs, repairing, and repairers, brought tacit and inherited knowledge to the surface. The gallery became a public space for personal reflection, inspiring anecdotes, experiments and conversation. After the project ended it left the questions of where does this go now, where else and how else can it manifest?

## 5. Conclusion

The Department of Repair was the subject, method and outcome of itself and of my practice-as-research, and as such embodied 'knowing' in many ways. It sought to communicate 'content that is enclosed in aesthetic experiences, enacted in creative practices and embodied in artistic products' (Biggs and Karlsson, 2010).

Catherine Harper argues that 'creation, not consumption... creates object attachment' (2014), and what S. Sinem Atakan et al. (2014) call the value creation of 'self production' can deepen and make new attachment and values in and through the act of repairing and the object.

From an activist perspective, The Department of Repair sought to make mends and mending visible and also menders. Repairing can make unexpected social connections, seams and deliberately visible repair practices act as placard, protesting obsolescence and connecting people to people, to objects and to capabilities. Stemming from human and object malaise, The Department of Repair, took a conscious anti-consumption stance (the second act of disobedience), making new narratives for society through repair and a collaborative form of quiet activism: by legibly displaying subtle symbols of personal politics, visibly repaired objects become placards of both defiance and empowerment. In celebration of resistance and autonomy, like Plutarch's Ship of Theseus, we can keep repairing our objects until they are all repair, and beyond ("Trigger's Broom," n.d.; Wang, n.d.).

Jacy Wall feels that repairs 'significance today is perhaps a commentary on waste and sustainability and a quiet call for the virtues of patient skill and deep enquiry into process' (2013). Stewart Brand says that to maintain is to learn (1997), and according to Kyle Wiens (2013), co-founder of iFixit, 'to disassemble is to learn, to mend and to move forward'. As repair is 'the process of connecting mind and thing: you are both creator and fixer', (Wiens, 2013) it 'can be regarded as a transformative process and paradoxically, rather than fixing relationships to cultural artefacts, it opens up a kind of dialogue in which the consumer becomes an active agent in their material lives.' (König, 2013).

By contrast, making one-off things by hand allows you to change your mind as the work is proceeding in front of you. This in turn is partly (and strongly) influenced by what you are capable of doing practically. There is a 'dialogue' between you and the object you are making, and the medium is your practical skill. (Dormer, 1994)

Through the discourse of repair-making a new conversation arises: a visual, verbal and physical language, of matter and form, of community and social/human interaction, where a bricolage of agents, methods and materials came into play, a grouping of distributed knowledge and learning potential beyond my skills, and the beginnings of a community of makers interested in repairing. The gallery became medium, studio and site for learning and reflection, associated tools developed specifically for repair joined the dialogue, strengthened the riotous act. The project embodied a visual language of repair, and its conceptual reaches, representing the dualism of making as both studio and curatorial practice. Breakage may damage our object relationships, yet making repairs conserves. Repair signifies contrasts of care, labour, necessity and will, and places the object back into use of some form. Preserving and heightening material details, The Department of Repair deliberately engaged with brokenness in order to take a reparative step, with visible repairing, repairers and repairs acknowledging, through itself, repair as a multidimensional form of knowledge.

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## *Acknowledgements*

Thanks to Maiko Tsutsumi, Michael Hurley and Karen Richmond from Camberwell College of Arts; CCW Graduate School Fund for supporting the project; Camberwell Space; and TFRC.