

The Creative Destruction of Brokenness: Japanese Boro, Repair, and Fashion Futures

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Summary:

This presentation investigates the lessons that worldwide practices of mending offer designers today and conjectures where such lessons might lead us in the future. Focus moves from historic objects, the maker's hand, and the care taken in the creation and life extension of singular, meaningfully crafted functional objects to overarching concerns of environmental, industrial, and societal repair evident in contemporary fashion projects and proposals. The text also provides an overview of the RISD Museum exhibition *Repair and Design Future* and highlights contemporary designers who incorporate reparative techniques in their creative processes.

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I. Introduction

In 2013 the Domaine de Boisbuchet, a site of innovative design workshops in southwestern France, mounted the exhibition "Boro: The Fabric of Life." In this evocative display, heavily mended and patched Japanese workwear received a then-rare moment in the spotlight as an offering and stimulus for Boisbuchet's design-conscious audience of makers and thinkers: a lesson in the beauty of aged garments nurtured and revealed by daily use, attention, and preservation.



Figure 1: Installation view of "Boro: The Fabric of Life" (2013) at Domaine de Boisbuchet.

Since then there's been a notable variety of repair-oriented, textile-based works that have featured at design fairs and exhibitions around the world. Italian furniture designer Martino Gamper's installation *In a State of Repair* was presented at la Rinascente department store during the Salone del Mobile design fair in 2014. There the public was invited to bring broken objects to various professionals to be repaired so they could witness the highly skilled process of fixing things and be encouraged "to keep their belongings rather than discard them, to improve what they buy rather than throw it away" (Gamper 2014).

Taiwanese artist Lee Mingwei re-presented his *The Mending Project* at the 2017 Venice Biennale. In this performance, Mingwei or his assistants met with visitors who brought to the performance venue personal clothing needing mending. As Mingwei and his volunteers talked and connected with the clothing owners, they visibly repaired it. In Mingwei's words: "Unlike a tailor, who will try to hide the fact that the fabric was once damaged, my mending was done with the idea of celebrating the repair, as if to say, 'something good was done here, a gift was given, this fabric is even better than before.'" (Mingwei 2017).

The two interactive conceptual installations just described are among many in which the theme and aesthetics of garment repair have arisen as leitmotifs—or, to take it one step further, as calls to action—in contemporary art and design culture. A humble act born of necessity has become an expression of resistance to our unmaking of the world and our environment. It has also become a way to bring us together, to re-engage with materiality, and to invite us as consumers back to understanding the contexts of makers and making.

In this presentation I investigate the lessons that worldwide practices of mending offer designers today and conjecture where such lessons might lead us in the future. Focus will move from historic objects, the maker's hand, and the care taken in the creation and life extension of singular, meaningfully crafted functional objects to overarching concerns of environmental, industrial, and societal repair evident in contemporary fashion projects and proposals.

II. Mending as Metaphor

I will show that repair is extolled and framed both as a localized, concrete mending practice applied to garments as a personal and/or economic necessity *and* as something much larger—as a global meta-concept serving as a palliative aid to the ills of mass manufacture and consumption and as a way of connecting us in socially engaged contemporary design.

In her book *Everyday Aesthetics*, philosopher Yuriko Saito outlines our dire need to shift our aesthetic paradigm from one favoring perfection, the cutting-edge, and the brand new to one stemming from an impulse similar to that which gave rise to wabi sabi in Japan centuries ago, an aesthetic that fostered appreciation for the transience of objects (and, by extension, humanity) by celebrating objects that have been well-seasoned by use and subsequent repair (Saito 2007).

Here I show a 9th-century Korean ceramic bowl that has been repaired with gold to highlight rather than hide the cracks, a technique called kintsugi. Many contemporary designs quote from this aesthetic, including Japanese avant-garde denim brand Kapital's "Kountry" kintsugi line of clothing.



Figure 2: Korean, *Bowl*, 936-1392. Glazed earthenware with *kintsugi* (lacquer and powdered gold) repair. Gift of Mrs. Gustav Radeke, 17.104. RISD Museum.

Examples of darned and patched garments and textiles—well-used, well-loved, and well-maintained objects—continue to speak to the current generation of design students. In my experience as a curator at the RISD Museum, an encyclopedic collection integrated within a premier American art and design university, introducing such objects to students inspires them to find meaning and beauty in the passage of time. As important signs of history and emotional investment, repairs are starting points for our students to think about how to remake ourselves and our worlds into something better.

III. Repair as Emotional Investment



Figure 3: Unknown Japanese, maker, Shonai (present-day Yamagata) prefecture. Work Coat (*Noragi*), late 1800s–mid-1900s. Cotton plain weave, indigo dyed; patched and mended. Elizabeth T. and Dorothy N. Casey Fund 2012.21.1. RISD Museum.

Since 2012, when I brought a Japanese laborer’s coat into RISD’s collections, I’ve noted that students from a range of disciplines are intimately touched by its sensitively sewn patches and repairs. Made to work and to last, *boro* items (a word that literally translates as “ragged”) show darns that animate them—have kept them alive and working—reveal their labored history, and bind them to us with memory and emotion. They motivate us to consider materiality, loss, decay, and that which is worthy of our care and attention.

These are narratives of practicality and emotional investment that criss-cross the world and the centuries. Items like these Swiss worker's pants of the 1940s and 18th-century women's pockets



(Left) Figure 4: Unknown Swiss maker. Work Trousers, 1940s. Cotton twill weave, indigo dyed; patched, mended, and darned. Mary B. Jackson Fund 2013.17. RISD Museum.



(Right) Figure 5: Unknown French maker, textile manufacturer; Unknown American maker, home sewer. Women's Pockets (detail), late 1700s. Block-printed linen plain weave; darned. Gift of the Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities 60.077.3. RISD Museum.

similarly offer our students much for contemplation and appreciation in the care that has been afforded them as evidenced by their numerous patches and darns. They invite us to become archaeologists of sorts as we unearth material value in a world of consumer goods that is most often moving much too fast for the accumulation of deep meaning.



Figure 6: Unknown Italian maker, Procida. Woman's Shift or Underdress, 1875–1920. Hand-spun, hand-woven linen plain weave with cotton embroidery and cotton lace; pieced and mended. Gift of Falcone Previti Family 2014.57.5. RISD Museum.

Likewise, garments like this late 19th-century woman's shift — hand-woven, worn, repaired, and re-made on an island off the coast of Naples, Italy—stand out as well-used, well-loved, and well-maintained pieces that were saved and cherished not for their perfection but rather because they stand for and withstood hard work, agency, and action. They were kept alive and active through their reinforced shoulders and seams, their alterations, and their mended holes, reminding us that everything we wear and use is in the process of becoming and is imbued with a living history that, if given the chance, will continue well beyond our time.

IV. “The wound is the place where the light enters you.”

Some writers on repair have sought to describe the magical views into the life of an object opened up by wear and tear by invoking Leonard Cohen’s song lyric: “There’s a crack in everything – that’s where the light comes in”; a line that itself is inspired by one written by the 13th century Persian poet and mystic Rumi: “The wound is the place where the light enters you.”

RISD students have likewise conveyed that areas of mending provide a way in, an entry point to understanding objects as material and practice and to identifying imperfections as valuable signs of history, time, and embedded emotion.



Figure 7: Installation view of *Repair and Design Futures*, RISD Museum, October 5, 2018–June 30, 2019.

Sharing repaired objects with students and faculty across RISD’s fine arts and design divisions has generated conversations touching upon a range of far-reaching topics including sustainability, political ecology, and decolonial design, which in turn informed the planning for the exhibition *Repair and Design Futures* on view at the RISD Museum from October 2018 through this past June 30. The exhibition broadly investigated mending as material intervention, metaphor, *and* as a call to action, thus inviting renewed forms of social exchange that I hope will inspire alternative, holistic ways of facing environmental and social breakdown.

One of the central questions posed by the exhibition is: What can historic repair in its variety and often disorderliness teach us about design thinking today? And, most important, where might it lead us? In the case of Kuba skirts of raffia with applique designs such as this one here, fragility and brokenness guide the design at its creation and throughout its use. The layout of the design is largely determined by weak and ruptured areas caused by the pounding of the stiff woven fabric to make it soft and pliable. Patches are added on to stabilize holes like the one visible in this image, with others added to aesthetically balance the design.

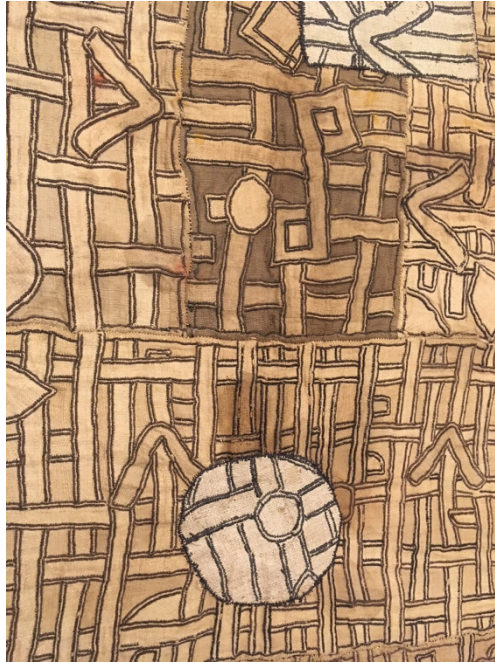


Figure 8: Unknown Kuba maker, Democratic Republic of Congo. Woman's Ceremonial Skirt (detail), before 1950. Raffia plain weave with raffia embroidery and appliqué; patched and mended. Mary B. Jackson Fund 2003.70.2 RISD Museum.

V. Broken World Thinking

The paradox of young artists and designers finding inspiration in old, used, broken, and repaired garments and textiles brings to the forefront the question of what it means to be a maker in a world in which we already have too much. This is a crucial question that points the way to information scientist Steven J. Jackson's polemic for "broken world thinking," which he describes as "filling in the moment of hope and fear in which bridges from old worlds to new worlds are built, and the continuity of order, value, and meaning gets woven."

Jackson's statement is beautifully supported by an early 19th century Kashmir shawl with an inserted repair that itself is composed of bits and pieces of other shawls. Here repair reads as a reorganization, a recontextualization, a way of picking up the broken pieces and making something functional again through improvisation and bricolage.

Jackson starts his essay, titled "Rethinking Repair," by calling out the 21st century world as full of risk and uncertainty; growth *and* decay; fragmentation, dissolution, and breakdown—a dire portrait, but one that he maintains is ripe with opportunity for reconsidering the value of imperfection, the fragmentary, and the incomplete. Here we return to the idea of the crack, fissure—the wound—as providing an opening and invitation to engage with, tend to, and care for on an individual and personal level but also in civic and collective arenas.



Figure 9: Fodé Keita, maker and wearer, Malian (Bamana/Mandinke), active 1960s–1970s Hunting Ensemble (shirt), 1971. Basilanfini (cotton dyed with *Lannea Velutina* bark) with imported silk and synthetic fiber appliqué patches and stitched mends. Field Collected by Claire Grace, Courtesy of Haffenreffer Museum of Anthropology, Brown University 2004-1-25, 2004-1-26.

Shown here is a hunter's tunic in the collections of the Haffenreffer Museum of Brown University that was considered by its maker and repairer, Fode Keita, a community leader and healer in his village of Siby, Mali, to become empowered by the accumulated and quite visible repairs necessary after each of his hunting forays.

VI. “Repair is the creative destruction of brokenness”

One of my favorite definitions of repair is that provided by the writer Elizabeth Spelman: “Repair is the creative destruction of brokenness,” a provocative stance from which to consider the ways that repair might operate within contemporary design practice and ethics, especially when the concept of “brokenness” is applied to the world as we have made it today (Spelman 2003). In this respect, repair serves as a way of creatively making something—perhaps even a broken world—functional again by acknowledging use, abuse, accident, and error; by insisting on not forgetting the thing or its history.

The examples I've included thus far illustrate the aesthetic and metaphorical power of stitches, sutures, and patchwork, but what can acts of textile mending teach us in regard to design thinking and production for our future?



Figure 10: WARP Collective workshop in “Repair and Design Futures” exhibition, RISD Museum.

Contemporary designers are increasingly ready to consider this question, especially as awareness rises with regard to the resources required and waste involved in commercial fashion production. A recent workshop put on by Providence's WARP Collective presented repair as a “Re-Visioning Process”: In their words, “The act of repairing becomes a visible and meaningful part of the object, poetically transforming and guiding the piece into new artistic terrain.”

In the context of what she notes as the current ecological crisis, overpopulation, unnecessary luxury, poverty, and threats to

traditional cultures, Chinese fashion designer Ma Ke has called for clothing with spirit and for the designer to be “the bearer of social responsibility... and an ethical leader.” Ma Ke’s project Wuyong/The Earth, displayed at the 2016 Venice Architecture Biennale, was inspired by the designer’s travels to remote areas of rural China, where she was impressed by the traditional lifestyles and ways of making that reflect a harmonious relationship with the Earth—a stark contrast with the world of fashion in which Ma Ke first worked as a designer. The garments she created for the collection summon the spirits of old clothes passed on by ancestors, made with old fabrics, repaired, sewed and re-sewed.

Los Angeles-based designer Christina Kim has long incorporated visible repairs as part of her label dosa’s aesthetic and mission for sustainability. Kim tells the story of bringing her grandmother’s mended socks as talismans on her family’s move from South Korea to Los Angeles when she was a girl.



Figure 11: dosa, design label; Christina Kim, artist and designer; Rajka Designs, artisan workshop. *Jennifer Wrap Skirt*, 2008. Printed Liberty of London cotton plain weave and cotton plain-weave khadi, reverse appliquéd and embroidered; linen plain-weave waistband. Edgar J. Lownes Fund 2010.2. RISD Museum.

For thirty years Kim has worked with women’s cooperatives in India and elsewhere in the world to create garments using fabric leftovers and featuring traditional mending techniques. To make the wrap skirt of remnant Liberty of London fabric, pictured at left, Kim worked with women artisans in Ahmedabad, India. The skirt’s dot pattern is inspired by the traditional Indian *tikdi*

sewing technique, in which the smallest scraps of leftover fabric were used in appliqué and quilting. Kim’s express purpose in engaging with makers employing time-honored skills and traditions such as these is lodged in the fact that the materials they produce will last long, transforming and, as such, melding with the wearer to add many more layers to an already rich history of making and creativity.

VII. Conclusion

To conclude, I suggest that the act and metaphor of textile mending provides a textured material grounding for opening up dialogue about design futures. At the macro level repair is an ethical and ecological commitment: a rejection of mass production and limitless consumption; a validation of undervalued and repressed labor; a reimagined relationship to quality. It is also an embodied act, a way of entering into and understanding objects as material and practice. And it functions as a renewed form of social exchange and as a creative pursuit open to all of us. It is now our turn to inscribe our history, our narrative, our care and repair.

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