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MENDING BOOTH



Acts of **REDEMPTION:** The Culture of **REPAIR**

BY KEN VICKERSON

“WHY ARE YOU DOING THIS?” was the question I asked myself as I sat repairing the covers of my old leather couch. I had repaired the splitting seams of these same cushion covers perhaps a half dozen times without this question coming to mind. This time was different though; the repair was much more involved due to the continued deterioration of the leather, which had absorbed so many impacts and spills. It required the search for a sturdy material to bind the seams, a particularly noxious adhesive, a new spool of upholstery thread and about six solid hours. The answer came to me as I placed stitch beside stitch... “because you enjoy it”; maybe it was the glue talking.

For reasons I continue to explore, this answer surprised me. If I really wanted a new couch I could buy one, but that’s not what I was doing. The couch held no particular sentimental value for me. It wasn’t an expensive couch, simply a useful object that fit nicely into my living room. I was aware of my predisposition for puttering, and was under the apprehension that this was an integral aspect of being a craftsperson. “I putter, therefore I am.” But this was more; this was a concerted act of redemption. My internal dialogue continued with thoughts of the couch’s final destination...the curb...a truck to Michigan, soon after, taking up space in some landfill, another monument to consumption. This was neither a place for a useful object nor a suitable expense of the energy required to get it there...and so the reclamation continued.

I was reminded of my first clashes with repair. I was trained as a goldsmith though with no formal training in repair. I could design, build and sell my works but when the first call came from a client that one of my works required a mend, I was horrified! A cold sweat condensed on my brow; I squeezed the receiver in a death grip...repair??? Something I had made was broken. How could this be? I was a maker not a fixer. Was I not a jewellery demigod, minus the power of reparation? Surely my father Zeus would smite the mortal with the temerity to suggest my work was deficient. He didn’t. I took the work back with a smile and had a good think.

“If you made it, you can fix it.” I said to myself. How long will it take? How much will it cost? The client wanted an estimate. “I need to see the extent of the damage before I can give you an estimate. Leave it with me and I’ll call you.” I replied. I was puzzled as to why this concept was so foreign to me. “You



ABOVE: Salvador González Escalona, *Callejón de Hamel*. Havana, Cuba.
Photo: Ken Vickerson

have not benefited from any training,” was the answer. It rang true; I had no experience as a result of my schooling, my circle of friends or my father who was only handy with thunderbolts. Customer satisfaction was the mantra for a young goldsmith, so I endeavored to work that angle.

As it turned out, my first instinct was correct; I had made it, so I could fix it. It took longer than I had estimated, so I took a hit. It was a small price to pay for a satisfied customer and a satisfied maker. I took comfort in the fact that I did have the skills required to repair my works even though I was unfamiliar with the protocols. This was not an insignificant feeling. This was empowerment. I now look forward to these experiences; patrons have become friends who tell me about the personal meaning my work holds for them.

One of my colleagues explained how she educates her goldsmithing students in the value of repair on levels that are less obvious to them. It establishes trust between the craftsman and client; it supplements the maker’s income as well as brings the client into the shop where they can see what’s new...and what’s old.

LEFT: Mindy Yan Miller, *Mending Booth*, performance, 1994.
Photo: Peter MacCallum



ABOVE TOP: Robin Tieu, *Good Intentions* (detail), 2008. Bicycle pump, tire tube, floor mat, needle, embroidery thread. Photo: Robin Tieu

ABOVE BOTTOM: Robin Tieu, *Good Intentions* (detail), 2008. Bicycle pump, tire tube, floor mat, needle, embroidery thread. Photo: Robin Tieu



ABOVE: Artist unknown, Subaru. Photo: Ken Vickerson

An act of repair takes some courage, as one must first (literally) deconstruct the object to understand its nature, function and tolerances. Failure is a real possibility. *“Good Intentions”* is the title of a work by Robin Tieu, which beautifully illustrates the result of a well-intentioned but ill-informed repair. Robin’s childhood in Vietnam, where she salvaged bottle caps to make handmade toys (“they make good wheels”¹), prepared her for everything from mending her own clothes to overhauling cappuccino makers and producing works of craft that comment on repurposed materials. *“Good Intentions”* is a sculptural work in the ready-made tradition, featuring a bicycle pump and tire tube. The tube has been mended using an embroidery needle; a bright red cross is stitched at the apparent sight of the puncture with embroidery thread. Perhaps a metaphor for the work of NGOs (non-government organizations) in the developing world or maybe a comment on the general lack of common sense we experience in this age, the work invites reflection.²

Through my own interests and network of colleagues, I am aware of craft practices with strong ties to repair, luthiers and bookbinders among them. Tasked with the preservation of not only the object’s physical integrity but the intent of the maker, restoration carries responsibilities to maker as well as owner. It is crucial that the level of experience of the restorer be commensurate to the significance of the object. One does

not turn over an ailing Stradivarius or a threadbare Gutenberg to a beginner. The cult of the venerated object is the other side of this coin. What are the qualities that separate a disposable object from one worthy of repair?

I thought about the cultures where conditions dictate a repair is imperative. While on a trip to Cuba, my wife and I explored the backstreets of Havana, specifically Callejón de Hamel, a street with a rich display of Afro Cuban culture. We came to see a mural that had made the street famous, painted by Salvador González Escalona, an artist of some note. After enjoying the mural and sculpturally encrusted street we wandered into a gallery, which was equally festooned. We inquired after the artist and were told that this was the work of the aforementioned Salvador González. “He’s out front,” the attendant told us “Do you want to meet him?” Responding in the affirmative, we were led to a 50’s vintage black Ford. “Where is he?” I asked, looking around. The attendant spoke a few words in Spanish and the

artist emerged from under the car, soot smeared, wrench in hand. "It needed fixing," he said matter-of-factly. He proffered a greasy hand, which we accepted, and he gave us a tour of his gallery. I interpret his mural as an act of redemption for his neighbourhood, which is now a cultural landmark. Though clearly more significant by many orders of magnitude than my couch repair, it sprang from a similar motivation.

This experience and others in countries like Mexico where there are repair shops on every corner for every item imaginable led me to questions about North American culture. I compared this to the "right to repair" bill, first introduced in 2001, the bill was intended to give local auto repair shops (and car owners) access to the closely guarded diagnostic codes needed to affect repairs to increasingly computerized cars. These diagnostic codes held by franchised dealerships effectively create a repair monopoly.³ Do it yourself...I don't think so. This is systematic prohibition. Americans have since formed a *Right to Repair Coalition* in the hope of pushing the latest iteration of this bill through Congress.

I recall many repair shops in the towns where I lived as a boy. There seem to be fewer and fewer these days. The obvious answer to why this is the case: objects are no longer designed or built to be repaired, they are built to be disposed of and a new one purchased. This is surely the foundation of our consumption driven Western economies. No doubt many of us would like to have some private words with the collective masterminds who thought that this was sound and prudent reasoning. In any case we are all participants, willingly or not, and it may take an enormous leap of imagination to change this, or perhaps many small daily acts of redemption.



ABOVE: Jan Vormann, *Repair Award*. Awarded to the winner of Platform 21's Most Remarkable Repair Contest. Photo: Leo Veger



ABOVE: Platform 21, *Flower Repair*. Photo: Arne Hendriks

Tikkun olam is a Hebrew phrase that means, "repairing the world". This is a concept that has gone through many interpretations in Judaism but one that has increasing relevance in the modern world. One interpretation leaves it to people of conscience to make redress on an individual basis, be it moral, social or spiritual... thus repairing the world. I believe that this philosophy can be extended towards objects and in turn our physical environment, inspiring a more earthly type of repair. If we (in the developed world) had better access to or knowledge of repair, if objects were made to last rather than fail, if our purchasing and political judgments were based on quality rather than price, if we had a willingness to make mistakes and get our hands dirty...how would the world change? According to the Dutch group Platform 21's brilliant *Repair Manifesto*, "You can repair anything, even a plastic bag."⁴ ■

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION VISIT:

The Owner's Bill of Rights by Mister Jalopy (MAKE magazine currently my favourite) makezine.com/04/ownyourown
Platform 21's Repair Manifesto (though now defunct, it's worth a ramble through this site): www.platform21.nl/page/4360/en

ENDNOTES

- 1 Robin Tieu-Interview, Feb. 2009
- 2 The concept of common sense raises a number of issues, including the elevation of theory over the practice of art in our educational institutions. Will the next generation of cultural contributors suffer buyer's regret, having opted for creeping credentialism over tactile intelligence?
- 3 Sarah Palermo-The Keene Sentinel, Jan.31, 2009
- 4 www.platform21.nl