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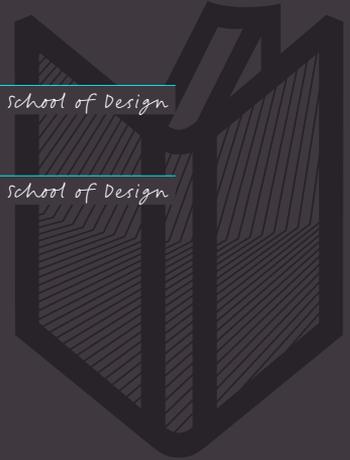
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# Book Overview. *Repair:* *Sustainable Design* *Futures*

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## ***Repair: Sustainable Design Futures***

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Routledge, 2023

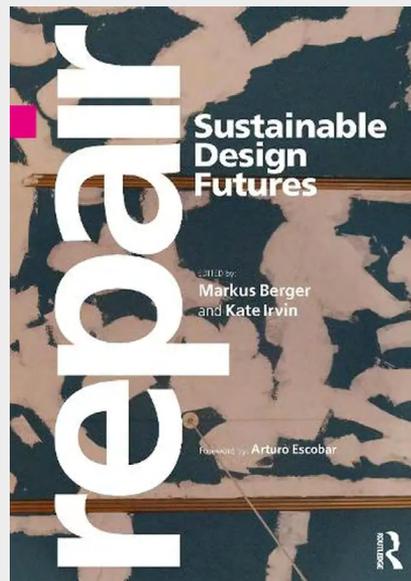
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288 Pages, 128 Color Illustrations

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## Synopsis

Repair, a humble act born of necessity, has become in the 21st century an expression of artistic and discursive resistance to humankind's unmaking of our societies and our environment. As a concrete practice, it serves to bring us together, to re-engage with materiality, and to invite us as consumers back to understanding the contexts of makers and making. As a metaphor and speculative meta-concept, it gives us an alternative and holistic way to attend to and face systemic social and environmental breakdown. To expand upon our respective approaches to repair in concept and practice, we issued a call for reflections on repair thinking and practices in the realm of art and design, resulting in the volume *Repair: Sustainable Design Futures* (Routledge, 2023), edited by us. This essay provides an overview of the book, highlighting the voices and artwork of the international, interdisciplinary group of authors included in the volume, speaking to multiple forms of brokenness and repair as entry points for sparking novel insights into how we might attend to our broken social and physical worlds. As a constellation of reflections on repair thinking and practices, the essays included in the book offer reparative responses to fractured systems, relationships, cities, architecture, and objects. Together they posit repair thinking as a way of addressing and nurturing our broken world.

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## Introduction

Around the globe in these first decades of our fraught 21st century, we are confronted with widespread social, environmental, economic, and political crises. We live in worlds full of risk and uncertainty; unprecedented growth and rapid decay; fragmentation, dissolution, and breakdown—a dire set of circumstances, but one that we the editors and diverse authors in this book maintain is ripe with opportunities for creating new relationships through reparative thinking and practices. In the book, we investigate repair as a contemporary expression of empowerment, agency, and resistance to the broken state of the world and our environment. We reconsider the value of the crack, fissure—the wound—as providing an opening and invitation for repair, for engaging with, tending to, and caring for on an individual-personal level, as well as in our civic and collective arenas.

This dissolute moment requires profound changes, a revolution in our thinking, imagination, actions, and routines. Only with an overall radical, reparative re-thinking that prioritizes a just and sustainable future can we craft a new mindset that will address our crippling social and economic systems, which promote racism, inequality, and injustice throughout the world. In the book, we present the act and metaphor of repair as a textured material foundation for opening dialogue about alternative futures. At a macro level, repair is an ethical and ecological commitment: a rejection of mass production and limitless consump-

tion; a validation of an undervalued and repressed labor; a reimagined relationship to quality. It is also an embodied act, a way of understanding objects as material and practice, while also fostering a renewed form of social exchange.

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### **Repair Thinking / Repair Practice (The Book's Organization)**

We see the act and thought processes of repair as entry points for sparking novel approaches and insights into how we might re-make our social and physical world, as well as the systems that support our being and inner life. The chapters in the book are organized around two overarching topics, and read as a kind of call-and-response, intertwining and engaging with one another in unexpected ways. Texts grouped under the 'Reparative Practices' rubric offer perspectives on concrete forms of repair, with chapters exploring topics connected to the processes, places, cultures, poetics, and aesthetics of repair practices stemming from a reactivated longing for authenticity and quality, alongside a revival of interest in narratives and experiences.

The chapters falling under 'Reparative Thinking' present speculations and arguments on the topic: they reflect upon large-scale issues that have engendered a state of brokenness, as well as those that might inspire us to rethink and repair. Repair thinking offers alternatives and opens up opportunities, providing insight in far less intrusive ways than traditional modes of making, building, purchasing, processing, and discarding. Thinking via repair allows us not only to tackle problems creatively, critically, directly, and minimally, but also enables an embracing of diversity and inclusivity in every respect. In this sense, physical repair acts as a springboard to philosophical, indeed reflective, musings that advance activist movements for structural change and repair (and vice-versa).

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### **Many Voices**

It is not possible to think about futures if we do not engage with interconnecting 'specialists', decolonizing and disrupting Western-centric thinking and theory, and prioritizing collaborative, pluralistic, and diverse contributions. Our book's contents include long and short essays, photo essays, and interviews representing projects and research by artists, designers, architects, sociologists, anthropologists, historians, business analysts, and entrepreneurs, amongst others. As such, they bring a wide range of values and experiences to the volume, with authors coming from diverse backgrounds, widespread geographical regions, and a variety of disciplines, including academia, art, and design.

We are excited by the multiplicity of perspectives that the authors bring to the subject, while at the same time, sharing an overall view of repair as an intimate physical and philosophical engagement with brokenness. By framing

repair as a localized, concrete mending practice, as well as a global meta-concept that functions as a palliative aid to environmental and socio-political ruptures in the material world, we aspire to reach those who are seeking to act and respond to our broken planet, as well as those interested in intersectional topics such as race, indigeneity, health, economy, pedagogy, and human/nature relationships. In the sections that follow, we've highlighted a selection from the 30 chapters in the book, a sampling of the entangled narratives that form its overall composition.

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### **Reparative Thinking\_Broken Worlds (Part 1)**

#### **Reparative Practices\_Wounds, Sutures, and Scars (Part 2)**

Texts in the 'Reparative Thinking\_Broken Worlds' (Part 1) section reflect upon broad issues that have engendered states of brokenness—including inequality, commodification, and exploitation at many levels—providing insights into how reparative thinking can help us to confront and engage with these broken worlds. The authors explore the brokenness that we experience in everyday systems: from our urban and natural environments, to injustices and inequalities in social, racial, and labor relations.

Authors in the 'Reparative Practices\_Wounds, Sutures, and Scars' (Part 2) section call for making that moves beyond rigid binaries and conservative approaches. Deep consideration of the context of the site of brokenness—no matter what scale—is crucial to effectively bridge voids and join to forge pathways to future functionality. Authors reflect on repair as a way of (re)making something—perhaps even a broken world—so that it becomes functional again, while acknowledging use, abuse, accident, and error, as well as erosion, breakdown, and decay.

*How might repair-thinking and repair practices challenge the ways in which we apply meaning and value to things, objects, and relationships?*

In Part 1, Avishek Ganguly's chapter 'Five Theses on Repair in Most of the World' reminds us that repair has been a way of life in countries of the Global South, as well as among historically marginalized minority communities in the North, well before the recent rise of 'repair cafés' and 'right to repair' movements in high-income countries, not to mention the newfound fascination with 'repair' at elite art and design schools. Drawing a connection between repair and translation, "that other great instrument of re-making," he states: "But repair, like translation, is always not enough." It even "can be disquietingly double-edged," particularly when the fix is meant to restore the status quo. Ganguly concludes: "Perhaps, even as we urge for reparations for generational wrongs and injustice, we should begin to learn how to live and think and feel 'through brokenness'? Because there are things beyond repair."

Yuriko Saito's 'Aesthetics of Visible Repair: The Challenge of Kintsugi' in Part 2 might be read as a response to Ganguly's call. Saito asserts that conventional methods of invisible repair attempting to restore an object's original appearance suggest that age and accidental damage through use constitute deterioration, a fall from grace: "We the consumers are encouraged to think that an object stops its life after the point of purchase, instead of continuing its history through its own aging process and our interaction with it." In contrast, the Japanese tradition of *kintsugi* (gold joinery) or *kintsukuroi* (repair by gold), which originated in the 15th century as a method of repairing cracked bowls used in tea ceremonies, has inspired a variety of alternative aesthetic potentials grounded in the idea that damage provides an opportunity for thinking creatively. *Kintsugi*, writes Saito, "requires a close observation to devise the intervention most appropriate for and respectful of the particular damage. (...) It also offers an artistic metaphor for healing the human psyche fractured by various traumas, which are unfortunately very much part of this world."

*How can we better understand the breakdown and failure of systems so that we can more effectively propose alternative forms of thinking through social and welfare systems and their economies?*

In 'Who Decides? Power, Brokenness, and Healing' (Part 1), Lorén Spears, enrolled Narragansett-Niantic activist and museum director, writes:

*Our Indigenous Elders tell us, 'We are all connected. What one does to the Earth, one does to oneself.' This world view is in stark contrast to the ideologies of land ownership, imperialism, wealth, and resource control (...) that the colonies imposed on Indigenous people, which devastated Indigenous lifeways.*

Outlining the nefarious ways that current power structures—military, police, economic, political, media, and other institutional frameworks—continue to reinforce the colonizers' grasp for power via breakage and destruction, Spears demands, "It is time for humanity to change, NOW." She concludes: "We pray that the next generations who come will have completed the circle, woven the cordage of our lives, mending the hurts, healing the wounds of injustice, and creating wholeness by reclaiming the sovereignty of the mind, body, and spirit." The thread of relationships and ideals ruptured by colonialist institutions, in this case the museum, continues in a chapter written by one of us (Kate), 'Repair and Design Futures: An Exhibition and Call to Action' (Part 2). Balancing the assertion that "museums embody brokenness" with the recognition that they "also hold manifold expressions of care and repair," the text goes on to investigate the lessons that worldwide practices of mending offer designers today, and

conjectures about where such lessons might lead us in the future. Reflecting on the exhibition ‘Repair and Design Futures’ that Kate curated at the RISD Museum in 2018/2019, the essay leans on philosopher Elizabeth V. Spelman’s provocative definition of repair as the “creative destruction of brokenness” to emphasize its potential to disrupt and heal at the same time:

Studying the mended, the imperfect, the overlooked in a museum collection not only sidesteps the canon, but also prompts us to think about repair within a broader mindset: that is, a socio-political lens through which we can re-envision our relationship to objects and the world around us.

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### **Reparative Thinking\_Alternative Ways (Part 3)**

### **Reparative Practices\_Patched and Reassembled (Part 4)**

Chapters in ‘Reparative Thinking\_Alternative Ways’ (Part 3) engage with the questions and issues raised in the previous sections, and illustrate potential alternatives to broken societies and ecologies, things, and systems. In lieu of usual solutions to brokenness—novelty, growth, and/or returning to recent conditions—this section presents options that might inspire us to rethink and repair, to tackle problems creatively, critically, directly, and minimally, while embracing diversity and inclusivity.

Contributors to the final section, ‘Reparative Practices\_Patched and Reassembled’ (Part 4), illustrate various approaches to the mindful act of joining jagged edges, each requiring alternative thought processes and techniques that embrace multidirectional and cross-disciplinary approaches with which to fill the gap. The chapters analyze and catalog distinct steps in processes of repair, showing how we find meaning in not just the act of repair itself, but also in the repair of communities and individuals.

*In what ways might reparative pathways lead to a more diverse and inclusive culture of shared and/or mutually respected values?*

In ‘My Grandmother’s Mended Socks: Layered Design Thinking and Durability’ (Part 3), artist and designer Christina Kim reflects on lessons she learned from sewing and mending with her grandmother in South Korea. Kim conjures memories of the ways her grandmother structured her daily life around using resources with elegance and efficiency, characterizing this practice as layered design thinking. The text proceeds to connect these teachings to the ways Kim currently utilizes such organizing principles in the recycling projects at both her clothing label Dosa and at her international art installations. Integrating

reuse and consideration for the next generation in her art and design, Kim equates durability with repair writ large:

*In light of the dire environmental issues we're facing right now, I think about repair in terms of durability. If we build the potential of long life into the design of everything that we create, then we will ultimately use far fewer resources, as well as create less waste. Designing with durability in mind is a form of repair.*

The chapter 'Community Repair in South Africa: An Interview with Kevin Kimwelle' (Part 4) documents a conversation between Esther Akin-toye, one of us (Markus), and architect Kevin Kimwelle. Working in Port Elizabeth, South Africa, Kimwelle discusses his process of bartering food, clothing, and household products for materials gathered by waste collectors and recyclers, which he then re-engineers into his building designs. The interview highlights the process of participating in the circular economy, showing that it is much larger than just the material aspect: "By looking holistically at the problem and looking for solutions that are very human and practical," states Kimwelle, "you are able to impact the full cycle." He continues:

*The intention and the significance of a work of design has to be very well calculated to have a strong impact. (...) Therefore, the first aspect in my work is meaning, the depth of the community intervention, and, of course, the material it is being built with.*

*Can a deeper understanding of relationships in society and nature via brokenness and repair lead to less fear of uncertainty and the unknown?*

Paula Gaetano-Adi's chapter 'Trans-Repair: Emancipatory Techno-Poetics' (Part 3) focuses on the work of Bolivian robot maker Esteban Quispe, Peruvian school teacher Walter Velazquez, Kenyan inventors David Gathu and Moses Kinyua, Kenyan high-schooler inventor David Lawrence Kamau, and Malawian engineer William Kamkwamba, to show "what happens when technology meets humanity. This is repair beyond instrumental rationality. Technology on strike, the aporia of modernity." Gaetano-Adi relocates the use of electronic waste in these projects outside and against maker and DIY movements in the West, and in relation to Enrique Dussel's notion of trans-modernity, Édouard Glissant's concept of opacity, and Aimé Césaire's poetic knowledge. Calling this work *trans-repair*, Gaetano-Adi defines the term as the

Impulse to rehearse an act of radical imagination in which the pre-modern, the mythological, the vernacular, and the ancestral emerge to subvert the authority of modern technologies and institute a practice or reparability as a revolt to the West's onto-epistemic despotisms and universalisms.

Drawing from Paulo Freire's analysis of the dynamics of oppression and mutual liberation, Sebastian Ruth, in his chapter 'Toward Repairing the Social Fabric: Music Performance and Pedagogy at Work' (Part 4), examines the creative tensions inherent to the question of whether artistic interventions that are rooted in dominant cultural norms can disentangle from said norms and become part of a project of re-envisioning community and artistic practice. In this light, he explores the ways a collective of musicians, together with children and families in a community-based education project, continually seek to develop liberatory practices, challenging and expanding the art form of classical concert music as a way of building a strong and loving community. He concludes: "Looking globally at the question of repair, we must recognize that it's a complicated process without guarantees (...) Any true process of repair needs to remain constantly and vigilantly aware of the changing dynamics in a community."

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### **Continuity and Circularity (An Un-conclusion)**

In the book's foreword 'Repair on the Move', Colombian activist and researcher Arturo Escobar argues that shifting to relational worldviews is key to creating a more livable future. The world's current state of systemic unsustainability—what Tony Fry calls 'defuturing'—blocks so many avenues to alternative futures that we need a wholly reconstructive effort, an ontological re-arranging of the existing social orders. By outlining a new lexicon for designing—"Repairing, caring, healing, regenerating, mending, refashioning, reusing, repurposing, suturing, patching, reassembling, rewilding, re-placing, re-localizing, and so forth"—this book, Escobar suggests, adds to efforts to harness design's "powers of world-making" through a pluriversal and relational approach.

The varied perspectives expressed in the book coalesce into an urgent declaration of shared intentions. It is a compilation that manifests in multiple calls for action built on the concept and practice of repair: designing better futures requires embracing change while attending to what is here and now. We conclude with an invitation to continue, to disrupt: 'A Collective Call to Action' encourages everyone to re-think our communal values, re-envision our frameworks, create new habits, and remake.

Finally, a 'Lexicon of Repair' samples reparative terminologies, philosophies, and methods practiced around the world within different cultures,

religions, and languages. The book's current 12 lexicon entries—Andoolníígo / Darning / Gambiarra / Jua Kali / Jugaad / Mending / Mottainai / Murammat / Quilting / Reparations / Resolver / Tikkun Olam—written by 12 authors, represent a wide array of rooted practices, but they are only snapshots in the cultural world of reparative thinking and practice. We hope these entries will spark interest in further research on the myriad examples of global traditions and modes of repair not included in this vocabulary. As part of our effort to expand the lexicon of repair and continue the conversation, please consider contributing additional words and definitions to our live and growing website, which will appear on Digital Commons. **D**