

Exploration of domestic mending in fashion through material methods and participatory textile making

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Abstract

As a consequence of environmental and social impacts caused by the fashion industry (Fletcher & Tham, 2019; Fletcher and Grose, 2012) younger generations, born in the '80s and '90s, have started to adopt dematerialization as a strategy of resistance to capitalism and consumer culture (Reinhart, 2021; Egereva & Gurova, 2014). It has resulted in a budding transition from a fast to a slow rhythm of consumption, with its characteristic features: the popularity of handmade locally produced fashion products, upcycling, recycling, personalization, circulation, repair, and maintenance of fashion objects (Durrani, 2019; Gurova 2015).

Within this framework, the growth in popularity of mending is one of the personal responses to the overwhelming problems of fast consumption and waste (Orsola de Castro, 2021; Brayshaw, 2020). Despite an upsurge of mending practices in the last decade, accentuated by the global pandemic, the sustainable fashion practices within the domestic landscapes in the Western context are limited to a 'niche' and have precarious, marginal, and residual qualities. Simultaneously, in the East European post-socialist societies, the ability to sew, repair, revitalize and transform clothes persists, and is a socially widespread occurrence. This PhD research suggests that the study of these parallel realities and their melange of everyday practices, both traditional and new, could enable the international academic community to think of East European practices in terms of their meaning of resilience, diversity and unintended but real sustainability.

On these premises, this PhD project is focusing on the study of mending practices in Western (Danish) and Eastern post-socialist Ukrainian contexts by embracing Research Through Design (Zimmerman et. al, 2010) and Participatory textile-making methodology (Shercliff & Twigger Holroyd 2020) and draws upon the material (Woodward, 2019) and wardrobe methods (Fletcher and Klepp, 2017). The research is articulated in two main phases, and expect to answer the following:

- How mending practices and their aesthetic codes are interpreted and materialized in Western and Eastern post-socialist contexts?
- How design approaches and competencies can guide, support and enable different levels of engagement with mending practices?

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The first part of this PhD is dedicated to the exploration of mending through wardrobe studies, and a series of participatory workshops with a group of six participants. It aims at exploring how the design process (Ravnløkke, 2019) can facilitate the engagement with mending on a domestic level and to develop the mending spectrum through iterative circles of planning, sampling and reflection (Twigger Holroyd, 2018). While the second phase will consist of a series of participatory mending workshops with a broader audience and design students and will explore how repair-centred sensibility can inform design practice (Durrani, Niinimäki and McLauchlan, 2019).

With this presentation, I will propose the first foray into Eastern European (Ukrainian) and Western European (Danish) mending practices. Therefore, the main goal is to share preliminary research and reflect on the gathered data, which has to be analysed. The early observational findings centre upon the Ukrainian two levels repair infrastructure. The first level is represented by diffused basic knowledge related to sewing, created through school education and family learning. The second level of infrastructure is constituted by the network of competent and affordable seamstresses (Vanshtein, 2007). These findings can facilitate understanding of repairs that can be done on domestic and on professional levels (Laitala et. Al., 2020), and will inform the development of a mending spectrum aiming at raising individual and collective mending capacities, and overcome the main obstacles of garment mending in the Western world: the lack of skills, time and equipment (Gwilt, 2014).

Keywords: mending practices, material methods, participatory textile making, education

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