

# From Space To Place

## The Department of Repair: Repairing as Place Making

By Bridget Harvey

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### Introduction

I am a maker, and practice-based PhD researcher, whose practice investigates processes of repair-making as material and social action. This builds on previous research into slowness and playfulness in design and making practice. Through my studio and curatorial practice I seek to understand ownership materially and emotionally through everyday objects and materials. My focus is on materials with previous lives and their palimpsests: I look to re-form things through making, remaking and repairing. I work at Camberwell College of Arts and Chelsea College of Arts, University of the Arts London.

In this paper I will discuss The Department of Repair, and the places it became. The Department of Repair was a six-week project which ran in early 2015 at the Camberwell Space Gallery, Camberwell College of Arts. Through some of the project-making process and the exhibits, I will also discuss how the project transformed the gallery space into a studio-place and a learning-place, as well as a reflective-place.

While I do not think we should have to repair everything we own and keep all things forever, I do believe that products, or objects for use should be repairable or have a built-in repair system, whether in the object itself, or an external system/infrastructure, more than just being able to be recycled. I also believe that repair information should be public, not held within a 'neoliberal' framework of proprietary rights (Wiens 2012). Where discarding and buying new is the instruction of capitalist culture, another route - that of the act of repair - is possible: a material action objecting to take, make, waste systems. Climate change is created in part by mal-disposal of things (broken or not), and the consequent seeping and spilling of out-of-control materials from landfill into natural systems. From this stance, everyday objects are my material, medium and motivation.

The Department of Repair explored the emergence and sustainability of repair cultures, and the possibilities of damage as a creative opportunity. The project consisted of a generative exhibition, a blog, a talk, and publication. The project, which began with a set of exhibits, also held a series of public workshops run by various makers and repair practitioners within the gallery space for the first three weeks (image 1). Objects produced during the workshops were added to the exhibition throughout this period (image 2). The exhibition included the wall displaying repair stories provided by the exhibition visitors via the project blog, as well as a 'tool wall' displaying repair tools and technologies. The aim was to create a temporary hub for showcasing, enacting and discussing repair as part of the making process and cycle of material use. Within this viewpoint, the scope of my practice has been broad, and, in the context of The Department of Repair, included a key role in the curation and making of the project: the exhibition, furniture, publication; making an exhibit; documenting and narrating the project in-progress; and, from this position, reflecting on the project as a whole.



Image 1

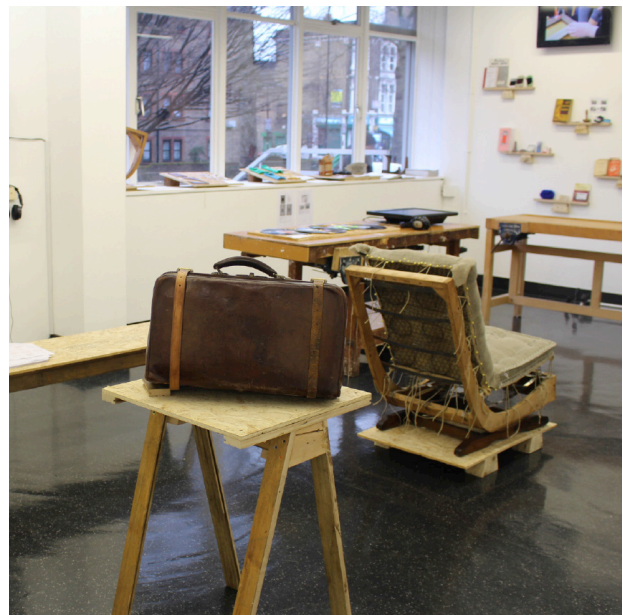


Image 2

The project brought together the practical aspects of workshops within a space introducing different ways to repair or intervene with damage, alongside pieces about problem solving and waste-making. The gallery-space became place, merging boundaries, providing room for ideas, experiments, and provocations. The Department of Repair brought together the space and communities of the white cube and the workshops for making and repairing.

A breakage might even be a regular occurrence as Frank Trentmann (Trentmann, 2009) comments that some systemic 'breakages' such as traffic jams become familiar in their routineness, and we can extend this view to such object breakages which might also be familiar: think of the handle breaking off a cup. However routine the breakage may be, it leads us to what Graham and Thrift call the 'decisional burden' (Graham and Thrift 2007) of repair: we must, if nothing else, brush up the fragments of a smashed plate.

Damage is a dynamic force generating space and opportunities for innovative, imaginative and creative (re) making on several levels. Stephen Jackson (Jackson, 2014) posits that repair comprises an aftermath, with breakdown often being a site for innovation. Through the making of [The Department of Repair](#) I explored the possibilities of this generative and creative space. The complexities and dualities of repair, functioning as both: old and new, ending and beginning, showing and hiding, creation and destruction, have been addressed by many. Elizabeth Spelman, in her overview of repair cultures 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 honors some moments of the past while erasing others' (Spelman 2002).

Maintenance of domestic objects can be seen as a freezing and masking act, reifying memory, experience and evolution (Gregson et al. 2009) and potentially ending, through wear and tear, in breakage.

As objects may work while damaged, for Chris Caple (Caple 2006, 2000), they are truly broken when functioning ceases. For him breakage depends on two things: the nature of the material and the force (and direction thereof) being applied, which may be followed by an act of repair.

Scott Burnham sees brokenness as subjective:

Breaking things may lack the positive associations that repairing things has – 'Do you want me to repair that?' will almost always be a more attractive request than 'Do you want me to break that?' But look around contemporary culture and you'll find that we're not always consistent in our relationship with the word. (Burnham 2011).

Using the example of a pool cue, snapped so it can be used to play in the corner of a room without hitting the wall, he suggests that damage (deliberate or otherwise) can make objects better fit their purpose, that we can 'break things better': breakage potentially becomes repair. Spelman both echoes and mirrors this in saying that 'repair is the creative destruction of brokenness... Irreparability is a state of brokenness that cannot be destroyed. Reparability is a state of brokenness that can.' (Spelman 2002).

Thus, brokenness is also highly knotty and oblique. It renders repair something of an eddy, curling in and back on itself, and discussion surrounding it potentially unending, illustrating the complexities of breaking and repairing, as well as the layers that build around and through object ownership and use.

I have created my own working definition of repair:

Repair is an attentive and generative act that can occur before or after a break, which makes something work in the way that is needed.

This could include customization, visible or invisible repairs, botches, done by professionals or amateurs.

Taking breakage as starting point and siting repair within the sphere of making, for me as a maker the project was method and outcome, probe and stimulus. It displayed, developed and tested both the material and immaterial manifestations of my practice. Building on this perspective, [The Department of Repair](#) transformed the gallery from space to three main places; an extension of my studio, and also the studios of others – a place of making. Through the workshops hosted, the gallery became: a temporary learning site for myself and others; a place for making know-how; and it also became a public place for personal reflection. These delineations do not truthfully have such defined boundaries – they blur and merge with one another to create a whole, which is also in part defined by what was not happening in [The Department of Repair](#), however I have loosely split the project into these areas for the purpose of this paper.

In the context of this paper, place refers to a particular position, location or point; and space - a continuous area or expanse which is free, available, or unoccupied. I intend place to refer to and indicate what became of the gallery space - the white cube. To clarify this a little further, place-making is often used to mean an approach to planning, design and management of public spaces. When planning this project we endeavoured to allow the space to be generative rather than static, and to 'make place' as it progressed, responding to the requirements at each stage, constantly reconfiguring.

In order to make the project and the exhibition, the gallery became a studio-place. This nature revealed itself in two ways, firstly for us, in making the project and secondly, a place for others to remake things, which I will talk about later.

### Studio-Place

The studio-place manifested early on in the project. From pre-project visits to map out how we might use the space, to the actual furniture making, work hanging and signage making, the gallery became a collaborative and expanding studio-place. At this stage in the project we decided that we should aim to make the project zero-waste, to create no new waste through it. We began to question usual practices of exhibition-making – plinth building, signage, printed materials, and this became a shared ethos. Through this, a conscious anti-consumption stance towards exhibition making was formed, and making a collaborative form of quiet activism (Hackney 2013).

One direct consequence of this aim was our decision not to use vinyl signage, instead painting the logo on the wall (image 3), and later using a blackboard for the events program. We printed the take-away information in small batches, topping up the piles as and when needed.



Image 3

The aim to surrogate zero-waste options wherever possible continued through into the exhibition furniture. We borrowed workbenches for the workshop area and made the plinths ourselves, using left over materials from around the college building. The decision to eliminate unnecessary waste of material in things used only for a short time, made us seek and develop a range of creative skills. The furniture making, using old floorboards, palette parts and reclaimed OSB board, made the gallery space into both a workshop, and a learning place, with designer Roger Arquer leading the making and sharing his know-how.

The studio-place also manifested in our choosing which works to show, and how to show them. First considering it as our context for showing works which were not necessarily conceived as artworks. The exhibited artefacts were intended to generate discussion, highlighting different approaches to repair as well as its conceptual and pragmatic reaches. For the exhibition, mostly tangible and analogue objects were chosen, visibly demonstrating the application of hand-making skills used for repair (and re-appropriation/reconfiguration). This project was a discussion of one aspect of repair, and, as curators we utilised the visibility of these skills as stimulus for conversation and making, and to clearly communicate its sometimes obscured information. The gallery became our workspace – with us arranging and moving exhibits and furniture within it, discussing and deciding on the layout in the space.

The artefacts shown were not necessarily designed for exhibition or as product: some, such as Michael Marriott's (twice-mended) Thonet stool, are normally in everyday use (image 4). As they mostly demonstrated the process(es) of repairing, the exhibits contributed highly to the transitioning of the gallery-space into studio-place, learning-place and reflective-place.



Image 4

Illustrating the agency of repair in several diverse manners, Marriott's Thonet stool evidences dynamic repair, which Richard Sennett (Sennett 2009) describes as potentially altering function, upgrading as well as fixing. In finding and salvaging the stool – which had been mended once already - he intervened with redundancy, and the application of his skill not only repaired but also revealed aesthetic agency through his redesign and upgrading.

Speaking of vehicle repair, Douglas Harper (Harper 1987) defines 'rationalised repair' as a direct mend with no critical engagement. He notes that repair is less intuitive than before the division of labour between makers and users grew. Marriott's rationalised repair, purely replacing the seat panel, is made dynamic through application of pattern and the introduction of a hand hole in the seat. His 'designer-ly' and 'maker-ly' ways of knowing, of seating design and of materials, is shown through this upgrade.

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 – he not only saved and fixed again the stool, but added a hand-hole for extra function. The seat was a break too far for someone: the material breakage made a social or emotional breakage too.

Amongst the artefacts chosen was tomofholland's Mum+Dad Sweater (image 5). This demonstrates his know-how of darning methods, and textile restoration. Echoing the notion of rationalized repairs, Sennett (Sennett 2009) describes a direct restoration to a working state as static repairing; as such the repairs enacted on Mum+Dad Sweater could be considered to be static repairs. However, through the obvious mixing of materials, colours and textures, it offered knowledge of its layered narratives, and its darns demonstrated both skill and a can-do attitude.



Image 5

Kintsugi is a Japanese craft of repair using lacquer and powdered gold. The material and skilled application add to the beauty and history of the piece. (Evans 2014).



Image 6

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 [a form of certification of importance], but a newly-mended utensil proclaims the owner's personal endorsement, and visually apparent repairs call attention to this honor. (Holland 2008)

Maiko Tsutsumi's work, smoothing a used Ikea table top by appropriating the method of kintsugi, but using gilding wax instead of lacquer and gold, through which she questioned use value(s) (image 6). The work showed knowledge of traditional craft practices, the concept of which she interpreted, and this act of 'repair' altered the table's identity, dynamically changing its value, position and aesthetic, highlighting the potential of values 'damages' could add to the object.

By showing my own work in the exhibition (image 7), I reflected on my expanded making practice, exposing and garnering the critical response to both my studio and my curatorial practice. My pieces, a series of repaired crockery, engaged with historical, everyday methods of restoring ceramics such as boiling them in milk, and discussed environmental issues such as the potential of paper plates to be more eco-friendly than ceramic.



Image 7

In *The Craftsman*, Richard Sennett suggests that 'a model is a proposal rather than a command. Its excellence can stimulate us, not to imitate but to innovate (2009: 101). My repaired or remade objects are considered but not excellent per se, and through my work I have even rendered many of them anti-functional. My mends are idiosyncratic - some verge on idiotic - they do not make the object typically useful again. Hanging plates on a wall in a gallery is very different to using them to eat from at home. These plates and their mends are actuals and potentials, stories and ideas. Stimulation is their aim: to act as provocateur or goad, questioning us questioning them.

For all the exhibits, repair acted as placard, their slogans not shouted, but darned, patched and glued; they made care, labour and skill visible. They embodied material knowing and skills, they were personal, political, active and rebellious, applying techniques to unusual objects, and they state that, as makers, we are through choice and necessity, repairing and reusing our things.

By showing artefacts which were studio-practice-in-progress, part of process, or, quite literally part of the studio furniture, the gallery became extension of many studios. It also extended my own studio, opening the doors wide - through collaboration we created a communal studio-place in order to make the project itself.

## Learning-Place

The second element of this shared studio-place was the workshops themselves – where the gallery became an open studio for many. I will focus on this element by seeing the gallery as learning-place.

Drawing on alternative and experimental pedagogies, we made (re)making opportunities for others: a series of workshops exploring repair practices as part of making in the practice of others. Although the broken thing comes negatively to human attention, un-othering it from the position of dirty or garbage through repair unsettles the one-way relationship of practitioner to thing or material and begins to teach the practitioner about its material self. The learning and knowledge shared during the project was what Alexander Styhre (Styhre, n.d.) would call 'messy'. 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 or 'witnessing' of it. My 'narrating' of it inevitably has my experience of it intermingled through it.

Through the series of repair workshops, drawing on alternative educational models, brokenness began to be subverted into positive, community-lead, knowledge-sharing opportunities. This continued 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' (Illich 1971). 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.



Image 8

Otto von Busch describes repair as a way of building hope, independence and trust (von Busch 2010). Second Sitters reupholstery demonstration in the gallery developed into a participatory experience, with everyone learning through working together on one armchair (image 8). During their second workshop participant 'talked back', repairing the experience to her needs by bringing in her own broken chair seat. The highly practical repair of her seat created bank of other new know-how for all participants, made a place for her needs too, and invited trust and deep cooperation through shared work.

The withholding of repair information by companies disempowers and forces the user into being a consumer. The Restart Project are a social enterprise encouraging repair of electronics. Their workshop hacked boundaries in a 'de-schooled' manner, and exposed a material block for knowing and not knowing.



Image 9

During the workshop, a restarter (one of their staff) replaced his phone screen which had smashed (image 9). One visitor, who described mobile phones as ‘monoliths’, was highly interested in this reparability, and asked if decisions made by the designer affect the ability to repair. The answer was that different design solutions, such as smallness, might impede acts of repair but do not render it impossible. Matthew Crawford writes that ‘things need fixing and tending no less than creating’, and that repair requires openness to the obscurities of objects (for me, including the wilful obscurities of planned obsolescence) made by others. Engaging with failure, its unpredictability demands ‘you be attentive in the way of a conversation rather than assertive in the way of a demonstration’: the repairer must look, listen and notice things (Crawford 2009). If one wants to repair something, one will.

By opening objects perceived to be un-openable and showing their reparability, The Restart Project also opened other possibilities to those attending. By witnessing the repairers actions - opening and repairing un-openable objects - other repair possibilities are opened: Glenn Adamson suggests that this specialized knowledge and/or adaptable skills can create community and radical ideas (2013: 147).

Through the workshops, a temporary learning site was made where a discourse of matter and form, of community and interaction, and a bricolage of agents, methods and materials came into play. The workshops showed that, in that setting, interest in repairing 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. Repair promotes a reconstruction of social and material spaces, tools and values, and the consequent redefinition of ownership and power.

The gallery became a learning place also for me as a researcher, watching as it, an open space, with no doors, and no entry fee, allowed the coming and going of participants, observers and facilitators. This made for a freely changing amount of people in there, and the physical space taken up by the workshops reflected it as such. My observations of the happenings, some of which I have narrated here show the gallery becoming a place for my learning too.

### Reflective-Place

I will focus on this and the reflections of others by looking at the gallery as a public space for personal reflection. Jacy Wall opines 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’ (Wall 2013). Stewart Brand (Brand 1997) says that to maintain is to learn, and according to Kyle Wiens, ‘to disassemble is to learn, to mend and to move forward’ (Wiens 2013). Repair connects mind and thing, putting the repairer into a dual position of being both maker and re-maker, giving active, creative agency to the task and the worker, and, as repair always starts from a break, it is in many ways a naturally reflective act. The Department of Repair expanded its original position by making questions for future investigation or further reflection.

The repaired phone represented enterable and forbidden space - as monolith it appeared unrepairable, however through its opening, knowledge and community were expanded. After repair it returned to the state of monolith, and again did not share repairable-ness with others, appearing un-openable, and thus un-repairable. The social and learning-place that The Department of Repair made meant knowledge was offered that the phone could be opened and could be fixed.

Place therefore appears key to sharing knowing. So the decisional burden of repair making appears at two points in object lifecycles – in designing and in using. If there is no obvious place for repairing, and 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 to the user?

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 throughout repair, how does the concrete practice of repairing affect the post-user life?

The visibility of the project, of the repairs, repairing, and repairers, brought tacit and inherited knowledge to the surface. It inspired anecdotes, experiments and conversation. After the project ended it left the questions about which space and how it can continue to manifest?

The place for publications, and the texts and images included in them was negotiable within this project – would the liveness of the place we were creating be captured or killed by these static medium? But the experimental nature of the publication, aided by working with a small art-house publishers meant it contributed to the expanded nature of place for us. This quote comes from our designer and publisher, Chris Cawkwell:

With such an abundance of paper in the world, often used for the manufacture of throw-away junk mail and print outs of digital information, it seems only fitting that they should be reused in the production of something of worth. A zero-waste publication....It is only fitting then, that to coincide with The Department of Repair's workshop and exhibition, that the two publications being produced are on reclaimed paper, hand bound and only produced on a scale to meet demand. It has not been an easy endeavor. Locating a reusable source of paper, that can be used and printed on without impairing the legibility of the content. The task of printing and hand binding each edition. Of course, it would have been easier to produce a standard layout and send to a printer, in order to produce 500+ copies of the publication. But at the end of it I would rather a society where the impetus is on 'mending', (repair, reuse and recycling), than 'ending'.  
(Cawkwell in Tsutsumi and Harvey 2016).

Reflection was not limited to those involved in the making of the project. One visitor left a long note asking us about the theory behind the project and making his own suggestions. His reflection and critique demonstrates some of the questions asked, answered and not answered by the project, and manifests as a written version of some of the conversational reflections had there.

### On-Going-Place

To conclude, 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 enclosed or invisible content. Stemming from human and object malaise, The Department of Repair, took a conscious anti-consumption stance, making new narratives for contemporary society through repair and creating a collaborative form of quiet activism by legibly displaying subtle symbols of personal politics: choosing to repair. It sought to make the acts, the outcomes and the agents visible and to make unexpected social connections. Set up to be visible, repair workshops acted as placard and encouragement, protesting obsolescence and connecting people to people, to objects and to capabilities, giving an acknowledged time and creating a place where repair could be discussed and engaged with.

A single repaired thing or act may seem insignificant. However, through visible process, material manifestations of repair give elasticity, an agency beyond the individual. The Heideggerian broken object - disobedient, even if broken deliberately - calls itself to our attention. Repair demands and creates a new response where a bricolage of agents, methods, systems and materials create riotous and resilient new narratives for and places in society. Breakage may damage our object relationships, yet repairing conserves. Repair signifies the contrasts of care, labour, necessity and will, and places the object back into use of some form. Heightening these material details, The Department of Repair purposefully engaged with brokenness in order to take a reparative step, utilising visibility and inherent skills, and acknowledging, through itself, repair as a multidimensional place.

All images by Bridget Harvey  
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