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Layers of repair increasing the emotional durability of fashion and textiles

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Keywords: Layers of repair; Fashion and textiles; Emotional durability; Craftivism; Co-creation.

Abstract: This paper explores our relationship with clothing and textiles from the perspective of mending. It asks how layers of repair can increase the emotional durability of fashion and textiles. It aims to rethink fashion and to create a caring environment through the act of repair, co-creation and craftivism. The paper presents a case study based on the exhibition "*Pikem suhe*" (A Long Engagement) at Kondas Centre, Viljandi, Estonia. The exhibition was formulated through co-design with the participating artists and the audience. The designers and artists exhibiting their work invited the public to participate in repair workshops, with the hope to support garment use time and enhance social well-being and emotional satisfaction. The works presented in the exhibition were accompanied by stories about the items of repair and provide the data on which this paper is based. The findings from the analysis of these written stories show repair being added layer by layer to loved clothes to prolong the relationship once the items start to wear out. The layers of repair can be seen as an embodiment of narratives from our prolonged relationship with clothes.

Introduction

Different approaches to repair have recently emerged in the discussions within fashion, clothing and textile design practice as a means to support a transition to more sustainable futures (Durrani 2019). This research looks at the works presented in the exhibition "*Pikem suhe*" (A Long Engagement) at Kondas Centre, Viljandi, Estonia as a case study. The work is positioned in the context of design and crafts and seeks to open up the discussion and understanding of how a designer can facilitate emotional durability and support sustainability through layers of repair.

The paper departs from an overview of the literature in repair and prolonging the use phase of garments. Following, this research is exposed in terms of its methodology, the exhibition is explained and the findings are laid out. A discussion on the possible implications of the research results for the field of textiles concludes the paper.

Literature review

Recent shifts in clothing and textiles production and consumption have led to a growing early discard of fully functioning goods. Chapman

(2015) argues that one of the reasons for such early discard is the lack of emotional attachment, and notes that there is little point in designing long lasting products if consumers lack the desire to keep them. Studies have pointed out repair as a tool to prolong the use phase and contribute to cultural and environmental sustainability (Durrani 2019). In addition, Fletcher (2021) suggests that practices of care and repair can support a society-driven, bottom up approach to sustainable transition. Vankerschaver (2017) adds that the one-sided principle of perpetual growth must be replaced by a living dynamic of diversity and local knowledge can be united in a global system.

De Castro (2019) brings out the absurdity of us still seeing creative repurposing and revival of clothes as a badge of shame of poverty and need at the same time when now it is precisely the opposite. Donating clothes to charity stops is no longer an act of good will but an act of dumping responsibilities for the unwanted clothes (De Castro 2021). In the open letter to the fashion industry Ricketts (2021) brings out the problems with discarded and donated clothing. Chapman states that recycling is

sometimes even an excuse for more rapid discarding and can encourage wastefulness (2015, p. 15). It is estimated that less than 1% of all textiles worldwide are recycled into new textiles. (European Commission 2015) Stained and moth-holed clothing cannot be recycled and is not suitable for donating to reuse centres. One of the few options we have to stop our clothing and accessories from ending up at the landfill is to rediscover some old wisdom, through mending and repurposing.

Durrani suggests communal garment mending events as means to slow down and extend the use of clothing that people already possess (2019). What if clothes and textiles are considered to be at their best if they show signs of use and damage? Wearing out gives the user a possibility to interact with the clothing by adding layers of repair as a sign of increasing value over time. Garments are 'made' with each and every wear (Sampson 2020).

This research is aiming to contribute to a system for the clothes to live their own life in the hands of the user or multiple users, each adding up a new layer. In the European Commission Circular Economy Action Plan, repair is stated as one of the ways of redefining the consumption patterns and transitioning to a regenerative system (European Commission 2015). Unfortunately the regularity of domestic mending is reducing but participation in repair events has been growing (Durrani 2019). Individual consumers are being empowered with skills and the social aspect is important when making something together (Hircher et al. 2018). Craftivism, the more powerful more personal approach to activism can pioneer change (De Castro 2021).

Clothes represent the actual worldly reality of lived experience (Fletcher 2019), especially when we approach them as experiences rather than as things (Sampson 2020). Sampson (2020) describes wear and use not only as a record of the wearer's lived experience but also as embodiment of stories experienced in a relationship. This research develops the idea further to layers of repair possibly seen as embodiment of the caring relationships in a long engagement.

Motivation and inspiration

In March 2023 Marta Konovalov was elected as UNESCO Creative City Viljandi Master of Crafts for one year. Her aim was to contribute to cultural and environmental sustainability by focusing on textile repair. One of her contributions in this role was curating the exhibition "*Pikem Suhe*" (A Long Engagement). Inspired by the simple but radical idea of Kate Fletcher and Mathilda Tham (2019) who ask us to put the health and survival of our Planet Earth, and consequently the future security and health of all species including humans, before industry, business and economic growth. Believing that we do not only need to take radical action but we need a sense of optimism to be able to proceed with our actions. Instead of waiting for a shift in the industry level, everyone can contribute by looking after their clothes with care and repair (Fletcher 2021).

Methodology

The research was carried using a qualitative multi-method approach having the exhibition as a tool for data collection. Data was produced with participants via workshops, focus group interview, patient cards and visual documentation (photos). In order to engage the audience as research participants an exhibition was designed, where the audience's contributions set the exhibition in a state of flow and constant development. The exhibition design evoking a maker-space setting supported such engagements via workshops and discussions and allowed for a data collection environment, enhanced audience engagement, as well as a setting to popularise repair.

About the exhibition

The exhibition "A Long Engagement" took place at Kondas Centre, Viljandi, Estonia from 16.11.2022-28.01.2023. This exhibition explored our relationship with clothing and textiles from the perspective of mending. Aiming to rethink fashion and to create a caring environment through the act of repair, co-creation and craftivism.

On the first day the exhibition was not finished (Figure 1). On its opening day there were works from seven designers, craftspeople and artists — Maris Taul, Marta Konovalov, Anna-Maria Saar, Kelian Luisk and Marika Jylhä, Terje Meisterson and Gary Markle.



Figure 1. Gallery setting on the first day of the exhibition with the works of Maris Taul. All photos by Kärt Petser.

Marta Konovalov makes mending visible in her creative practice with the aim to remind repair as a philosophy and inspire others towards the act of repair for prolonging the use phase of fashion artefacts. The works exhibited by her were also intended to function as samples of the workshops. The socks and footwear are both mended in similar methods to outline the possibilities to regenerate broken or worn out textile surfaces (Figure 2). Aiming to create an aesthetic that values mending, hoping that visible mending is more than a trend.

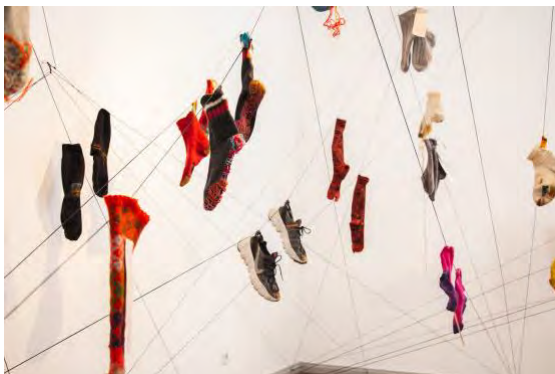


Figure 2. The darning samples by Marta Konovalov aligned with the works added to the exhibition by the audience and workshop participants.

The exhibition also outlined the need to repair the way we consume and produce fashion.

Gary Markle's work is intended to mend connections between people and the clothing they consume by asking them to slow down and engage in a process of remaking material (Figure 3.). Hoping to educate consumers to extend the use time of garments but also to enhance social well-being, providing emotional

satisfaction which can even replace some of the emotional effects of fast fashion consumption (Hircher et al. 2018).



Figure 3. Engagement in a process of remaking material on tools by Gary Markle.

The public and the workshop participants were asked to contribute to the exhibition by adding their previously made work of repair or a mending project from the workshop. The works are accompanied by stories about the items of repair in the form of written interviews. The exhibition space became a workshop where one can repair, learn how to mend and to discuss the well-being of our planet, ourselves and our clothing while making together. The audience was invited to a discussion over our roles in our relationship with textiles and clothing — are we the consumers, owners, wearers or are we in a caring relationship?

About the workshops

Six workshops focusing on textile repair were organised during the exhibition. In three of them people attended as groups and in other cases people came out of their personal interest. There were more than 800 people who visited the exhibition and 89 workshop participants in total.

The aim of the workshops was to teach and learn repair techniques, mend together and to discover repair as means to revive our relationship with clothing. In addition to creating an environment where local craftspeople can interact and exchange knowledge.

The workshop by Maris Taul provided inspiration from the common practice of our ancestors and the mending techniques popular in the beginning of the 20th century. Marta Konovalov led four workshops, where the

participants were reminded how basic techniques such as darning and swiss darning can give new life to clothing.

Anna-Maria Saar was teaching *sashiko*-inspired patchwork techniques based on her own personal journey of mending her clothes. Sharing her observation on the material and the time needed for the practice. The workshop also functioned as a focus group interview. The position of being an active participant instead of teaching the methods for repair allowed to lead the conversations and ask questions on why and what people choose to repair.

Findings

During eleven weeks 30 works of repair were added to the exhibition. 12 of the added works were collected from the mending workshops and 15 people brought their independent work of repair to the exhibition. Three artefacts mended at repair workshops organised outside this exhibition were also presented. We also asked the public and the workshop participants to contribute to the exhibition by telling stories about the items of repair.

Some of the artefacts brought to the exhibition have had previous relationships with other people. In the case of the second-hand store findings these people are not known. Other items had been made, worn or repaired by someone dear. "Repairing something is an act of love... It's an act of care for that object, of course. But it's often an act of love for the person that the object belongs to." (Treggiden 2021). There was a work of repair that functioned as a journey of personal healing. Repair is also an act of emotional repair (Treggiden 2021). The act of repair can be seen as a form of positive activism that leads to emotional well-being.

Many of the added works had been repaired multiple times, sometimes by different people (Figure 4). The reason for mending the exhibited artefacts was always them being worn out or having holes. Durrani approaches repair as mending something that is broken, not alterations (2019). In the case of all the works added to the exhibition the same approach occurred. It was later discovered that none of the mending techniques used had been done with the help of a sewing machine. Hand

stitching, darning and handmade patchwork was applied instead.



Figure 4. The inside of a sweater with repairs from three different people.

Most of the participants had previous experience in textile mending and also the technical skills. It was the mindset and philosophy of repair as means of care that needed relearning. Often repair of the items occurred, because the workshops took place or people attended as a group. But co-creation meant more than just mending together in the same space. There were sweaters co-mended in the belief of increased emotional value and socks darned by different menders in the workshops. Some people needed to learn the basic techniques of mending and most to remember repair as an option before discarding.

It also happened that people skillfully mastering the techniques of repair choose not to use it in their daily practices, because there was a period in their life where they had no other option. Some of the participants stated that they choose what they repair, meaning that cheap and poorly made fast fashion items are not worth the effort. Other practitioners mediate the repair activities as a creation or an act of performative art, thus making the hidden work visible. The humble act of repair (Ax 2018), holds within an essence of care, creativity and also power (Durrani 2019). De Castro (2021) also argues that when it comes to the emotional relationship, everything is worth keeping and repairing something that was designed to be disposable strives towards an overall improvement of the system.

Each repair marks a sometimes visible, often tangible caring engagement. In the case of one

dress the repair added in a previous relationship got to be unnoticed for years by the current wearer of the dress (Figure 5.). It only got noticed when a new act of repair was needed.

Each repair marks a sometimes visible, often tangible caring engagement. In the case of one dress the repair added in a previous relationship got to be unnoticed for years by the current wearer of the dress (Figure 5.). It only got noticed when a new act of repair was needed.



Figure 5. The dress repaired by Anna-Maria Saar where layers of repair are camouflaged by the pattern.

When it came to textile and clothing the motivation behind the repairs was to prolong the possible use of the garment. The practices of use depend on the reality of our everyday lives (Vankerschaver 2017).

It was due to emotional attachment or sometimes also practical need that the relationships with these garments were prolonged. None of the relationships ended

when the garment got damaged or broken. Often these items had already been mended before. It was also discovered that none of the works aimed to recreate the piece in its original state. They were under constant development through use, wearing out layers of repair (Figure 6.). Often these layers are applied by different people. This relates to the *wabi-sabi* philosophy where the notion of completion has no basis and also the role of the author is not considered the most important. In the *wabi-sabi* universe things are either devolving toward, or evolving from, nothingness (Koren 1994; Koren 2008). Through wear and repair clothes were in the making.



Figure 6. A glove added to the exhibition by Jane Remm with multiple layers of repair.

The works exhibited and analysed were limited by the ones that could be exhibited because they were not needed in daily use. For example one of artefacts, a woollen pair of socks, could not be exhibited due to the winter season and the participants' needs. These kinds of items most often represent the layers of repair.

Conclusions

Adding the first layer of repair to clothes and textiles can lead to mending them again, because of the emotional durability created through care. Through co-creation, care and repair clothes can have a life of their own in long relationships with humans. The layers of repair can be seen as an embodiment of narratives from our prolonged relationship with clothes. This could lead to future discussion over how the role of a designer could be seen if we shift our focus from making to maintaining. Also on how to rewrite the story of our clothes and to bring in new narratives of well-being, care and regeneration. Hopefully this research can widen

the boundaries of when a garment's use phase should end and begin.

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