



Spelman cups: Attitudes to the past

Bridget Harvey



Image 1: Spelman Cups (2016) ceramic, mixed media. Photo: Bridget Harvey.

Technically there are five of you, but actually only four. Really you are three and one other.

None of you are really broken, but all are damaged, bar one. Small, glazed, white, glossy.

Three old, one new. Slip cast, tipped out of a plaster mould, handles moulded too, joined later.

Three of you are stained; use, time and storage showing on your bodies.

The one newer, perfect, crisp, unstained, unchipped – little story acquired yet. You sit together, deliberately spaced. A wider gap between first and third: where your missing comrade should hang.

You tell a story as a group.

First belongs to a ‘Creator, those who start anew, do not repair what already exists’: cup repurposed, plant pot now.

Second, the gap; the missing, destroyed, discarded, binned, trashed, no longer wanted, thrown away, tossed aside. The ‘destroyer wants to get rid of what’s there, not rescue it’.

Third, still used by a ‘noninterferer, those who neither help nor hinder, simply allowing decay’. Dregs in the bottom. Potentially cared for, potentially just not bothered. Not broken enough to warrant change.

Fourth, brand new, proudly branded but somehow less interesting. Unchipped, unstained, unused. A ‘replacer has figured it’s not possible to or worth it to repair your original’.

Fifth, post it note stuck on. It reads ‘chipped, might be useful’.

Belonging to the bricoleur, purpose is sensed but not seen, there but not clear.

You rest now, your place is logged, your properties acknowledged.

As a group you tell a story. If you yourselves could speak what would you say?

I feel you ask questions, querying our identities – what is my relation to the past? Is it described here? What kind of Repairer (or not) am I?

You deliberate on our actions – what do I do? How do I move forward from breakage?

You now hang in a row, in a public space, there to be looked at. You are white objects on a white wall. Potentially no one will notice you.

(Spelman, 2002:5)

Attitudes to the past: The craft and politic of being a ‘repair-maker’

Before the recent resurgence of interest in repair, Elizabeth Spelman’s 2002 cultural survey, ‘Repair: The impulse to restore in a fragile world’, was one of the only philosophical texts in the field. She explored repair both as a material practice and cultural exchange, in which she also included apologies and reparations. In her introductory chapter she suggests that ‘as varied as the activities of *H. reparans* are, they appear to be notably different from other kinds of relations to or attitudes toward the past’ (2002:5), naming these others as creators, destroyers, noninterferers, replacers, and bricoleurs (*ibid.*). I represented her five typologies with this series of cups. Spelman tells us that repair permeates both the acts of creating and of destroying, but she doesn’t, in that instance, frame repair as a political act. While repairing itself is not necessarily always done as an act of activism, ideas of activism can often be applied to acts of repair, implicitly and explicitly. Responding to Spelman’s list of ‘attitudes to the past’ (2002), I suggest a possible identity of ‘Repair-Makers’ as agent, activist and practitioner in what I describe below as the third wave of repair, where repair-making is often a choice imbued with politics, after being common practice, obligation and chore, then phased out by increased consumption and production practices. I locate contemporary repair practices within a brief history and define what I term the ‘craft of repair’; I explore the relationship between anti-consumption politics and repair before continuing to look at repair workshops as places for knowhow, identity and community building. My writing draws on my experience as co-organizer of the ‘Hackney Fixers’, as facilitator of other repair workshops, and my doctoral research (‘Repair-Making: Craft, activism, narratives’) taking place in the emergent repair scene in London, UK.

I also explore the craft and politic of repair through the figures of ‘Repair-Maker’ and ‘Repair-Seeker’. We are all a Repair-Seeker at some point. We have something that we want fixed (whether we get it done or not is another topic) and opportunities now exist to bring the broken object to a repair workshop, to learn the skills on offer, to observe or to get advice. At workshops we may shift from being a Repair-Seeker to being a Repair-Maker, temporarily or permanently. Equally while some of us might already be considered Repair-Makers – those who repair without thinking about it as repairing; those who make a deliberate choice to investigate the possibilities and potentials, histories and formal routes of repair; or others who reach for the superglue, the cello tape, hammer and nails – we are unlikely as individuals to be able to repair all types of things, and so find ourselves in the position of Repair-Seeker at one time or another. It is through the mobility of these positions and the collectivity they each invoke, I explore the craft and politic of repair, and our attitudes to the past.

A rapid history of Repair-Making

Domestically Repair-Making has been an omnipresent practice undertaken on a range of everyday objects. Much of this repair activity was phased out in the mid 20th century through women's liberation from the home, the deliberate development of planned obsolescence, neo-liberal capitalism and consumer cravings for smaller, faster, and 'the latest' models of things. At the time of writing, repair is emerging as a grassroots activity, a strand of environmentalism, a form of anti-capitalism, an agenda for forward-looking business models and corporate responsibility, but despite this it often remains a domestic or local task, initiated by the owner. I consider these to be, loosely, the three waves of repair, distinguished from one another by their actions and intentions. Where initially there was a (possibly obligatory) politic of object-care, as manufacturing technologies improved and production costs lowered, replacing broken or dated objects became easier and was marketed as a form of self-care. This has now moved on again, into a realization for some, that unbridled consumption and disposal is leading to climate disaster, and that repair can be a statement of ability, ownership and environmentalism.

Deliberate Repair-Making goes beyond 'craftivism' (a neologism of craft and activism) where new objects (frequently made from new materials) are used to promote a political message or stance (Greer, 2007). This goes beyond hacking, which is often an undoing of an unbroken object, and by intervening in that which already exists transforms it into what is needed and/or wanted. However, repair may, in some cases, be considered or discursively framed as craftivism, and similarly, there are crossovers between hacking and repairing. There are now kits for sale for craftivism, hacking and for Repair-Making – frequently differing through material intent rather than material content.

The 'Craft (?!) of Repair'

Repair-Making is both a craft of its own, and part of the craft of creating. Definitions of craft as skilled, material knowledge (e.g. Adamson, 2010) often lack political edge, focussing more on artefacts and less on the meaning of the actions of making – key in this third wave of repair is where 'craft is edgy, craft is radical, even revolutionary, and craft has the potential to remake regimes of distribution. Craft can be a galvanizing visualization of political intent' (Bryan-Wilson, 2013: 9) and a way of shaping of resistance to neoliberal practices and injustices (Greer, 2014). Acknowledgement, too, of the complexities of craft across time, class, place and intention is important where craft is described as a 'wedge' which 'polarizes and collapses theoretical positions about what making means today' (Bryan-Wilson, 2013:10).

D.M. Dooling proposed that the ‘crafts might indeed be a “sort of ark” for the transmission of knowledge about being’ (1979: xii) and is so in a number of ways: by containing or keeping afloat ideas of sharing and working together; of developing lines of thought, and of experiencing change in and through materials and understanding; and lastly a way to make ‘the questions with which we began ... clearer’ (*ibid.*: xiii). Spelman suggests the ‘wall of separation’ between creation and repair contains ‘deep fissures’ (2002: 131) as does that between repair and destruction, suggesting that when a repair is made, a ‘beloved ruin’ may potentially be broken (*ibid.*: 131). The Craft of Repair embodies these tensions, and, as a ‘wedge’, creatively reconciles, polarizes and collapses its multiple meanings – and in that it acts as an ark for skill, knowledge, change, politics, economies, intentions and questioning – repair is a way of metaphorically, financially, socially and materially staying afloat when material goods (such as precious metals in phones) and social connections can seem scarce.

The experience of change carried by craft gives it an appearance of ‘authenticity in what is seen as an increasingly inauthentic world’ (Erlhoff and Marshall, 2008: 91), where inauthenticity erodes the ability to deal with the unfamiliar, to be reflective, and to adjust to change (Ehrenfeld and Hoffman, 2013). When engaging with the Craft of Repair, coping with the unfamiliar, risk and uncertainty are essential as the needs of a broken object are ‘variable, complex and not of our own making, and therefore not fully knowable’ (Crawford, 2009: 16-17), ‘*fixing*, in a general sense, extends a yet earlier mind and method, that of the original fashioner’ (Harper, 1987: 21). Repair-Makers ‘share the aim of maintaining some kind of continuity with the past in the face of breaks and ruptures to that continuity’ (Spelman, 2002: 4).

Some Repair-Making requires deep knowledge of materials and objects (Strasser, 1999; Harper, 1987) and potentially ‘an expert is seen as someone who can equally make and repair’ (Sennett, 2009: 248), with patience (Crawford, 2009), interpretive skills (Harper, 1987) alongside a ‘cognitive and moral [disposition]’ (Crawford, 2009: 82). Some however, require little more than a roll of gaffa tape and some gumption. Both approaches can equally lead to successful repairs. Engaging with the familiar and the unfamiliar, the past and the future, the known and the unknown, the Repair-Maker, through the Craft of Repair, produces, not necessarily beautiful, but authentic, appropriate and functional outcomes.

Spelman suggests, ‘Homo Reparans is always and everywhere on call’ (2002: 2). As a human ‘wedge’, embodying the tensions of repair-making, the Repair-Maker may or may not own the broken object, may or may not be a professional

repairer or be experienced, skilled or knowledgeable about the type of repair needed, but repairs, through adaptation, customization, restoration, conservation, as choice, chore, or obligation, bring an object back to working order.

Repair-Making as anti-consumption practice

Repair has a complex relationship with consumption. In some sense, repair is inherently an anti-consumption practice, and Repair-Makers may well engage with this politic. However, the need for parts and materials often means making a purchase, and there is a small industry emerging around this. Examples might be new materials such as Sugru¹ (and copies of it, such as Kintsuglue²), or kits such as Merchant and Mills Rapid Repair Kit³, which effectively contains the same materials as most sewing kits⁴ at what could be considered an exclusive cost of £15. There is also the question of what commodities one chooses to buy, whether secondhand or new; can one purchase a repairable version of that which is needed? These are often more expensive, and thus more exclusive purchases.

Brand	Count
<input type="checkbox"/> Cookworks	(18)
<input type="checkbox"/> Breville	(11)
<input type="checkbox"/> KitchenOriginals by Kalorik	(10)
<input type="checkbox"/> Bosch	(6)
<input type="checkbox"/> Kenwood	(6)
<input type="checkbox"/> Tefal	(6)
<input type="checkbox"/> KitchenAid	(5)
<input type="checkbox"/> Bodum	(4)
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Dualit	(3)
<input type="checkbox"/> Swan	(3)
<input type="checkbox"/> Magimix	(2)
<input type="checkbox"/> Waring	(2)
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Simple Value by Argos	(1)
<input type="checkbox"/> Delonghi	(1)
<input type="checkbox"/> Prestige	(1)
<input type="checkbox"/> Seren	(1)

Product	Price	Rating	Count
Simple Value 2 Slice Toaster - White	£7.49	★★★★★	(149)
Dualit DPP4 4 Slice Lite Toaster - Black	£89.99	★★★★★	(87)
Dualit 46201 4 Slice Toaster - Cream	£99.99	★★★★★	(80)
Dualit 20245 Vario 2 Slice Toaster - Stainless Steel	£149.99	★★★★★	(33)

Image 2: Price comparison of not-repairable and repairable toasters on Argos website, January 2018.

1 See <https://sugru.com>

2 <http://www.loctite-consumer.co.uk/en/products/kintsuglue.html>

3 <https://merchantandmills.com/store/equipment/notions/rapid-repair-kit-3/>

4 For instance the Hemline N4305 Premium Full Small 'Sew & Go Sewing Kit'

Looking to anarchist culture, Laura Portwood-Stacer provides us with a deep discussion of motivations for anti-consumption activism as a lifestyle choice (2013). She describes anarchist practices of anti-consumption as ‘part of the fabric of everyday life’ (*ibid.*: 26); they ‘do not universally abstain from consumption ... rather they consume differently, in ways that *signify* an opposition to the kind of lifestyles encouraged by the bourgeois consumer culture’ (*ibid.*: 26, emphasis in original). Materially, this may have similarities to mainstream consumer culture, however anarchists ‘often *discursively* frame their consumption activities as contra to the overall system of consumer capitalism. This is what makes their anti-consumption lifestyles understandable *as* activism’ (*ibid.*: 26, emphasis in original) She lists anti-consumption activism motivations as; personal, moral, activist, identificatory, and social (*ibid.*).

Positioning these anti-consumption motivations in relation to Repair-Making, *moral* motivations consciously differentiate right and wrong, and form the basis of *activist* motivations. *Personal* motivations for repair may include the simple desire to not engage with mainstream consumerism, and *identificatory* motivations build identity through purchasing choices, and build community through the visible display of these choices, acts, politics and emotions – these are performed by being material expressions of being a Repair-Maker, *socially* linking one with others who share concerns. By taking a reflexive and communicative approach to consumption, choosing to consume differently (asking for parts, instructions, repairable objects), by not consuming that which cannot be repaired, by discursively framing choices, the anti/consumption of the Repair-Maker may lean towards an anarchic practice. Given form by these acts of resistance, a counter-cultural solidarity is created by, and creates, togetherness as well as non-geographic, non-physical togetherness through Instagram hashtags, tee-shirts, slogans, patches, visible repairs and efforts to change standard business practices. While some of this togetherness appears not to be very diverse (an unscientific survey of the users of #visiblemending on Instagram seems to show mostly white, female makers working on expensive clothes) my experience in community workshops is that the participants are diverse, and while the repair skills are somewhat gendered (e.g., the clothes repair is demonstrated by women, and the electronics by men) this is not definitive.

The ‘Visible Mending’ movement, where many people mend their possessions deliberately visibly, sharing and documenting these acts through hashtag use on social media creates a critical mass of #visiblemending acts. These aim to show the relationship with and the reaction to the power of contemporary consumption habits by embracing the aesthetic of repair, and, particularly on clothing, these mending acts are both slogan and sibling to the slogan tee-shirts worn by repair-makers. They point to an affinity with other repair-makers,

through the very visibility of the mends rather than readable slogans or graphics. The visible mends therefore become what Portwood-Stacer calls a ‘subtle symbol’ of ones politics (2013: 55).



Image 3: Ugo Vallauri co-founder of the Restart Project and repair activist wearing a tee-shirt that promotes repair. (2015) Photo: Janet Gunter.



*Image 4: Blue Jumper (2012 onwards) showing visible darning by Bridget Harvey.
Photo: Bridget Harvey*

There are tensions inherent in anti/consumption practices and the politics of repair work for Repair-Makers. Repairing initiates a different route to consuming new items, but does not encourage manufacture of repairable goods or goods for repair, yet by engaging with manufacturers who embrace reparability, the act of anti-consumption becomes redundant. Wearing a visibly repaired garment is potentially a privileged choice unavailable to those who, for example, must wear a company uniform (or those whose items are not well-made enough to warrant repair or to withstand it?). Repairing clothing visibly might mean not purchasing a new garment, but repair-slogan tee-shirts are often new to the owner, printed especially. Visible repair work encourages community and signals ones politics, but in doing so might exclude others – those who don't or can't repair, who feel unable or unwilling to join that movement. A repair practice that maintains an anti-consumption stance, for example, darning a jumper with leftover yarn, might not work for another object, like a smart phone with a dead battery. Consumption, in relation to repair, requires a conscious thought process around purchasing practices, and may result in a swap, a make-do or gifted part. The repair-maker must, along with their 'attitude to the past', pay mind to the future.

Hackney Fixers: A very short introduction



hackneyfixers.org.uk

Image 5: Hackney Fixers logo (design by Dave Lukes).

Hackney, a gentrified east London borough, has a mixed set of inhabitants, long-standing, new, short- and long-term residents, coming from across a spectrum of economic incomes. Hackney Fixers are a group of four volunteers who, since late 2013, have run events in community centres and libraries across the borough. These are open to anyone with something that needs repairing, and generally the objects brought in for repairing are of everyday use. We aim to repair as much as possible on a shoestring budget and rely on the goodwill of a team of volunteers and community spaces. We accept donations and external funding, but do not require payment for access to the spaces we use or the skills we share. Hackney Fixers provide a range of tools and knowledge, and encourage participants to use them, aiming to show the do-ability of Repair-Making using common household tools and materials.

Our approach builds our connections with the area and its residents, bringing the craft-of-repair to many. Juliette MacDonald, head of the School of Design, Edinburgh College of Art, University of Edinburgh posits that ‘craft as a

communal experience functions as a form of resistance to that sense of alienation' often experienced by urban dwellers (MacDonald, 2015: 104). For her, the resulting objects from a community project may be sloppy and imperfect but the participation provided through the making experience 'demonstrate the potential for the creation of far more complex webs of meaning (social, psychological, political and cultural), providing a depth of connection achieved through the sharing of process and experience' (*ibid.*: 105). She concludes by saying 'engagement rather than a perfect end-product is the key to promoting social capital and the result is that participants become knitted into the fabric of the community' (*ibid.*: 106). To be embedded is one of the aims of Hackney Fixers – that we as a group are valued and useful in our mixed and changing community, neither owning either what we do nor the skills we share, nor limiting who we share them with.

Repair workshops: Volunteering to make repair possible

The act of volunteering can create both personal and group wellness (Pickett and Wilkinson, 2010). Our repair workshops aim to break down the dichotomy between professional and non-professional Repair-Makers by engaging with informative, exploratory and reflexive challenges, where volunteering is often a nexus point for hobbyists or tinkerers, learning and politics. In this nexus, the Repair-Maker is dependent on the Repair-Seeker for information about how the object is used and how it is to be repaired. As such, repair workshops bring people together, creating opportunity for social interactions and togetherness. The connections created are sometimes permanent and sometimes transient. Repair-Makers may meet repeatedly and build strong connections and this may be a motivation (Graziano and Trogal, 2017), as may Repair-Seekers. Alternatively, one off encounters might be had: materially, the duration of relationship is of secondary relevance as long as repair is being attempted, and knowhow is being shared.

With our open access repair workshops we aim to form a micro-economy of values, building relationships within communities: attempting Repair-Making together can become worth more than making or buying something new. Attending or volunteering at a repair workshop can become a form of activism. Repair workshops, as we run them, draw on alternative educational models with 'humanistic goal[s]' which 'distinguish learning from schooling' to show value in that learnt in and through society (Illich, 1977: 70). By sharing learning, they aim to clarify not only repair skills, but also the situation in which not having these skills continues to bind the deskilled to their (capitalist) oppressors by avoiding 'mere speech-making... and mechanistic activism... to move towards the unity of the oppressed' (Freire, 1996: 156). Hackney Fixers workshops strive to subvert

brokenness into positive, community lead, knowledge sharing opportunities. This inherently questions what Ivan Illich calls 'knowledge stock' – that learnt in formal education such as a school or university which contributes to a knowledge based class system (1977: 71) – and continues the repair discourse, while giving space for 'talking back'. Participants control how they participate (Illich, 1971), how they engage and learn (participants are present throughout the repair work, and are supported to help as much as they feel able, and to share what they feel is important about their objects), when they arrive, and how long they stay.

'Loose parts', described by Simon Nicholson as physical phenomena aiding discovery and learning through creative interaction (2009 [1972]: 5), can be found in the form of tools, materials and space for use, structure and experimentation contribute to learning activities. This is also the case with the structure of Hackney Fixers, which, while organized by a core team, is contributed to by a large group of people who are willing to share their mixed skills, and a flexible volunteer participation system where fixers step up and step back according to their wishes – there are no set hours or commitments.

Conscious choices in the third wave of Repair-Making

Repair-Makers who volunteer their aid encourage others to repair and promote repair as an active and enjoyable part of ownership. By opening objects perceived to be un-openable and showing their reparability, repair workshops also open other possibilities to those attending. Repair-Making disobeys the economic rules of growth capitalism, but, in some forms, obeys contemporary consumption principles. The potential activism of participating in repair workshops enables a questioning of what we know, what we are taught, and how we are told to behave, and so furthers the act of Repair-Making. The Craft of Repair is more than simply material, it is social and political too.

Repair practices run the risk of being re-co-opted by big business, but this does not mean that we should not repair – repair as business or service has long existed and it has long been a paid service. Now, however, it stands in the face of fast consumption and production. Choices based on anti-consumption principles help step ownership away from capitalist growth models, and potentially builds identity and activists stances, through creative construction of the self through both practices of consumption and stewardship. Consumption choices are key to both supporting the repair movement and voicing opposition to anti-repair acts.

While Spelman's examples of 'attitudes to the past' provide some understanding of what a Repair-Maker is not, here I have pieced together: an understanding of the Craft-of-Repair; an identity of a third wave Repair-Maker, along with potential

motivations for and meanings of the act of Repair-Making. Taking damaged material from a destructive to a creative place, using brokenness to reposition repair as a politic and as anti/consumption consideration, showing workshops as community and identity builder, the Craft of Repair becomes a propositional practice. The contemporary figure of the Repair-Maker demonstrates not only an attitude to the past, but also an attitude firmly rooted in the future.

references

- Adamson, G. (ed.) (2010) *The craft reader*. London: Bloomsbury.
- Bryan-Wilson, J. (2013) ‘Eleven propositions in response to the question: “What is contemporary about craft?”’, *The Journal of Modern Craft*, 6: 7–10.
- Crawford, M. (2009) *Shop class as soulcraft: An inquiry into the value of work*. New York: Penguin Books.
- Dooling, D.M. (ed.) (1979) *A way of working*. New York: Anchor Books.
- Ehrenfeld, J. and A.J. Hoffman (2013) *Flourishing: A frank conversation about sustainability*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Erlhoff, M. and T. Marshall (eds.) (2008) *Design dictionary: Perspectives on design terminology*. Basel: Birkhäuser Verlag AG.
- Freire, P. (1996 [1970]). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. Penguin Books: London.
- Graziano, V. and K. Trogal (2017) ‘The politics of collective repair: Examining object-relations in a postwork society’, *Cultural Studies*, 31(5): 634–658.
- Greer, B. (ed.) (2014) *Craftivism: The art of craft and activism*. Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press.
- Greer, B. (2007) ‘Craftivism definition’. [<http://craftivism.com/definition/>]
- Harper, D. (1987) *Working knowledge: Skill and community in a small shop*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Illich, I. (1977) *Toward a history of needs*. New York: Pantheon Books.
- Illich, I. (1971) *Deschooling society*. London: Calder & Boyars.
- MacDonald, J. (2015) ‘The value of “sloppy craft”: Creativity and community’, in E. Cheasley Paterson and S. Surette (eds.) *Sloppy craft: Post-disciplinarity and the crafts*. London: Bloomsbury.

Nicholson, S. (2009 [1972]) *The theory of loose parts: An important principle for design methodology*. Republished in *Studies in Design Education Craft & Technology* SI, 4(2). [<https://ojs.lboro.ac.uk/SDEC/article/view/1204>]

Pickett, K. and R. Wilkinson (2010) *The spirit level: Why equality is better for everyone*. London: Penguin Books.

Portwood-Stacer, L. (2013) *Lifestyle politics and radical activism*. London: Bloomsbury.

Sennett, R. (2009) *The craftsman*. London: Penguin Books.

Spelman, E. (2002) *Repair: The impulse to restore in a fragile world*. Boston: Beacon Press.

Strasser, S. (1999) *Waste and want: A social history of trash*. New York: Holt Paperbacks.

the author

Bridget Harvey tactually explores narrative patinas – use, repair, and memory, seeking materials past their best for investigating process, materials, and social actions through making. Her AHRC PhD research is titled *Repair-Making: Craft, politic, community*. Artefacts such as ‘MEND MORE jumper’ (2015), ‘Sides to Middle: My Way of Working’ (2016), and curatorial works such as ‘The Department of Repair’ (2015) simultaneously embed, show and hide narrative, and her interventions re-story the familiar, and reconstruct the forgotten. She is associate lecturer, teaching MA Designer Maker, Camberwell College of Arts, and visiting lecturer for MA Textile Design, Chelsea College of Art.

Email: bridget@bridgetharvey.co.uk