

COMMUNITY REPAIR

STRATEGIC SOCIAL SKILL MOBILIZATION FOR SUSTAINABLE FASHION



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INTRODUCTION

FASHION IS A VEHICLE OF IDENTITY IN THE SOCIAL PLAY OF EVERYDAY LIFE. AS A COMMODITY THE FASHION GARMENT AND ACCESSORY ENACTS WISHES FOR IMITATION AS WELL AS AUTONOMY AND ITS EPHEMERAL QUALITIES MAKE US CONTINUOUSLY RE-ENACT SOCIAL RELATIONS.

The fashion commodity promises transformation and metamorphosis. We can dress to become someone, to enact a persona; perhaps ourselves, perhaps someone else. But most importantly today, the fashion commodity requires no commitment. The essence of the object is its ephemeral quality. The fashion garment promises instant satisfaction; no strings attached; use me, then discard me.

As an effort towards sustainability, fashion needs to embrace repair as a designed feature for everyday clothes. Normally we think of repair as merely fixing a broken object, making it functional again. But repair can be so much more. It can be an update of function, an improvement of style, a sign of compassion, or even rebuilding of community. If sustainable fashion takes repair seriously, designers might be able to reengage communities in strategic collaborations for repair; using the broken object to mend the social fabric scattered by the status anxiety of fashion.



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01. MARGOT SNYDER

Angel
Photographer: Jamey Hurbert

Fashion is a way to fulfil a need. It is a way to express ourselves and build an identity. The strength of belonging and representation was explored through the repair, upgrade and fit of men's blazer with using local skills and resources in the Islington area. Cultural skills, colours of landscapes and history were used as inspiration for this repair, along with incorporating skills and techniques used by couture and bespoke businesses. This repair identified what Islington means, creating a sense of belonging, learning new interaction tools for future projects along the way. There is a stronger appreciation for skills and stories. This allowed an opportunity to share skills and confidence with others, while creating a bond with people outside of my everyday life.

02. DANIELLE SPONDER

Brixton
Photographer: Giorgio Taraschi

Unemotional Attachment

This old red blazer was buried in my costume-box for years, but there was something about it I always loved. While searching out places in the neighbourhoods I frequent, I was put in touch with Yolanda and we worked together to brainstorm ideas and construction techniques to emphasize the vibrant colour through standout design. We both have fashion backgrounds so we worked together, but Yolanda's expert tailoring was what put everything together. As a representation of the relationships formed through garments without becoming attached to the garment itself, I am now passing the garment on to Yolanda for the next part of its life.

03. JULIANA SANFELICI

Camden
Photographer: Jimmy Kyriaco

It all begun with my boyfriend's old leather coat. It had a big tear in the back, so he never wore it, and the coat was kept in a dark corner of his closet. That was when community repair came to the rescue! With the help of designer, neighbour and fellow Brazilian Gabriela Mantushka, the old coat was cut apart and turned into a leather cover for my portfolio. I designed it, Gabriela made the patterns, and we worked on it together. The result was better than expected. We turned something that had no use into something new that I needed and was going to buy from a shop. That's what I call a happy ending.



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04. RACHEL CLOWES

London College of Fashion
 Technical Team – Shepherd’s Bush
 Photographer: Abid Qayum

I really liked this dress when I first bought it, but wearing it to work made it torn and stained. To remedy this I engaged my work community in its repair, to transform it from a worn-out work dress into something special. I organised weekly ‘Skill Swap Sessions’ to utilise my colleagues existing specialist skills and encourage knowledge sharing between disciplines. I taught my colleagues a simple technique of stitching and slashing scrap fabric, which they used to repair and improve my dress. The image shows how my work community helped a luxury, fashion-focused dress emerge from an old garment.

05. EMILY TOWERS

Paris, France

Little Red Riding Hood: a practical experiment into creating enduring narratives with our clothes.

Bright red and bursting with memories; my favourite winter coat was in desperate need of repair. With the help of my community, the Sweatshop Paris and fellow Eurostar passengers, we experimented with how fairy tales from childhood memories can affect our attachment to a garment. Using ‘Little Red Riding Hood’ as a starting point, I documented how the narrative that is used to repair a garment develops and deepens the relationship. How it has been further cemented by my community, through the use of waste fabrics that tell their own individual stories, and the human connections formed.

06. RENÉE LACROIX

Bethnal Green & Bow
 Photographer: Karoliina Bärlund

E2³

To represent my neighbourhood’s multicultural and eclectic nature, I worked in collaboration with The Create Place, a community arts and crafts centre, in the customisation of a second-hand garment. We took a basic trench coat, an icon of traditional English style, and added in a colourful patchwork lining made out of donated fabric scraps. As the project manager, my role was to organise both the repair and the photo shoot and ensure the process went on smoothly. The coat has then been showcased at the Museum of Childhood during an ethical fashion event and will be auctioned off to profit the centre.



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07. KATRIONA LEA

Finsbury Park
 Photographer: Charlotte James

To utilise current industry to work with teenagers opened up a world to me that I will explore further. For me this project was not particularly about the garment being perfect as the levels of the girl's skills were varied. It was very important to me that they enjoy themselves, gain any extra amount of confidence as some were very nervous in simply cutting the fabric. It was my intention to have them gain an insight in the possibilities of clothing and textiles and what they are capable of doing, and leave them inspired for future participation in such activities.

08. HELENA THEBA

Bethnal Green
 Photographer: Alejandro Cavallo

Urban Indian meets Bethnal Green

Though this journey of repair and remake, which begun in my kitchen, I have grown as a person. It has taken me all over Bethnal Green, in East London. However, emotionally, I have travelled much further. The garments consist of a skirt that was cut off and got an update as well as a plain old sweater which was made into a vest. The two garments were tied together with a braided belt. All of the alternations were made by the same people and I was the creative force. It has been exciting to see all the thoughts spring to life in this amazing collaborative project!

09. BENEDIKT LUEDKE

New Cross
 Photographer: Benedikt Luedke

The starting point for the community repair project was a classical tailored men's shirt which had been discarded by my dad a while ago. I took the shirt to save it from its uncertain future - I planned on altering and wearing it. Instead, the hat making class at the Telegraph Hill Community Centre transformed it, under the guidance of Mr Alva Wilson, into a men's hat and a women's headpiece. In exchange for the hats I took portrait pictures of the each of the women in the course, trying to realistically capture those warm-hearted and friendly characters.



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10. SARAH DIXON

Elephant and Castle
 Photographer: Giorgio Taraschi

Can't sew, won't sew

A menswear jumper underwent a transformation and now has a new lease of life as a women's wear jumper. The aim was to engage those that are not able to sew; for once men were involved in a traditionally feminine activity. Several workshop evenings were held when I helped three male friends refresh the jumper by teaching them basic sewing skills and using their discarded items to embroider the jumper. They were keen to learn essential repair skills such as sewing on buttons. In return, I repaired many items for them and cooked several hot dinners!

11. OLGA WAGNER

Hackney
 Photographer: Barбора Veselà

'Investing in Hackney's streets. Part of our £22 million investment in 2010/2011'. My neighbourhood is full of road works. Mending takes place at every corner. My long, old-fashioned purple vintage dress needed to be repaired and updated as well. In my community I found Steffi Kerschbaumer, a footwear design student, who was willing to collaborate with me. She cut off sleeves, the collar and length of the dress. For the piping she used leather scraps; a by-product of the shoemaking process. I used the leftover fabric to create a hair-band for her in exchange. To connect people in a community it takes much less than mending streets for millions of pounds. Maybe only a smile.

12. MAIBE MAROCCOLO

Wandsworth Town
 Photographer: Matthew Austin

I like the perception and spirit that a biker waistcoat brings. It is an iconic item, representing freedom, adventure and anarchy. Inspired by that, I've turned my old jacket into a biker waistcoat style. The experience of approaching members of my neighbourhood was interesting, though mostly unsatisfactory. After unsuccessful visits to local shops, I decided to involve the few residents in the house where I live. They've attached each stud on my waistcoat. Children are more susceptible regarding trust and belief. They are less prejudiced and open to new ideas. This experience with them rejuvenated the trust I had in my closer community.



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13. KARINA MICHEL

Maheshwar, India
 Photographer: Barry Lategan

With a pair of ripped torn jeans, I reconnect with my local community in India. Sisterhood of the travelling pants...but not really. It builds upon my relationship with Jhoole, a women's empowerment group located off the banks of the Narmada river in the holy town of Meheshwar, India. Having been away from Jhoole for almost a year, the community repair fortifies our relationship and contributes to my understanding of small-scale production practices bent toward wellbeing. With perfect craftsmanship, Jhoole successfully repairs my jeans and returns them to me just as I begin preparation for my return back to Jhoole.



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14. LOULA MERCEDES

Shoreditch
 Photographer: Rafael Bastos

Moth path coat

In 2006, household moths fed from this wool and cashmere coat. The repairing process was inspired by the accidental path left by the moths and their subsequent marks, which were purposely left throughout the coat. Holes were covered by hand embroidery and stamp printing by Dainah Price, the lining repaired by Kojo Sarkodie and the hand drawing contributed, by Natasha Louise, all students from the Working Men's College. Other collaborators were Prontaprint, who provided the stamp. The laundry and an anonymous fabric donation were all sourced locally, from Camden borough.

COMMUNITY REPAIR: CHALLENGING A CULTURE OF NON-COMMITMENT

Throughout the theory of fashion a tension between two poles has always resonated, triggered by the social mobility offered by emerging modernity, the tension between imitation and autonomy. (cf Simmel 2003) As fashion theorist Gilles Lipovetsky argues, with social mobility the rise of fashion “reflected the emergence of human autonomy in the world of appearances.” (Lipovetsky 1994: 37) However, the logic of fashion might offer possibilities and a room for the individual to express traits beyond their social status, but it does not promote the autonomous shaping of an individual. Fashion entraps as well as liberates. To use the words of sociologist Rosalind Coward; “One thing fashion is quite categorically *not* is an expression of individuality.” (Coward 1984: 30)

Fashion is part of a larger social game and it breaks the stagnated social roles of custom and tradition. For Lipovetsky, the ages of customs are based on the re-enactment of traditions and historic repetitions, of inheriting the past and its institutions preserving it. With modernity comes the ages of fashion, actualising another logic. In eras when fashion dominates, the traditional past is no longer the object of devotion. The current moment galvanizes people’s awareness. Novelties have prestige: change and the present are venerated. [...] Fashion entails a specific temporality and a specific sociality. (Lipovetsky 1994: 227)

The sociality of fashion, the community of belonging to the same culture and eventually dressing in a similar style, resonates well with Benedict Anderson’s concept of nations being “imagined communities.” (Anderson 1983) To Anderson, the sociality of nations is created, not primarily by everyday interaction and interpersonal relations, but by the mental image of shared affinity. This image is projected through media, events and rituals to build a social fabric and national loyalty beyond the social, “conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship.” (Anderson 1983: 224)

This horizontal sociality is also the environment in which contemporary fashion thrives. As noted by fashion theorist Yuniya Kawamura, the contemporary social terrain is levelling out, not in the sense of material income, but of how the status play is performed. Consumers today do not look upwards to imitate prestigious groups, but we look at our equals. Fashion communities are built as a performance of de-massification and in recent years “Idolatry [has] diminished; rivalry increased.” (Kawamura 2005: 98) Fashion today is expressing traits of social re-mix, of identity as an assemblage of expressions and styles drawn from many walks of life, hardly any of them “true” to our social standing. Diana Crane, sociologist of fashion, frames this transition it correspondingly:

FASHION IS PRESENTED AS CHOICE RATHER THAN A MANDATE. THE CONSUMER IS EXPECTED TO ‘CONSTRUCT’ AN INDIVIDUAL APPEARANCE FROM A VARIETY OF OPTIONS. AN AMALGAM OF MATERIALS DRAWN FROM MANY DIFFERENT SOURCES. (Crane 2000:15)

Identity is expressed as an amalgam of material commodities, such as fashion accessories or clothes, or services making the lustre of our skin glimmer of lust, with cosmetics and spa experiences, or recently, the almost everyday use of cosmetic surgery.

To sociologist Zygmunt Bauman fashion has expanded to become a prime tool for our contemporary “instant living”. In society’s liquid state, where the solid values of modernity no longer seem to apply, we mute history and restrain from discussing the future. (Bauman 2000) In these setting we are not only what we consume, buying ourselves a social position, but we have also become the commodities themselves. (Bauman 2007) In the words of Bauman, citizens are “simultaneously, *promoters of commodities* and the *commodities they promote.*” (Bauman 2007: 6) Just like with commodities, every relation is made disposable and there is always an easy exit clause.

Theorist Jean Baudrillard, concerned with the simulations of commodity culture, argues that the fetishized object in consumer culture is the primary symbolic order of today. (Baudrillard 1994; 1996) The commodity is valued for its social and symbolic function, not crude material use, and most importantly; commodities ask of us neither commitment nor devotion. We use the commodity to position ourselves and then quickly discard it when it has lost its social shimmer. Inserted into a complex system of signs, of social simulation, “no product can escape the formal logic of the commodity.” (Baudrillard 1996: 41) A special position within the commodity system is held by fashion, as it is both a system and a commodity, connected to the root of capitalism. “Fashion embodies a compromise between need to innovate and the other need to change nothing in the fundamental order.” (Baudrillard 1981: 51.) The mechanism of fashion commodities only conforms the power play; the consumer can “vote” with their money, we feel involved but cannot participate. In the words of Baudrillard; “to the illusion of change is added the illusion of democracy.” (Baudrillard 1981: 78)

Indeed, the “democratized” fashion, today so cheap and abundant it seems accessible to everyone, does exhibit the illusion of “horizontal comradeship”, but it offers neither a community of commitment nor real social interaction. Instead it has become a vehicle for an increasing social stress or status anxiety. (de Botton 2004) Or in the words of fashion historian Anne Hollander, “the tyranny of fashion itself has in fact never been stronger than in this period of visual pluralism.” (Hollander 1993: 345)

The love for fashion offers the perfect ephemeral and passionate affair. In the fashion crowd you are just as replaceable as any garment. No hidden catch, no strings attached; it’s free love.

COMMUNITY AND COM-PASSION

To French theorist Jean-Luc Nancy, co-existence is at the core of human being; *to-be* is *to-be-with* someone else. (Nancy 2000) In fact, our being is a relational phenomena of community, as reflected in the title of his book; *Being singular plural*. Human being is always a “we”, or as he phrases it, “existence *is with*: otherwise nothing exists.” (Nancy 2000: 4) Instead of the Cartesian singularity of “I think therefore I am”, Nancy emphasises the sympathy between humans as the core of being.

COM-PASSION IS THE CONTAGION, THE CONTACT OF BEING WITH ONE ANOTHER IN THIS TURMOIL. COMPASSION IS NOT ALTRUISM, NOR IS IT IDENTIFICATION; IT IS THE DISTURBANCE OF VIOLENT RELATEDNESS. (Nancy 2000: xiii)

Nancy later continues, “To want to say ‘we’ is not at all sentimental, not at all familial or ‘communitarian’. It is existence reclaiming its due or its condition: coexistence.” (Nancy 2000: 45)

The social in human societies is for Nancy the basic element of what makes us human, an ontological position far from the Social-Darwinist “survival of the fittest” or the crude disposal of traditional social bonds that Bauman observes in the contemporary “instant living” mentioned before. What Nancy sees as human meaning is the *sharing* of social meaning. (Nancy 2000: 2) This sharing is the mortar of community, existing in-between every member and participant. We exist as we commit to one another and this com-passion is the foundation of human life.

Community is built on molecular commitment, of sympathy distributed among its members. In the community, the exchange of gifts, services and loyalty, shapes the bonds between humans. Emphasised by anthropologist Marcel Mauss, solidarity and hospitality, key social behaviours of the community, are built on social trust and gifts. (Mauss 1970) The North American Indian ceremony of gift exchange, the Potlatch, is part of a complex system for re-distribution and reciprocity of wealth, guiding the inter-tribal relations and social hierarchies. As

Mauss argues, such gift ceremonies are essential to social solidarity, but the gifts are never “free” (as in free beer). Opposed to the anonymity of money, where the transaction cuts all social debt, the gift shapes the bonds of social relationships and ties the members tighter together. Gifts are always embedded into larger social mechanisms of exchange: loyalty, status, support, and sacrifice. To refuse to receive is to refuse a social bond and reciprocity is needed for liberality, wealth and honour. Money simulates but does not build such status, it catalyses further exchanges, but does not engrave itself into the social of a community. To Mauss, true social status within a community, that of communal loyalty and support, can only be built on social exchange of gifts.

For writer Michel Serres, the exchanges and rituals of food are central features of community, which he regards as a web of intricate exchanges between parasites. The parasite is for Serres not primarily an organism which benefits at the expense of the other, the host, but instead Serres sees the parasite as an actor of uneven exchanges. Literally, parasite in Greek means “to eat next to” (Serres 2007: 7), so to Serres the parasite is the guest that eats from the table of the host, but reciprocates this generosity with his gift of stories, as Socrates in *Symposium*. Thus, the exchange happens asymmetrically, or on different frequencies, activating or resonating with different social or biological needs, creating diversity and public dialogue. The parasite stirs, makes noise, and causes disruption as a “thermal exciter.” (Serres 2007: 190) The meals, feasts, repasts and banquets, with dance, alcohol, laughter, and excess, are all parasitic events, operating inside the social body of the community, activating various symbiotic exchanges which form the social fabric.

The asymmetric but symbiotic exchanges foster community. A community is built upon a mutual situation of countless reciprocal exchanges, a situation where all owe someone else something all the time in an endless chain of services and interchanges. The community is a population which share a “common”, a common wealth, with self-determination, distributed decision-making, and associational commons among the participants. Here, the “social” of social fabric, the loyalty, solidarity and interaction, is the common-pool resource. Fashion is the liberation from tradition, from the social bonds of interdependence. With the help of money, it breaks the individual free from communal loyalty or social position based on gift exchange. Fashion is not a common asset of shared trust and enduring affection, but rather ephemeral status play, helping an individual to shape new symbolic bonds outside of the community. Fashion is a force which disintegrates community, cutting members free. Disapproving such tendency, an effort of community repair tries to mend the social fabric with transversal zigzag seams of com-passion.

MOBILIZING SITES OF SKILL

A possible way to use repair as a tool for community restoration is to start by making an inventory of unused capacities; assets within the community that could be better shared and catalyzed into an intermediary resource. A garment in need to mending can be the litmus-paper with which to reveal local craft knowledge. In the process of finding such social assets and actualizing them, the facilitator engages in an activity similar to the mental site-visiting of rhetoric. It is a meandering motion between various themes, or skills, which builds an argument or supports an endeavour of vision.

In the practice of rhetoric a central talent is that of *inventio*, the inventory of a subject. Here, the speaker builds the argument by encircling it, examining gaps in reasoning, visiting the multifarious approaches to the topic. It is a practice quite like the hacker’s method of “reverse engineering”; the process of discovering technological principles by taking the mechanical or software object into pieces for analyzing the inherent functions and operations, and how the parts communicate. This is not a creation out of nothing, but the creative rebuilding of ready-made parts, a complementary addition into something already existing. In rhetoric *inventio* (invention) is the process that leads to the development and refinement of an argument, a discovery of the hidden, an

excavation. The rhetoric argument is an assembly done between sites, lines, and positions. Such positions are *topoi* (from the Greek for “places”; i.e. “places to find something”); the sources and sites of information. *Topos* is the storage for concepts, thoughts and arguments. It is an inventory of thought; places, figures and clichés. (Rosengren 2002) But it is also the practice of using these places, the navigation, a mnemo-technical tool. *Topoi* is according to Barthes, in *L’aventure sémiotique*, a “method, a network of empty forms, a storage of filled forms.” (Rosengren 2002: 83)

In a similar vein, community repair is about activating sites of knowledge, energizing craft assets and putting them into work for the community. It is a local detective work, searching the neighbourhood for local knowledge that can catalyze gift exchanges. Community repair is a strategic method of finding and using existing knowledge, tune it for repair, and apply it to the current issue as an act of restoration. It is a matter of recruiting local knowledge together in new forms.

As an exploratory tool, repair can become a social experience of what political theorist Benjamin Barber has called “strong democracy”. (Barber 1984) To Barber, the everyday democracy of the west is a “thin” democracy, based on fragmented individuals asking for their discrete rights and representation through elections, rather than the fostering of shared and participatory co-existence and distribution of power. Such shared individual and collective civic actions are to address issues of public concern, forming a politics of engagement rather than consignment. Such community driven politics are not primarily a matter of professional representation in a parliament, but everyday political citizenship “as a way of living: an expected element of one’s life. It is a prominent and natural role, such as that of ‘parent’ or ‘neighbour’.” (Prugh, Costanza & Daly 2000: 112)

If approaching community repair from this direction we can also relate community repair to the concept of “living democracy” of Frances Moore Lappé. (Lappé 2010) Lappé proposes that most of us are trapped in a “spiral of powerlessness” where we, in our detached state, are discouraged to engage in the ruling of the world. In media we are met with the proponent images of man’s autonomous selfishness, we come to distrust our fellows and government, only to hope that the “magic market” can make us individually wealthy. But as wealth is concentrated, most often to other individuals, it warps politics and increases injustice, making us feel more powerlessness. “Feeling powerless, we’re robbed of energy and creativity, with hearts left open to fear, despair and depression.” (Lappé 2010: 4) A little self-reflection can make any fashion designer see that fashion plays no little role in this fragmentation of society, where we do our best to arm our fellow beings with tools for the social arms race towards ephemeral autonomy and status anxiety. As mentioned by Nancy, the modern community is auto-destructive as it continuously has to be filled “time and again with self-produced substances”, that is, with products of individuation. (Nancy & Kate 2011: 38)

However, Lappé does not leave us powerless. She proposes to face the thin democracy, where we act out of self-defence, with proactive micro self-governance, where we communally engage to create a social life lived without domination in any form. In Lappé’s vision, creative communities form *relational power* by building relationships of trust, analyse power and self-interest, mobilize knowledge and public actions with discipline, persistence and humour. (Lappé 2010: 122ff) Such undertakings form the basics to shape a population’s engagement in the “arts of democracy”; active listening, creative conflict, mediation, negotiation, political imagination, public dialogue, public judgement, celebration, evaluation and reflection and mentoring. (Lappé 2010: 131ff) Engagement can help foster a spiral of hope and empowerment, which in turn can support the community and facilitate democratic interactions based on trust and companionship. Civic engagement through repair, using the discards of fashion as a tool to rebuild community, can be an excellent start for building stronger street-level democracy.

STRATEGIC REPAIR AND DIT (DO-IT-TOGETHER)

In the project of strategic repair the MA students of Fashion and the Environment have explored how craft skills among the members of their local communities can be mobilized for the repair or adjustment of a garment. The task of the designer is not so much that of designing a specific garment, or directing a group of people to solve a problem, as much as exploring how the quality of the "social", the mobilization of the communal or common-wealth, can be part of an endeavour towards sustainable fashion. Repair can be a purposive element of design to encourage social empowerment and catalyze skill exchanges. This is not a practice of do-it-yourself, but rather do-it-together.

Such strategic perspective on repair can take on and strengthen the local publics. In resonance with sociologist Nootje Marres discussion about the shaping of pragmatic publics, the damaged garment can become the issue, or "material public" around which community is formed, collectively dealing with a craft-based matter of concern. (Marres 2007) The com-passion for a garment, the crafting of a shared memory, the mending of a social skin, can be the needle on which the thread of gifts and exchanges can stitch up a shattered community.

THE DAMAGED GARMENT IS THE MATTER OF CONCERN AROUND WHICH WE COME TOGETHER TO BUILD SELF-RELIANCE AND CATALYZE A MULTITUDE OF SKILL EXCHANGES.

Repair is not an issue of opposing the ephemeral nature of fashion, but proposing how this very fleeting passion, built into fashion's essence, can become the tool to intensify community com-passion.

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A DAMAGED GARMENT CAN BE MENDED, A COMMUNITY CAN BE REPAIRED

The MA students of Fashion and the Environment at London College of Fashion has taken on an artistic research project and explored a series of questions:

How can the simple process of repairing a garment mobilize resources in a local community? What social capacities can repair liberate and strengthen? How can designers engage in community repair as part of their design practice for sustainable fashion?

