

Object Therapy: critical design and methodologies of human research in transformative repair

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Abstract

This paper outlines the framework, development, methodologies and objectives of 'Object Therapy', a collaborative human research project and participatory exhibition concerning the public perception of broken objects and their transformative repair, which we define as repair that changes an object's appearance, function or perception. The process by which owners of broken objects were interviewed and their possessions collected for distribution to Australian and international, emerging and established artists, designers and other specialists, for response, is described. This methodology is framed as an approach of critical design that connects a community with another, mediated and traced by the researchers, for the purposes of 'constructing publics', a concept developed from John Dewey by Carl DiSalvo and new materialism theorist Jane Bennet. The critical design aspect in this regard corresponds to making public the problems and perception of broken objects – problems of ownership, obsolescence, and lack of options for conventional repair – within a public exhibition presenting alternative, experimental approaches to repair and reuse. The paper argues that the process of commissioning transformative repair processes thereby constructs a public and, via a new materialist approach, reframes human/non-human relations in ways that acknowledge the agency of materiality in social ecologies.

Introduction

The waste and disposal of consumer products presents a serious threat to human sustainability. Since the early 20th century product life cycles have steadily diminished, resulting in increased levels of production and consumption and larger and larger volumes of waste (Slade, 2007: 4–7). Repair is a culturally and industrially established means to diminish waste and return functional objects to service. However, repair industries are in decline. It is known that repair thrives in socio-economic situations of material poverty, but it flounders in advanced economies in which it is cheaper to replace broken products with new products (Kalantidou, 2015: 159). Yet, there is a re-emergent contemporary interest in home and do-it-yourself (DIY) repair in such economies (Tsutsumi, 2015) (Mitchell, 2011). New discoveries are being made by historians and archaeologists regarding the role and significance of repair in history and prehistory (Portell, 2003) (Sennett, 2008), and there is contemporary research into repair as it concerns technical, practical or aesthetic matters (Mitchell, 2011), (Tsutsumi, 2015) (Keulemans, 2015). Furthermore, the broader, extended and embedded role of both repair and maintenance in socio-technological systems has been investigated (Graham & Thrift, 2007) (Houstens et al., 2017) (Edgerton, 2011).

However, there are at least two areas of repair that we consider under researched. Firstly, this is the lack of attention given to the experiences and events that occur during and after the moments when an object breaks and its owner or user considers the relative merits of disposal, replacement, or repair, and furthermore a lack of attention to the qualitative and aesthetic experience of encountering objects after they have been repaired. Secondly, we believe that a quite logical, pragmatic focus on functional repair, whether DIY or professional, has neglected the potential role of artists and designers in repair. In particular we are interested in the capacities of artists and designers for 'transformative repair', being repair that changes an object's appearance, function, perception or signification. This definition follows from research on the transformative qualities of the precedent kintsugi, a Japanese ceramic repair practice, that includes, more broadly, the potential capacity of repaired objects to transform an audience or public within a cultural context (Iten, 2008: 18) (Keulemans, 2016: 16).

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which owners of broken objects were interviewed and their possessions collected for distribution to Australian and international, emerging and established artists, designers and other specialists, for response, is described. This methodology is framed as an approach of critical design that connects one community – a community of owners – with another, a community of visual artists and designers, mediated and traced by the researchers. It is proposed this process aligns with the concept of ‘constructing publics’, as developed from the philosopher John Dewey in his 1927 book, “The Public and its Problems”. According to Dewey a public is the emergence of a collective of individuals, for the purpose of common action, in respect to a common harm. The concept has more recently been explored by design theorist Carl DiSalvo (2009) regarding critical design and participatory practices. Additionally Matt Malpass argues that a key criterion for critical design is in its capacity to critique and question the dominant technological and industrial ideologies of design and manufacturing practices (Malpass, 2009 & 2017). In *Object Therapy*, the critical design component corresponds to making public the failings of common design and manufacturing practices about their obsolescence and generation of waste; this comprises one aspect of the harm needed to construct a public. The emergence of this public perception and its qualities, via interviews that were provided to designers and artists, affected a participatory process that variably informed their repair and reuse experimentation. The resulting exhibition of transformatively repaired works is therefore proposed as an event-based, material expression of a constructed public comprising owner-participants, designer/artist-repairers and, perhaps more provocatively, the material’s capacities of the repaired objects themselves. This inclusion of non-human, material capacities within a bridged public of human actors has been previously proposed by new materialism theorist Jane Bennett (2010). It corresponds with the new materialist concern for uncovering the agential power of non-human objects to better understand their effects and environmental impacts (Bennett, 2010: 95, 100-105). This confluence of critical design theory and new materialism is supported by DiSalvo; in his 2012 book *Adversarial Design* he notes that the mandate of critical design is complementary to the contemporary formulation of Spinozist-Deleuzian concepts that inform new materialism. DiSalvo sees the

practical benefit of this theoretical confluence as bringing about a greater understanding of the political effects of objects and systems, and thereby an expanded role for politics in design that is demanded by critical design (DiSalvo, 2012: 24).

It is a limitation of this paper that we are unable to discuss analysis of individual works in any detail.¹ Rather, this paper discusses the methodological approach and framing, linked to key illustrative examples of works and interview excerpts.

Object Therapy

Object Therapy was developed in partnership between the University of New South Wales, the Australian National University and Hotel Hotel, as part of the latter’s Fix and Make cultural program, a series talks, workshops and exhibitions exploring people’s relationship to objects.² Broken objects were collected via a call for entries, supported by the hotel’s public relations, social media, and the Fix and Make community. This was open to anyone who had a broken or damaged object. Around 70 entries were received, and these were assessed (Figure 1) by a criterion for inclusion, so that they:

- a. together loosely represented a mixed range of products within contemporary consumer culture without excessive duplication in typology or material,
- b. had potential for creative repair (based on the experience of the research investigators as creative professionals engaged in repair practice, and as facilitators or participants of previous repair workshops).

The 30 or so selections included furniture items, ceramics, household appliances, textiles, sentimental objects and, unexpectedly, one human.³

The participants were video interviewed by a researcher, then photographed with their objects (Figure 2).

The interview process was designed using a hybrid semi-structured/in-depth interview methodology to facilitate the Reissman model of narrative-based analysis. This

¹We reserve in-depth discussion of individual works for future papers, however an overview can be gleaned from the exhibition catalogue and its curatorial essay in which we distinguish three strands of experimentation: transformative repair, adaptive reuse, and critical objects (Keulemans, Rubenis, Marks 2016). Refer to www.hotel-hotel.com.au/objecttherapy/

²Fix and Make was a cultural festival that took place in Australia’s capital, Canberra, during 2016. It was held in the city suburb of New Acton at Hotel-Hotel, a member of Design Hotels.

³As previously indicated, we have little space to discuss individual works in this paper, but to satisfy the request of a reviewer we can explain that the human, Peter, was selected and his interview and details forwarded to the Amsterdam-based conceptual designers Thought Collider. Thought Collider considered it inappropriate to apply a repair practice to a person, but in response to Peter’s dissatisfaction from a lack of creative and life opportunities, they designed a collaborative research project, an investigation into possibilities for moon habitation. This was enthusiastically embraced by Peter, and a research desk and materials was installed within the exhibition for his public use (Keulemans, et al. 2016).



Figure 1. Selection process of the submitted objects.



Figure 2. Selected Object Therapy participants with their broken objects. Photography by Lee Grant.

interview method involves “less dominating” interview techniques intended to encourage participants to describe their experiences and perceptions through narratives that “reflect and respect their own way of organising meaning” (Reissman, 2001: 695–7). Practically this concerns using semi-structured questions,⁴ but allowing interviewees time to free-associate their experiences in-depth in ways that may develop previously non-conscious understandings of their possessions and their relations. In particular, it was hypothesized that the interviews would provide material suitable for a narrative analysis within a new materialist framework, that sought to uncover relations between humans and non-human actors (Bennett, 2010: x). The ways in which such theoretical relations emerged will be discussed towards the end of this paper.

These objects were then distributed to 30 or so designers, artists and other experts, from fields including furniture and homewares design, ceramics, glass art, electronic art, Japanese lacquerware, conceptual design (for the person), material science and a specialist in indigenous art (Figure 3). These were our repairers. They were selected by the curators based on pre-existing and researched knowledge of their capabilities and suitability for the repair of specific objects, but it is important to state only a few of them had any substantial experience with the practice of repair within their field. The brief was focused on the concept of transformative repair or reuse, and was otherwise open. It was expected that the appearance and possibly the function, or signification, of the object would be transformed as part of the repair process. Repairers were also asked to provide an artist statement and complete a survey intended to capture information about the difficulty and cost of the repair, their valuation of their work and any expectations for incorporating repair within their future practice. The analysis of this material is now in process. Its collection was intended to shed light on the

viability of transformative repair as a specialist service provided by visual art and design professionals.

After a repair period of approximately two months, the repaired works were collected back at the Fix and Make venue (Hotel Hotel) and shown to their owners on camera during a second interview (Figure 4). Subsequently, works were retained for exhibition, the first of which took place at Hotel Hotel in Canberra on October 14th 2016, accompanied by an online exhibition of interview excerpts. The exhibition has been funded to tour to eight metropolitan and regional venues around Australia from 2017 to 2019.

Publics

In the 2009 paper 'Design and Construction of Publics', Carl Di Salvo notes the relevance of John Dewey's 1927 concept for the constitution of 'publics' to the contemporary practice of design, critical design in particular, and for the design of participatory practices. A public is an emergent concrescence of individuals for the purpose of collective action. Di Salvo notes Dewey's interest in how they are formed, malformed or "thwarted", based on real world "situations, experiences, and materiality of everyday life" (DiSalvo, 2009: 48). Publics should be "broad, inclusive and multiple" so that their political agency was democratically and equitably aligned (DiSalvo, 2009: 48). Publics constitute in response to consequences, threats or harms that affect or impact the lives of their constituent individuals in similar ways, so that it becomes collectively sensible to address and manage those consequences systematically. Nonetheless, publics can be thwarted by the difficulty of individuals to articulate the problems they are experiencing. Dewey notes that such harms are often,

felt rather than perceived; they are suffered, but they cannot be said to be known, for they are not, by those who experience them, referred to their origins (Dewey, 1927: Chapter 4) (also Dewey in DiSalvo, 2009: 51)

⁴ For the list of questions and links to full and excerpted interviews, please see Supporting documentation and links for Object Therapy human research (Keulemans, 2017).

Therefore, Di Salvo proposes that publics must be “prompted” to emerge, and this is a role for design (DiSalvo, 2009:51).

- a. obsolescence, in which objects break while still in use, presenting a perplexity to their owners;
- b. waste, the production of which can exert emotional and psychological pressure on owners in the form of guilt, anxiety and the desire to retain broken objects; and
- c. a lack of accessible repair possibilities for consumer objects, that typically can be replaced but which may produce guilt, and for sentimental objects, that typically cannot be replaced, frustration or a loss of agency.⁵

²Dewey does not refer to these such particular harms in his 1927 book, and such concerns may not have been considered important to him at that point in time, however he references other harms of similar social and economic significance, including alcohol prohibition, railway design, farmer access to fertiliser, the replacement of traditional building technologies with newer materials etc (Dewey, 1927: Chapter 4).

There were also prompts and harms that combined to enlisting the contributions of repairers. Firstly, we acknowledge that the marketing presence, status and community reach of the hotel and the Fix and Make community was significant in regard to repairers responding to invitations to contribute. As was the often unstated obligations of professional relationships (which is beyond the scope of this paper). We should note however that there was one obstacle to contribution, in that there was no, or very limited, funding for making and material costs, and furthermore it was made known that the repaired works would be returned to their owners at the end of the exhibition period. This was a consideration



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that was carefully deliberated on the basis that it complemented the participation of owners and the time they gave for research and interview, but it does not fit well with the conventions of commissioning exhibited work from artists and designers. In *Object Therapy*, other than the gains of promotion through exhibition, marketing and media, the repairers had little reward for their time, expertise and costs. Why then participate?

Provisionally, we speculate that repairers feel a need to respond to the same kind of harms that threaten consumers: the problems of obsolescence, the abjection of waste and the loss of repair possibilities. To the fullest extent, these harms also prompt the authors of this paper, as critical designers, curators and cultural actors, in the development of *Object Therapy* and their prior and future projects. It is intended to test this speculation against the repairer survey analysis, in a subsequent paper.

The Extended Publics

Other than constitution of these various publics, we would also like to consider that there is additional publics constituted that are premised on the de-privileging of anthropocentric viewpoints fundamental to new materialist thought. This is public constituted between owner and the objects, and the repair and the object, or more precisely, between these humans and the material capacities of the object. Extending the constitution of a public between human and such non-human actors is conceivable in two or three ways:

- There is a public constituted by object and owner through service and use. The interviews indicate that owners project anthropocentric feelings into their possessions and this motivates their participation in *Object Therapy*. Their concern for the object's material damage, beyond its functional consequence to them, indicates an object-based, albeit projected, emergence of a harm or threat required for the constitution of a public.
- There is a public constituted by repairer and object through the process of repair. Repair statements and post-exhibition panel discussions with repairers indicate that the material capacities of an object suggest possibilities for transformation and guide the repairer to an outcome. This is a hybrid design process, unlike an autonomous act of 'new' creation, in which the material capacities and conditions of the existing damage 'co-act' on the process of the repairer. In this interpretation, material and repairer work together to constitute a public in response to the harm of material damage.

- There is an indirect public constituted by repairer and owner via the object. Although repairers and owners were not in communication with each other within the *Object Therapy* process, the desire of the owner to either communicate or express an emotional connection with the repairer emerged in several works. It was felt by some owners that the quality and style of the repair suggested that the repairer had formed an attachment with the object equal to their own.

Obviously, there is a weakness in the argument that non-human objects can form publics. In what way can an inanimate object experience the condition of a harm or threat required to form a public? It might be asked, for example, what difference does it make for a piece of wood to be chopped up for use within a reconfigured chair, as compared to being ground into fibres for paper making or slowly decomposing within a landfill? Bennet struggles with this requirement, and notes Rancière's opposition to the notion, but nonetheless asserts that Dewey's original theorisation is open to the possibility (Bennet, 95, 102, 105). We acknowledge the expression of a harm is a consequence of a human projection, paradoxically the kind of human perception de-privileged in new materialist theory. However, that projection is the product of the intense human-object interaction of use, maintenance and/or repair. This is often a careful and close interaction at the level of material. The quality of that interaction is aligned and beneficial to a new materialist analysis.

In conclusion, it should be noted that the construction of viable publics should be evaluated against a capacity to take or compel future collective action (DiSalvo, 2010: 484). This criteria may not yet be fulfilled within the limited scope of *Object Therapy*. Nonetheless, we consider that a potential capacity is evident, insofar that the theorisation of extended publics between human and non-human actors provides a template for the generation of future projects that bring together consumers with designers or artists through the act of transformative repair, as both critique and response to the harms of product obsolescence and waste. A key significance of this approach is that consumer influence on product lifetimes, either passively through preference for buying stronger, better lasting or more repairable products, or actively through political demand for regulation of highly obsolescent or irreparable products, is fostered by the creation of a publics that draw attention to products and their material durabilities and capacity to be repaired or transformed.

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