

REPAIR YOUR PRACTICE!

Get out of your tower and into the world

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Abstract

Reflecting on co-curating The Department of Repair (2015), part of my AHRC PhD project, RepairAbility: Repair-Making as Social and Material Action, led me to attempt to patch gaps which emerged. TDoR mostly engaged makers, those skilled at repairing particular styles of object (there was very little ad hoc repair), and some involved with repair-making but not necessarily with sustainability. While my practice is rooted in sustainability, I felt it needed further extension into social engagement through action, prompting me to take my practice outside academia to public spaces. This paper discusses the perspective gained from direct action and disobedience through social engagement, and explores use of an autobiographical method to redefine and communicate object-based practice. Linking old and new techniques, and political and personal practices, it [re]examines the transformative nature of repair-making as material action and personal choice. Taking repairers to community centres and libraries by co-organising Hackney Fixers events and other repair skills sharing workshops helps include in the current repair discourse, those most hit by austerity measures. The togetherness this direct action creates is “social motivation” for my activism (Portwood-Stacer, 2013), through which I am made to reassess my ‘makerly’ privileges: we repair not just beautiful, treasured objects but also essential, everyday things. The outcomes of collaborative and/or participative work - although somewhat recorded in my objects (eg, Learning Cardigan, 2014) - is mostly captured in objects that belong to others: meaning that I, as maker, must see my practice here as one that purposefully shares repair skills and the associated discourse. To contribute to repair practices in a way other than repair-making, I made MEND MORE Jumper (2015), as a placard for the 2015 Climate March. My activism is simultaneously disobedient to dominant consumer cultures and “autonomously obedient” to my principles (Fromm, 1981). It also draws on the history of craft being used to highlight injustices; handwork as political stance; and questions hierarchies through subversive stitch-work (Parker, 2010). MEND MORE Jumper clearly states my agenda: its non-preciousness enabling portability, its portability facilitating visibility of its slogans, which challenge dominant practices and ‘vocalise’ my activism. Alongside my practice, I took a year of life-writing classes to help better communicate my practice, develop my ‘voice’ and structure my writing. The relevance of autobiographical methodologies to craft practices becomes clear as the idea of autography - handwriting - corresponds to handmaking. Life-writing, as autoethnographic practice, brings the vulnerable (Behar, 1996), the messy (Hoskins, 1998; Jeffries, 2016; Styhre, N.D.) and the tugs between fictions and truths (Goett, 2016; Porter, 2012) into my writing and speaking, in a way I felt was previously only evident in my making. The procedure of crafting writing using ‘old’ techniques such as writing by hand, reading aloud and scribing events, aids interpretation of ideas and emotions as materially as the crafting of repairs. Episodic building of narrative (eg, McKee, 1999) thus occurs in my writing and making as aspects “shaped by any number of parameters, including time, place, topic or theme”(Miller, 2007), autographically captured.

Where my practice, for several years, has revolved around repair-making, not everything I do as part of this practice is actually making a repair. This paper discusses how volunteering, demonstrating and handwriting have strengthened and expanded my material practice, and these forms of 'repair-activism', while not literal acts of repair in themselves, provide me – as maker – new grounds and skills for sharing and promoting repair discourse to new audiences, and ways understanding this expansion as part of my own practice and identity. I will also examine how volunteering, demonstrating and handwriting link into an anti-consumption framework from anarchist culture, which provides understanding of how certain anti-consumption practices help form identity. As volunteering, demonstrating and handwriting are not necessarily generative in the way making is, these facets of my practice led me to question my identity. Thinking about them as means to promote repair as an anti-consumption stance helped me embrace them comfortably as part of myself as maker.

Repair-making, for me, is a choice and a political act. Linking old and new techniques, and political and personal practices, through it I engage with sustainability, environmentalism, anti-consumption politics and community needs. While repairing itself is not necessarily always an activist practice – and not all activists repair! – ideas of activism can nearly always be applied to acts of repair. I am interested in repair-activism as both the promotion of repair-making and as an anti-consumption stance.

Reflecting on co-curating *The Department of Repair* (2015), an exhibition and series of workshops focused on repair-making and part of my AHRC PhD project, *Repair-Making: Craft, Politic, Community*, led me to attempt to the patch gaps which emerged. The Department of Repair mostly engaged makers, those skilled at repairing particular styles of object (there was very little ad hoc repair), and some involved with repair-making but not necessarily with sustainability. While my practice is rooted in sustainability, I felt it needed further extension into social engagement through action, prompting me to take my practice outside academia and into public spaces. In this paper, I will endeavor to explain the perspective I gained from direct action, mutual aid, and disobedience through the expansion of my agency by facilitating community repair workshops, my promotion of repair through demonstrating, and my use of handwriting and an autobiographical method to re-examine and communicate object-based practice as the transformative nature of repair-making as material action and personal choice.

Activism and lifestyle politics

I utilize some of the language of anarchism when talking about my practice. Lifestyle practices scholar Laura Portwood-Stacer suggests that herein lies 'the inherent tension within lifestyle politics - the material and symbolic dimensions of it may, in fact, be working at cross-purposes. A strategy that embraces diffusion of anarchist lifestyle practices may require that activists reconcile themselves to becoming less recognizable as anarchists' (2013: 151). This is true of myself - in order to strengthen and push my practice and my ideas, to have them taken seriously, I have had to become less recognisably out there, however I believe my lifestyle politics, my stance against unnecessary consumption and discard practices, my belief systems and my ways of working are stronger for it.

As repair is both an act of consumption and anti-consumption I am also drawing on Portwood-Stacer's list of motivations for anarchist anti-consumption activism: personal, moral, activist, identificatory, and social motivations (2013: 23). She tells us that the discursive framing of consumption practices is what makes the anti-consumption lifestyle understandable as activism (2013: 26). Repair-Making is a stand against common consumption practices, but necessity, poverty or emotion are often its motivation, and political framing of repair could be seen as a luxury.

Repair-Activism obviously discourages consumption by creating opportunities for Repair-Making, and encourages repairability on all levels, from manufacturer to user. According to Portwood-Stacer's framework, 'personal motivations' for anti-consumption are for bettering one's own situation and resisting ideological manipulation (2013: 38-39). Through my Repair-Activism I reject standard consumption practices and, amongst other things, embracing repair means I need work and earn less, and therefore I free myself from what she describes as the "false needs" imposed by dominant consumerist ideology' (2013: 39).

Volunteering

Although sometimes a profession, repair is often conducted by volunteers; potentially a family member or friend, or at a repair event. Personally, I co-organise Hackney Fixers events and other repair skills sharing workshops to help include in the current repair discourse, those most hit by austerity measures. To me, this volunteering, as direct action, is a form of mutual aid - an anarchist principle of solidarity, sharing and generosity. Through facilitation of workshops I am made to reassess my makerly privileges: we repair not just beautiful, treasured objects but also essential, everyday things. This provides 'activist motivation', which Portwood-Stacer describes as using 'actions to effect a change' (2013: 40), or simply 'propaganda by deed', where cumulative smaller deeds are a way to 'publicly represent political ideologies and convince others of their correctness' and pressurize the systems to change current practices (2013: 40-41). Facilitating free, open workshops invites others to experiment with and draw their own conclusions about repair-making, while knowledge and skill sharing, along with a higher visibility of deliberate manufactured barriers to repair, puts pressure on manufacturers to make their products repairable, while driving consumption down.

'Crucial to every society is the kind of union and solidarity it fosters and the kind it can further, under the given conditions of its socioeconomic structure' (Fromm, 1981: 108)

Volunteer work is challenging and exciting. It decentralizes me in my practice, and puts me in the position of 'professional encourager', which John Chris Jones describes as giving part of design process to the user and giving freedom to do things that professionals do (1991). Although this is a hierarchical way of thinking about the roles, the initial hierarchy is often negated when participants share their knowledge with the repairers. This is what Marcel Mauss, according to Neil Cummings (2015), would suggest giving is a 'networked social contract' that one gift triggers another and, in this case, the repair network increases. Research suggests that engaging with voluntary groups and activities reduces death rates and increases trust and wellbeing (Pickett and Wilkinson, 2010). Otto von Busch describes repair as a way of building hope, independence and trust (2010). Learning through working together is enhanced by repairing the experience to participant needs by mending the things they bring. Repeat meetings, sharing and knowledge retention create networks. These are sometimes permanent and sometimes transient, neither of which, for me as witness and participant, seem less valid than one another. The act of volunteering implicitly asks us if our time might be better spent on others rather than ourselves, on our communities and society in order to benefit all, and to reduce the inequality we know to be so destructive (Pickett and Wilkinson, 2010).



image 1: Learning Cardigan (2014 onwards) Hand-knit cardigan, various yarns. Image: Bridget Harvey

For me, as practitioner, the outcomes of this collaborative and/or participative work – although partially recorded in my artefacts (e.g. Learning Cardigan, 2014) – are mostly captured in objects that belong to others: meaning that I, as maker, must see my practice here as one that purposefully shares repair skills and the associated discourse. Portwood-Stacer’s ‘social motivation’ for anti-consumption activism positions the anti-consumer with those who share politics, and apart from those who don’t, stating, ‘anti-consumption may even spur more social cohesion than shared consumption practices do, due to its association with radical resistance to mainstream ideologies and mores’ (2013: 43). Repair workshops bring together practical aspects of repair, creating networks of repairer-makers and others who care about repair, and opening potentially dormant knowledge of repair shops, websites and businesses, standing them apart from those who unquestioningly replace broken with new. The potentially oppositional practice of repair-making becomes a propositional action through repairing together.

Demonstrating

Another approach I have taken to promoting the repair discourse and its anti-consumption stance is by making MEND MORE Jumper (2015) as a placard for the 2015 London climate march. While drawing on the history of craft being used to highlight injustices; handwork as political stance; and questioning hierarchies through

subversive stitch-work (Parker 2010), MEND MORE Jumper clearly states my agenda: its non-preciousness enabling portability, and its portability facilitating visibility of its slogans, which challenge dominant practices and communicate my activism.



Image 2: MEND MORE Jumper (2015) Jumper, hand stitched applique lettering. Image: David Stelfox

When unpicking my own social motivations for repair making and repair-activism, I realize they are what Erich Fromm terms 'autonomously obedient', they are 'obedient' to my own 'reason or conviction' of being anti-consumption, anti-waste and pro-circularity, and thus are 'not an act of submission but one of affirmation'. Simultaneously repair-activism is disobedient to our consumer culture, where, according to Fromm, this 'obedience to a person, institution or power (heteronomous obedience) is submission' implying 'the abdication of my autonomy and the acceptance of a foreign will or judgment in place of my own'(1981: 19).

Arguably our dominant economic culture is what Fromm describes as 'having' - with principles around ownership, gains and growth. The affirmative act of positioning myself with others by demonstrating - surrounded, presumably, by those with similar politics and ideals - still pushes back against dominant cultures to act both obediently to myself, and disobediently, against capitalist consumerism, against expectations of the designer, and of the PhD researcher - I am not there purely for my own gains. My 'moral motivation' (Portwood-Stacer 2013: 39) is my own attempt to distinguish between right and wrong consumption practices and to encourage them in others. The climate march itself shows the different faces of activism, slightly described by the piece of experimental writing that follows.

MEND MORE Jumper - purple, acrylic, large, and textual - is part encouragement and part disparagement. Its stance is political: overt, visible, legible, unmistakable. Made as a placard for the Climate March 2015 it had to stand out from the crowd to say repair is a vital step towards a sustainable future. Having tried to wear it I realised I couldn't - its acrylic body makes me uncomfortable but suits its purpose; it dries fast in inclement weather. The yellow lettering is cut from fabric scraps dug out from my stash, hand-stitched, patched, appliqued, not hemmed, not glued. It reads MEND MORE BIN LESS, MEND MORE BUY LESS.

MEND MORE is my slogan, my catch phrase. It relates to protest and agency. The lettering is bold enough to be read from afar, and these short words spell out a clear message. I intend it to refer to all things, not just clothing.

Travelling to the march I was nervous, I did not want to get caught in any affray. Where demonstrations can be aggressive and angry, the point and privilege of them - the right to manifest as a collective voice - is vital. Banners and placards become a showing of hands, looking for and creating solidarity, clearly stating positions. That day I marched with the self-formed, self-proclaimed menders bloc - friends from TRAIID and the Restart

Project. We were there as our own critical mass, contributing to the greater one, and for our own personal politics. Staunchly environmentalist, all actively activist, all specifically engaged with mending, carrying out our duty to care for people and planet by suggesting repair as part of that.

MEND MORE Jumper asks us to use repair skills for practicality, resilience and resistance, and to protect the planet. I raised it high atop a pole. It speaks about clothes and people, with its arms swinging, it has a human-like form. For me, MEND MORE Jumper carries a second order message. It was something else before and now is new, it's critical, political, subversive and affirmative, its power intensified by its previous life – more than graphics, its material supports its message.

At the end of the march, many placards were trashed and dumped – destroying the work of making them, and to me, destroying part of their point – was their message disposable too? MEND MORE Jumper's end has been planned; it's easily disassembled, and can still be reused as clothing. The thread and letters are compostable, its body recyclable. It deliberately sidesteps the hypocrisy of protesting for a better world and then trashing the placard after.

I cannot wear MEND MORE Jumper. Yet, as signage, as statement of my politics, it is fully functional, it is too explicit to be misread. It brings us together, and stands us apart. MEND MORE Jumper is vibrant, full of narrative and agency, it says, 'we mend, join us'.

Writing

Facilitating workshops and demonstrating could be a way of making a version of myself through my practice, only partially recorded in artefacts. As happenings they need capturing differently, through writing, as part of my PhD and, arguably, part of my contemporary craft practice.

Understanding myself as someone who makes writing has given me some nascent thoughts which I am beginning to unpick here. Firstly, how, as a maker, I construct myself through text and use writing about my practice to make myself. Secondly, the relationship of handwriting and handmaking, where making text by hand continues my craft practice, textually.

Laura Portwood-Stacer's final motivation for anti-consumption activists is identificatory motivation, which is performative, supporting material expressions of being anarchist. This is both an 'individual and collective process' where 'performances of self are both intrasubjective and intersubjective: the performance is done for oneself and for others.' (2013: 42)

Writing became a question of identity for me, in terms of making textual content which was coherent with my practice and myself along with physically creating the writing. In order to understand it more deeply and to improve – to help better communicate my practice, develop my voice, and structure my writing – I took a year-long life writing classes. During classes I was obliged to write autographically, by hand. As I further explored writing practices and continued to write by hand (including my whole PhD thesis draft) I started to see links between writing by hand and making by hand, as well as starting to understand writing as a facet of my identity.

Making myself through text

Life writing is described as being specifically about 'an aspect of life shaped by any number of parameters, including time, place, topic or theme' (Miller, 2007: 3). Leanne Prain suggests storytelling in material practice

helps narrate deep, 'binding thread[s] of human experiences' (2014: 9). In life writing I use narrative to find and unpick meaning and to gain proximity to lived experience, to highlight aspects of material practice made or mended by me, alone or with others, and to create experimental and performative textual episodes. Life-writing, as autoethnographic practice, brings the vulnerable, the messy and the interplay between fictions and truths into my writing and speaking, in a way I felt was previously only evident in my making.

When making and exhibiting artefacts, facilitating workshop, and demonstrating, one opens oneself up to a level of vulnerability which also occurs in writing. Ruth Behar describe vulnerability in writing ethnography as

Loss, mourning, the longing for memory, the desire to enter into the world around you and having no idea how to do it, the fear of observing too coldly or too distractedly or too raggedly, the rage of cowardice, the insight that is always arriving too late, as defiant hindsight, a sense of the utter uselessness of writing anything and yet the burning desire to write something, are the stopping places along the way. (Behar, 1996: 3)

This vulnerability goes hand in hand with a messiness. When practicing, we create what Janet Hoskins calls 'disparate, messy fragments of daily experience', and 'a coherent narrative constructs a unified image of the self' from this (1998: 5). This messiness can be recreated in textual practice, when, as Janis Jeffries suggests, the fluidity and tensions 'between the "I" and the other, the life of the text and the "textile" and the terrain of the lived' (2016: 99), are shown in writing, which provides a scene 'where textiles, as mobile sign and material practice, have been loosened to play out a sensuous mapping of sweat and scribble' (2016: 99). This, she posits, joins the personal voice with theory, material with metaphorical and provides 'transformative contributions to culture' (2016: 99).

Along with vulnerability and mess, here truthfulness needs consideration. Textually framing my practice constructs it in certain ways, and others might recount the scenes or read the texts differently. Thus truth becomes subjective and writing is potentially both honest and dishonest at once. The self in my text is only one facet of me, as the self that facilitates, demonstrates and makes are individual facets of me. The performative nature of artefacts and/or actions is also evident in writing. Texts are always doing something for us, but it is context which helps establish truthfulness.

So, life writing is a textual performance which constructs narrative of practice and self, and expresses vulnerability, messiness and varieties of truths. This parallels material practice in content, but the relevance of using autobiographical methodologies in craft practices is furthered by the idea of autography – hand-writing and how it corresponds to hand-making.

Making text myself

For me, working on a computer acted as barrier between the physicality of writing and my material practice. Writing with pen and paper brought these experiences closer. Physically marking paper creates my 'self', both autobiographically and autographically. The hand-written text becomes a personal artefact, a prototype, drawn on, rewritten and indeed repaired, often then typed up, and occasionally polished and sent out to others, inviting them into my thinking in the way that my artefacts and direct actions do materially. Beginning the writing by hand brings it back to my practice.

The procedure of crafting writing using 'old' techniques, such as writing by hand, reading aloud and scribing events, has been proven to increase recall and aids conceptual understanding, interpretation of ideas and emotions as materially as the crafting of repairs. The vulnerable, the messy, question of truths, as well as problem-solving are physically evident in hand-written texts as they often are in hand-made artefacts and

prototypes, and in actions such as facilitating and demonstrating where one could be considered to be testing oneself. Writing by hand also conveys another set of truths – there is no hiding behind set fonts, neat lines and well-spaced letters – it shows the authors abilities and inabilities much the same as working a material by hand does.

To sum up, material practice, artefact, and action – along with writing – takes place in fits and starts, series or one-offs, often containing repeat motifs and showing the makers hand. Hand-writing strips away the protection in the same way that making by hand does – by showing what one has done.

Jeanne Perreault describes feminist autography as writing to express oneself as both individual and part of the collective, seeing writing as an important part of self-making, and selves as intersection across disciplines. Speaking of written content, she says that 'textual enactments of an "I" and the boundaries of "we" are in play as elements of inquiry, as territories to be claimed and disclaimed, as constructions or as essences' (Perreault, 1995: 1). These textual enactments reflect the blurred boundaries of facilitating workshops and demonstrating. According to Janis Jeffries, autography and autobiography differ through focus: 'autographies make the writing itself an aspect of selfhood through which the writer experiences and brings into being the possibility of playful, even wicked, self-invention' (2016: 98).

Volunteering, demonstrating and writing my way out of the tower

By examining how volunteering, demonstrating and handwriting link into Portwood-Stacer's anti-consumption framework I have attempted to understand how certain anti-consumption practices help form identity. As volunteering, demonstrating and handwriting are neither direct anti-consumption acts, nor direct acts of repair (or making), thinking about identity through them as an anti-consumption stance potentially helps create comfort in this expanded makerly identity. These differing activist motivations push repair-making as practice out the academic tower and into the world. Here, facilitating and demonstrating enhance and further the practice of repair-making and the material artefacts of practice. Writing about them becomes a form of enacted biography where I autographically record myself and my practice, constructing and embracing the vulnerability, messiness and questions of truth implicitly held in artefacts, and destabilising norms to create transformations and difference. The narrative content of written aspects 'bind' the personal and the theoretical, and the physical act of prototyping writing autographically binds content construction to material practice (Prain 2014: 9). This combination of actions contributes to repair cultures through, to paraphrase Jeffries, a mix of sweaters, scribble and Sugru (2016: 99).

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