

Transformative repair beyond materiality: care, bereavement and loss

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Introduction

Intuitively, the practice of repair is an act of care, a service that restores function to products supporting human activities concerned with comfort, pleasure, wellbeing or health. Repair can also be understood as an act of care for the environment, by helping to slow down accumulation of product in landfill, and by reducing energy and pollution intensive production of replacement goods. Literature on repair references care in relation to cities (Hall & Smith, 2014), the climate crisis (Carr, 2022; McLaren, 2018) and community repair cafes (Meißner, 2021). Repair is proposed as an inherently ethical and careful way of designing within “complex and traumatized ecological systems” (Crosby & Stein, 2020). Repair also extends an ethics of care across multiple domains and disciplines (Reeves-Evison & Rainey, 2018), beyond artefact typologies, suggesting repair concerns a wider range of people than those typically labelled repairers (Denis & Pontille, 2017). Design as a discipline has been critiqued for its failure to care (Rodgers et al., 2019). However, repair also suffers from marginalisation within design industry, perceived as an in-expert practice outside the discipline (Herweck in Zambelletti, 2024) potentially harming integrity of form (Sadler et al., 2024), while non-designers paradoxically struggle with its expert requirements (Berge, Magnier & Mugge, 2023).

We contend that not only is repair within the discipline of design, there is also scope for expanding repair via *transformative* forms that firstly transcend the convention of repairing old objects to ‘as new’ functionality, and secondly potentialize broader transformations in discipline, industry, culture or economy. To explore these possibilities, we introduce repair to designers and craftspeople in ways that

leverage their professional skills for its innovation, to extend the capacity of design and craft, as material practices, beyond the repair of objects and towards the care of human relations.

Repair as a material practice is a form of craft that conserves and restores functional components within broken objects. In working with what already exists, in contrast to paradigms of design focussed on creating artefacts anew from raw materials, repair craft is literally ‘careful’ in the practical sense; broken objects can be fragile and must be treated with care to repair without causing further damage. Repair draws away from obsession with the creation of new things in hyper-consumerist cultures (Jackson, 2014), and so repair is ‘carework’ having social possibilities that challenge mainstream consumption culture (Reno & Isenhour, 2019). However, there is a tension to repair as an act of care noted by Drotbohm (2022):

“On the one hand, the care concept features a protective and conservative dimension that is congruent with the past. On the other hand, the concept incorporates a transformational dimension through its notions of development, progress, and improvement.”

Acknowledging the breadth and diversity of global repair practices, within the context of 21st Century affluent, Global North societies, the transformational dimension of repair is diminished by the marginalisation of repair in general. The advantages of repair to consumers are unclear when replacement products are less expensive and more easily accessed; circular economies need functioning

markets to work (Stahel, 2013), as addressed in our prior research on market-testing transformative repair (Keulemans et al, 2024). In this study, however, through participatory, practice-based research, we challenge this state of affairs by investigating how transformative repair processes can improve significance, aesthetics and values of care, in addition to restoring function. Evaluating a selection of case studies from the project Transformative Repair x JamFactory (TRxJF) conducted in 2023-24, we document and assess material transformations of objects connected to circumstances of loss and bereavement. These examples evidence the capacity for professional designers to creatively repair objects in ways that care for emotions, community wellbeing and other intangible values.

Theory and knowledge gap

In a material sense, all forms of repair are somewhat transformative. Largely missing from the literature on repair are examinations of creative styles of repair that explicitly intend to be visually, functionally or conceptually transformative. Our interest is how transformation may be intentionally designed to express care. We have, in prior research, instrumentalised Deleuzian-Guattarian concepts of affect to explore how transformative repair shifts affective 'assemblages', being the micropolitical arrangement of thoughts and perceptions within and between individuals (Keulemans, 2018). The transformative, yet traditional, Japanese ceramic repair practice of kintsugi was shown to resonate with care and catastrophe amelioration across wider macropolitical social and cultural registers (Keulemans, 2016). Affect is an appropriate framework for understanding the care within repair, because while there are other theories suitable for understanding the emotional impact of design, such as upcycling (Wegener, 2016) or emotionally durability design (Chapman, 2005), affect has a broader interrogative power to understand the "psychotechnologies" used by designers, including those of narrative-based marketing and experience economy (Marenko, 2010: 146).

However, as most widely practiced forms of repair are conventional, there is not many established transformative practices of repair upon which to examine personal, social or cultural impacts. It is our hypothesis that

focused study on transformative repair decisions made by professional designers will illuminate how improvements to social wellbeing can be intentionally delivered through repair practice. We do this in our methods by combining ethnography (interview of owners and designers to understand decision making) using narrative analysis (Reissman, 2001) with a qualitative aesthetic analysis of the repair outcomes informed by concepts of affect (Keulemans, 2015; 2016; 2018) however this work is ongoing and its full review beyond the scope of this article.

Methods

Working with industry partner JamFactory, an Adelaide-based craft and design organization, we released two Expressions of Interest (EOIs) seeking participants: people with objects in disrepair (Owners) and creative practitioners willing to repair them (Repairers). Submissions were reviewed and specific objects matched to specific repairers in consultation with both Owners and Repairers. As researchers, we mediated a negotiated cost of repair for Owners, additional to a fixed subsidy provided to Repairers. Participants were interviewed, and work in progress plus outcomes were documented in photography, exhibition and documentary video. The research process is diagrammed in Figure 1. A selection of three significant works from the eleven total works are illustrated. This sample size is small but sufficient for the project's qualitative focus on aesthetic and narrative analysis. Artefacts related to grief and loss were not sought nor expected from the EOI process, but their inclusion was not surprising either due to similarly linked objects emerging in our prior projects (Keulemans et al., 2017).

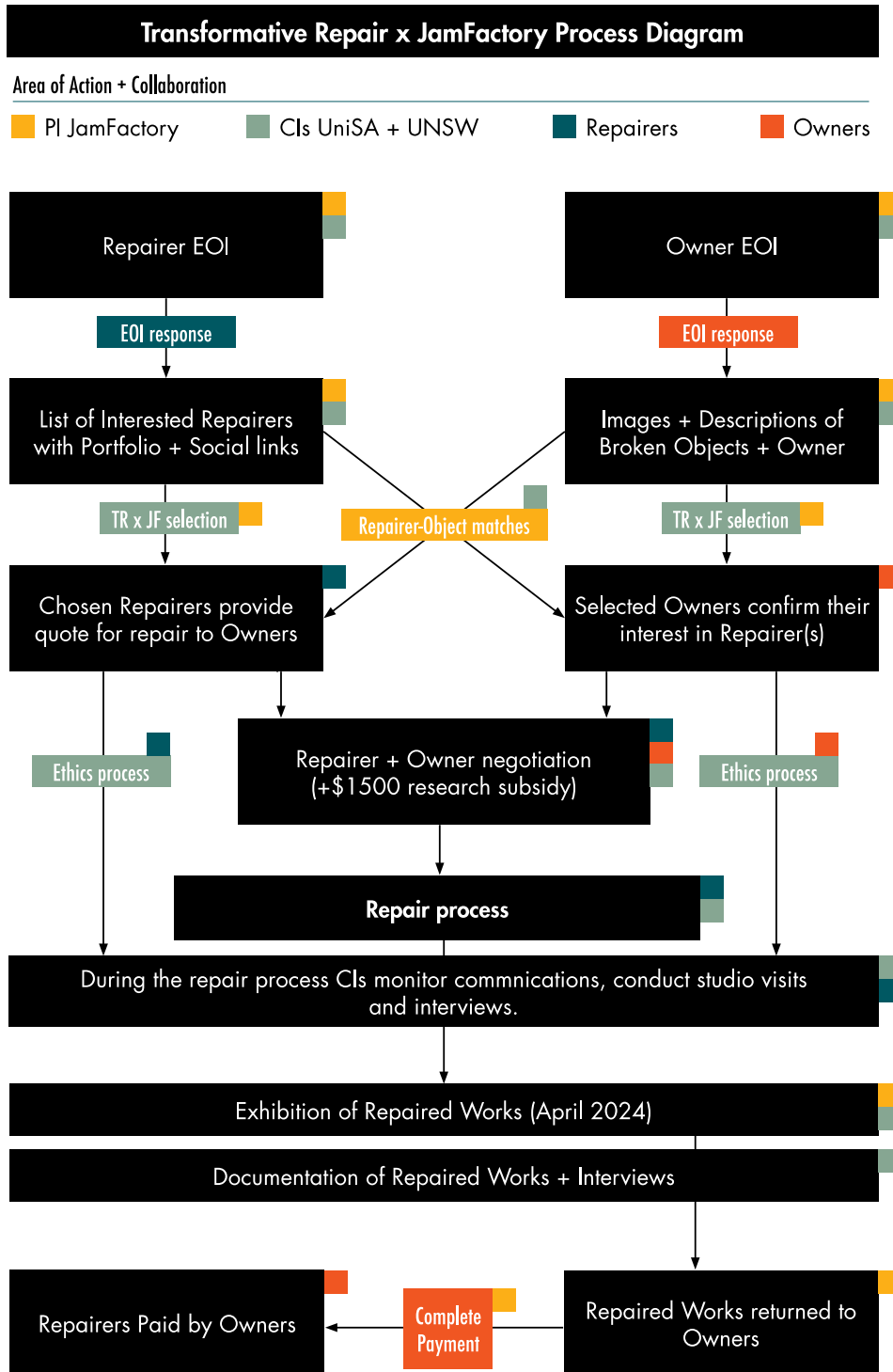


Figure 1. TRxJF Process Diagram ©TRxJF

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Outcomes

The three selected objects and their repair are summarised:

A. Figures 2 & 3. A knitting table inherited by its owner upon the death of her mother. The

colourful restoration of the table by Repairers Bolaji Teniola and Melvin Josy, using marquetry, staining and veneer bending, shifted the owner's appreciation for the table, helping to resolve complex feelings she had for her mother since inheriting the object.



Figure 2. Knitting Table, before repair ©TRxJF



Figure 3. Knitting Table, after repair by Bolaji Teniola and Melvin Josy ©TRxJF

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B. Figures 4 & 5. Broken necklaces created by jeweller Alice Potter, an Adelaide designer who had recently died. The necklaces' owners sought approval from Alice's family before offering them to the project. The chosen Repairer, textile artist Kay Lawrence, found a collaborator to repair the necklaces conventionally, feeling it was inappropriate to transform them directly. Instead, she recreated their visual qualities into two new textile works, as a translation of Alice's particular skill in use of colour, inspired by Alice's experience of having synaesthesia (sensory crossover of

numbers, colours and letters). The sensitivity and emotional impact of this repair was pre-figured in its earliest stages, as addressed by owner John:

“it wasn't long after Alice had died and it felt too raw or too soon, or maybe it didn't feel like my place to introduce those objects back into the world when people were still grieving. [but] maybe it is the right time for precisely those reasons. So ... [if] everyone feels like this might be a therapeutic or a healing thing, then we should try.”



Figure 4. Alice Potter Necklaces, before repair ©TRxJF



Figure 5. Alice Potter Necklaces & new bandoliers after repair by Kay Lawrence ©TRxJF

C. Figures 6 & 7. Half a broken chair offered by notable Malay-Australian designer Khai Liew. Khai originally designed the chair in 2003; this particular chair belonged to a client. Tragically, Khai died from illness during the research project. Khai's passing inspired Repairer Andrew Carvolth to reflect on the influence and legacy of Khai's career. Inspired by agricultural grafting, in which young plants are bound onto

old rootstock, Andrew joined a woven seat onto the chair back and rear legs, creating a metaphor for the transmission of craft knowledge from old to new generations.

Documentary videos for these examples and others from the project can be found on the transformativerepair.net website and Transformative Repair YouTube channel.



Figure 6. Khai Liew chair. before repair ©TRxJF



Figure 7. K. Khai Liew chair, after repair by Andrew Carvolth ©TRxJF

Conclusion

We believe these works evidence that designers and craftspeople possess skills with potential to enhance the social value of repair, beyond the practical benefits of repair and the usual social benefits of design and craft. The application of design and craft skills via transformative repair within complex contexts, such as grief and loss, provides scope for repairers to revitalize artefacts for capacity to heal or ameliorate complex feelings borne from relationships with objects. This is likely an under-utilized and under-researched expertise in craft and design industry.

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