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# *The Experiential in Artistic Research*

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*Proceedings of the Nordic Summer University Symposia,  
2022–2025*



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Edited by Michelle Bratchie and Marina Velez Vago

Cover image: Heidi Seppälä, Winter Symposium, Latvia, 2022



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# *Connecting: Methods of Making, Unmaking and Remaking for Speculative Futures*

*Susie Olczak and Catherine Dormor*

## Connecting – Methodologies of Practice

**I**n *Staying with the Trouble*, Donna Haraway (2016) considers a framework for how the detritus of human activity might offer routes to a future that is more integrated and balanced. She argues that we cannot start afresh, nor sweep the pasts away. She encourages that we ‘stay with the trouble’, actively stirring things up, engaging with a present formed of and from its pasts, to acknowledge and address existing damages and injustices, and from there to build speculative narratives of futures based in truths told.

Sometimes this involves breaking things so that you can mend the whole. What is important here is that mending and repair are not about returning something to its origins. Repair must recognise the entanglements of production, consumption, and waste, and the violence of these together with the violence of the rupture. As Haraway notes: ‘nothing comes without its world’ (2018, p. 137). In this sense, repair offers a site for speculative futures in which the boundaries between pasts, presents and futures are not only permeable and malleable, but also entangled and irreducible.

Here, Catherine Dormor and Susie Olczak seek to bring together a set of methodologies and ways of thinking from practice. These offer scope to think through repair and making, to think about what it means to work contingently and impermanently, to work with community and in community with the more-than-human, and through this to offer spaces for and of reflection and inflection within community.

After meeting in Latvia in 2022, during the Nordic Summer University’s first ‘Experiential Art Practice as Research’ symposium, Olczak and Dormor presented a paper

in Lisbon as part of 'The Lost-and-Found: Revising Art Stories in Search of Potential Changes' in December 2023. This led on to a creative panel at the 'Lost-and-Found' symposium in Warsaw in March 2024, entitled 'Undisciplinary Practices – on unmaking as praxis', where Olczak and Dormor situated their thinking within feminist methodologies. This co-authored paper is grounded in a shared interest in making, unmaking, and ideas of making to form a creative–intellectual model that allows for the reimagining of what it means to be human through speculative and fictive theory-building.

Susie Olczak's practice-based PhD is an investigation into the relationship between contemporary expectations of landscape and the visual arts as a means of opening up critical questions to audiences and communities. Olczak's research, presented as part of the Nordic Summer University symposia in Latvia and Sweden, juxtaposed various distinct landscapes that are facing uncertainty due to climate change and weather extremes involving flooding or drought. This drew on her field research that took place in the Global North (South West and South East England) and Global South (namely Latin America, including the Darién rainforest in Panama, on the border of Colombia, with the Guna community; and the Atacama Desert in Chile, with the Lickan Antay community).

Olczak's subsequent production of artworks combines objective comparison and subjective experience, drawing on locally distinctive knowledge and using everyday routines both as a method of production, and as a means of visualising future possibilities for understanding landscapes. Through sculpture and video, these artworks highlight connections between disparate cultures and environments, and their contingent relationships to the climate crisis.

Olczak worked in Panama and Chile with the arts organisation La Wayaka Current (LWC) on two field research residencies in 2022 and 2023. In both Panama and Chile, the communities invited the artists to take part in the residencies through a co-commissioning process with LWC. Reciprocity and exchange were a key part of these residencies. Olczak's artworks continue to be made reciprocally with the communities she works with. She makes works with them during her fieldwork by exchanging material understandings and skills, and receives local narratives during their discussions. Olczak then transforms these narratives into works with the aim of uncovering local responses to how communities tackle extreme weather that involves flooding or drought, and adapt, survive and thrive amidst increasingly difficult climate challenges.

Catherine Dormor's practice-based research takes themes from textile production to consider what it means to be in community and the language of that community. Through this, she addresses human and more-than-human needs within the world. Dormor is particularly interested in how small acts and actions within woven and stitched cloth can offer insights into what it means to live reciprocal, intertwined and contingent lives, in dialogue with our environment and fellow humans. This is definitively a feminist practice as it seeks not to establish single truths or narratives, but to allow multiple and mutable

approaches to and lines of flight (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987) from her work. Her practice, sometimes displayed as artworks, acts as an inflection point for thinking about structures of community, and how these can be deployed for mutual benefit and flourishing.

Dormor's methodologies, therefore, embark from the practices of seaming and re-pairing, and how these work with woven cloth's structures and language. Whilst the seam is a joining mechanism, a creative activity, that brings different elements together to form a unified whole, the rough edges of the cloth are hidden within the seam allowance, and an articulated form is created that can be either flat (as in patching and piecing), or shaped and sculptural (as in a shoulder seam for a jacket or shirt). The capacity of the seam to join multifarious elements boils down to the skill of the seamstress in choosing and crafting the best kind of seam for the join, and for its subsequent usage.

This repair is predicated on rupture or damage, and is thus born within a context of violence. This creates a space for thinking through what violence and reparation can mean within communities, and how and why the notion of the 'invisible' repair might be rejected in favour of the visible mend and 'rough' bind. Taken in this way, repair becomes a space for contemplation and reckoning with pasts, particularly colonial pasts and presents, as it offers space for speculative futures that can sit with this inherited damage, acknowledging the hurts and violence of the past, and seeking to activate ways of 'being' in community that look beyond patriarchal hierarchies and power-based structures.

By drawing on textile practices, Dormor seeks to highlight how the production and distribution of cloth, as it functions to secure the expansion of a nation's wealth and power, serves to underpin all capitalist and industrialised systems. Alongside this sits another framing: that of textile practices as feminine activities, which are domestic and restricting; they speak to what it means to be a 'well-behaved woman'. Here Dormor asks, 'what might it mean to be unruly, disruptive, and to bind these ruptures roughly and impermanently?'

## Contingent Making – Shelf-to-Raft

Through contingent making, Olczak draws parallels between the intuitive processes involved in making artworks, and methods in society of human and natural adaptation; in other words, how humans build temporary structures, shelters, and rafts. The methodology is a source–translate–make process, or fieldwork to studio (to gallery). This is used critically and reciprocally by Olczak to adapt decolonial approaches to practice-based research, and to consider how an art practice can be outward-looking and generous/non-hierarchical in approach. The outputs challenge audiences and generate new forms of engagement through creative practice.

Olczak's project aims to generate hopeful and inclusive visions of landscapes affected by climate change. For instance, might the innovative use of a lightweight boat called a coracle, or dugout canoe, as well as different kinds of raft, provide us with a method of thinking about

more hopeful narratives in relation to climate change? These vessels all offer an object on which to float above the rising waters: what ways of thinking might do the same?

Olczak considers the sculptures that she makes to be rafts. The shelf-to-raft methodology provides a useful structure for the research process due to its connection to water-resilience. In Olczak's practice, water is explored as both a physical and metaphorical connector, and considered in terms of its relationship to adaptation and survival. The shelf-to-raft methodology is used as a critical framework in the examination of how Olczak's art practice generates and distributes new knowledge. The methods of thinking can also be reversed (as raft-to-shelf) through exhibition, discursive events, and zines and publications, to further distribution and link back to methods of making artworks where undoing and remaking are central. The research considers how gathering and displaying artworks to audiences is used in the research process as another field for fieldwork, and whether raft-processes might suggest other forms of making 'with'. The artworks consider different methods of making with the *other* through collaboration, working alongside communities, and making with the elements and the natural world. This idea of 'making with' draws from Kathrin Böhm's exhibition *Compost* (2021) at The Showroom, where she considered collective composting as a methodology for disrupting 'business as usual', and to question principles of usership and accessibility in order to test out different ways of working together sustainably (The Showroom, 2021). This exhibition questioned the desire to progress and to produce, examining what we discard and take with us alongside our inherent entanglement and interdependent modes of being.

As a central part of her research, Olczak works collaboratively and across disciplines with Daniel Keech, of the Countryside and Community Research Institute. Their collaborations are grounded in a shared individual and institutional interest in landscapes at the University of Gloucestershire, where both Keech and Olczak work, and include a paper recently published in *Folklore*, entitled 'Local Landscapes of Hope in Darién and Atacama: Material Narrations in the Anthropocene' (2024). Their joint research calls for a more nuanced examination of climate change, and argues that there is a vital necessity for cross-, trans- and interdisciplinary approaches to thinking about adaptation towards climate resilience. Olczak's non-hierarchical method of practice, where no one process or material is dominant, emphasises this thinking. Keech and Olczak state that 'interdisciplinarity has made space for trans-disciplinarity, as alliances of researchers, governments, civil society groups, and businesses try to solve difficult challenges towards sustainable transformations, such as a circular economy, or nature-based solutions to environmental change so profound that they are likely to affect established anchors of local identity' (2024, p. 554).

Olczak and Keech stress the need for new narratives within the Anthropocene that are capable of carrying hope alongside the critical messages and warnings relayed by scientists and scientific data. Art practices like Olczak's, which have an auto-ethnographic approach, can be useful in materialising climate change. Keech and Olczak argue that

ethnographic methods of practice-based research that are undertaken during fieldwork allow for '[n]arratives of current life experiences' to 'offer themselves up as tools for informing future visions and expectations, including the societal transitions which climate change demands' (2024, p. 556).

Olczak's work aims to highlight what may be at risk of being lost within landscapes to help encourage an urgent shift towards action in relation to the climate disaster. Her works interweave layers of narrative with the aim of presenting new ways of living with climate change that are not solely the 'doom and gloom' narrative that is often presented.

The routines that have been generated over years of living in extreme, remote environments, and the need now for adaptation to changing external conditions, are transferred into creative methods. Inspired by the exposure to rituals in Panama and Chile, Olczak's research experiments with different ways of producing art in contrast to methods of creating work in a studio, and considers how an art practice can have a lighter environmental footprint. Olczak's work with Keech demonstrates how creative engagement with the materiality of landscapes, alongside an understanding of climate issues that draws on frameworks across the humanities and social sciences, can function as an important means of working towards climate resilience.

## Contingent Thinking – Repair and Reparation

Repair and reparation are born of violence. Ruptures that require mending were violently formed. Whether that rupture was arrived at through repeated abrasion, a sudden attack, breaking under extreme tension, or some chemical damage, it demands to be addressed. The structure is compromised, and its integrity is at stake.

The concept of the invisible mend is a useful starting point for thinking about repair, as it is a form of mending that aims to make the rupture disappear. Between the violence of the rupture and seeking its invisible mend, an anxiety of re-rupture, further bleeding and making visible, is able to flourish or fester.

It is this tensional space between pasts and presents that calls us to consider what it might mean to refuse the invisible mend, to mend but retain evidence of the injuries and violence of the rupture. In this space of refusal, the wound remains open, performing a material and affective reminder of its violent origins, threatening to bleed and spill its truths.

Eve Sedgwick has called for a revaluation of repair, having grown frustrated with the ways in which critique has become useless and outmoded in dealing with state and institutional violence. It has, she argues, become deployed as a means for redirecting and displacing the gaze onto such violences (2002, p. 140). She points to ways in which critique has become dismissive, arrogant, and thus futile; or, as Patricia Stuelke frames it, 'critique finds what it expects to find, and even when it does, it cannot count on anyone transforming the world in response' (2021, p. 6). Heather Love glosses Sedgwick's proposal

of repair and reparation as being 'on the side of multiplicity, surprise, rich divergence, consolation, creativity, and love' (2010, p. 237). This calls for reparative acts and actions as a response to state (and other) violence that is not enacted through 'a closed circuit of injury and repair', which could be said to equate justice with the simplistic acts of returning damaged lands and properties, monetary compensation, and abolishing and removing colonial structures. To consider repair as a scaffold for truth-making requires a repeated act of tuning into the intertwined and often difficult discourses of freedom. Mimi Nguyen links the concept of the 'precious, poisonous gift of freedom' with an obligation of gratitude (2012, p. 3). Here, the notion of repair and reparation have the potential to become tools for further violences, repression, and further colonial rule.

Lauren Berlant cautions against reparation as a sentimental exercise (2008), which potentially restores another form of the past, warning of its failure to be revolutionary and of its capacity to initiate a passive ideal of compassion: 'a world of private thoughts, leanings and gestures' (2008, p. 4). The invisible mend offers such a space: compassion without action, a private space of (self-) contemplation.

Dormor's work emerges from a UK-based context, and in this she seeks to recognise the difficulties and violences that this positionality affords. This creates a difficult and uncomfortable space, one that is necessarily so.

She offers her work as a means by which to speak of the entangled relationships between nations and peoples, between environment and the need/desire to travel and be with one another. Textile and fashion production are particularly toxic and continue to create pollution and human misery. Dormor's printed cloths and jabbing needles speak to these narratives, disrupting and calling attention to the destructive and beautiful elements held in tension with one another. Textile production brings about a form of strangulation of the planet and its most vulnerable people, largely for the pleasure and leisure of the rich; the same can be said of discarded and unwanted textiles, which litter the beaches and landscape of parts of Ghana (Zhang, 2024), the Atacama Desert in Chile (Bartlett, 2024), and other areas across the globe.

The delicate printed silk cloths of Dormor's practice (Figure 1) move and undulate with the air as people pass through the gallery space, highlighting the vulnerability of physical bodies; the cloth itself sweeps against the dirty floor, scraping and being abraded, and so the metaphor for the body becomes a risky space. This is the reality, the precarity, of the dwellers of many parts of the world: their precious lives are as at risk as the precious silk organza and silk satin displayed in Dormor's work. The bodily self becomes embroiled in colonial, imperialist pasts, in the damaging present, and in the unknown future of these lands and their peoples.



**Figure 1**

Dormor, C. 2024. *Still Stitching*.

Digital print on silk satin and silk organza. Each panel measures 130 x 300 cm.

## Mending

The supersized needle and thread in Dormor's work makes its way across the cloth, its surface and printed image, in the act of repair, where needle and thread can draw raw edges together. As the edges are drawn together, they are held in tension, in an anxious dynamic. This intentionally sits in contrast with the calm subjectivity that is portrayed as what should be achieved through Western and colonial notions of humanitarian progress. Foucault speaks of normalising acts as operating within a biopolitical plane (2003, p. 223), and Achille Mbembe extends this to the necropolitical (Mbembe, 2019). This is a warning against the societal invisible mend that tries to *make as if new*, to say: 'there is nothing to look at here anymore'.

The cloths move chaotically, becoming caught up with one another and scraping inelegantly across the dusty floor, the air emerging from the doorway nearby, stirred up by the movement of the bodies in the space. This brings to mind the work of Magdalena Górska who, in her essay 'Corpo-Affective Politics of Anxious Breathing' (in Sliwinska, 2020), sets out how the act of breathing and living a breathable life has become politicised on every front. This offers a way of thinking beyond the invisible mend through the corpo-affective materialisation of power structures that textile production enacts. To mend within a framework of anxious living is to allow scope for re-rupture and re-bleeding: the rough edges threaten to fray and re-rupture. If we are to reckon with the pasts and presents, then the futures must allow for these anxieties to be held in tension.

The act of catching up the fabric parts is an important one when focusing upon reparation in terms of anxious living. Anxious living leads to vulnerable living, anxious politics leads to vulnerable politics, but anxious living has the capacity to act beyond the reactive, and anxieties can provide breaks in practices and effect change. The raw edge, roughly bound, offers a model of murky resistance to neatening off or the invisible mend. Jack Halberstam suggests that 'alternatives dwell in the murky waters of a counterintuitive, often impossibly dark and negative realm of critique and refusal' (2011, p. 2).

Górska highlights ways in which frameworks for political agency point towards acts of protest and physical resistance that are simply not available to the most vulnerable. If the capacity to demand a breathable life is prevented by even the structures of protest, then every breath threatens to be the last. To live a breathable life requires truth-telling, solidarity with others, and community. The stitch and mending offer scope for such a lived activism. The stitched mend becomes a laboratory for collective hope, resistance, and care within a framework of anxiety.

### Reparation – Rafting or Being on the Raft

Calls for an examination of how we live together, in addition to our methods of adaptation in light of the climate crisis, are brought to the fore within such a framework of anxiety. Issues around social justice and the disproportionate impact of the climate emergency on the less industrialised Global South, which result from the actions of the Global North, also need to be considered. Keech and Olczak argue that '[s]uch engagements raise important debates about the value and validity of several types of knowledge and their hybrid nature: lay, expert, local, and technical knowledge must combine to find flood solutions without making bold claims or privileging one form over another' (2024, p. 554; see also, Houghton, Bankoff, and Coulthard, 2015).

Rafting, or being on the raft, acts as a metaphor and methodology to inspire a practice-based approach for thinking about hopeful narratives in relation to climate change (see Figure 2). A raft is often created and stored for use only when required, or made in a way



**Figure 2**  
Olczak, S. 2024.  
*Your Place and Mine.*  
Mixed media on re-claimed banana crate.  
50 x 30 x 25 cm.  
This work was shown as part of the curatorial project *RAFT* at the Royal Over-Seas League.

that is contingent on need. Some rafts are made intuitively with materials that can be readily gathered nearby, such as driftwood and string, or used plastic bottles. Rafts are simple vessels and are human-powered, to be used as flotation devices for both transport and survival. In different contexts, basic boats can also become objects of play and adventure.

Methods of linking local knowledge and adaptability in the face of the climate crisis feed into curatorial strategies that enable widened perspectives; Olczak seeks to explore and examine this within the exegesis stage of her research. For example, *RAFT*, a 2024–25 exhibition curated by Olczak at the Royal Over-Seas League in London. As outlined on the exhibition's website, this work sought to rethink:

...the relationship between Britain's waters and the wider world, through the ongoing movements of people across and between these spaces. The exhibition investigates how people think about the role of water in relation to diasporas in different places. It challenges us all to rethink this in ways that strengthen international relations rather than breaking them down. The exhibition's name – RAFT – is highly symbolic. A raft is a small vessel used to move across water. It represents a journey ... Just as the raft has been adapted to different purposes, so have societies across the world. For example, structures such as tents, have been employed by the homeless, by holidaymakers, and by refugees. (Royal Over-Seas League, 2024–25)

In their *Folklore* article, Keech and Olczak (2024) call for further exploration into the potential for learning from adaptations made in places that are already experiencing extremes, in order to support climate change mitigation in other parts of the world. They stress that it is important to question the types of speculation about the future that emerge and, crucially, whose voices are included rather than left out. The exegesis stage of Olczak's research, in addition to discursive aspects of her practice such as her contributions to the Nordic Summer University, aim to disseminate such narratives.

### Reparation – Mending

As the needle passes through the cloth it ruptures the surface, dragging its thread in its wake. Mistakes can be undone and restitched, but their marks remain. The stitch is persistent and pervasive. As a form of repair and reparation, it causes a form of bleeding out. (Women's) Bleeding functions at the edge or border: between clean and dirty, between life and death.

As a border act, refusing the invisible mend becomes a process of materialisation that refuses to stabilise, and remains in a state of tensional anxiety. Within this space of anxious living, binaries and dichotomies become existential threats that have no promise of resolution. But within the mend there is the capacity to hold onto hope, to create hopeful spaces that cross temporal fields. This involves living with the pain and violence of the rupture, living through the stitching, binding and mending processes, and continuing to live adjacent to the scar tissue of the wound. Rough edges are brought together, but are not eradicated; past narratives and systemic structures must constantly be reckoned with. Human and more-than-human damage create their own narratives and rituals.

Hilary Robinson (2019) discusses gestures as stand-ins for the body, suggesting that collective protests might begin with the anger of the 'I', and become the anger of the 'we', and then the persistence of the whole. Through this, they also become an act of repair, of claiming space in which to be seen and to act. In the moment of two or more 'I's recognising each other, and in the building from that into the solidarity of collective anger,

we see what Basia Sliwinska terms 'budding activism' (2020) effected, which recognises the emergent nature of such communal gestures. The repair and reparation draw the rupture's edges together, but in refusing the invisible mend, the site of the wound seeps and drips, becoming part of the ongoing societal fabric. This repair is sticky and messy, risky but truthful.

### Conclusion

Refusing the invisible mend in favour of reckoning with colonial pasts, presents and futures is founded on caring for the societal and environmental fabric, and its ruptures and fissures. Reparations and repair must not seek to tidy up past violences and criminal acts, but rather should carry their pain and labour forward. Here Dormor and Olczak seek to materialise and corporealise vulnerabilities that persist, suggesting that repair needs to remain persistent and insistent in telling its truths. Through seaming, and shelf and raft methodologies, there is scope for shifting the focus of repair away from returning something to its original form, and towards becoming mended with its pasts and presents.

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## *Proceedings of the Nordic Summer University Symposia, 2022–2025*

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*The 2022–2025 Nordic Summer University Symposia spanned six conferences that were held across Europe, during which various groups of practitioners came together to explore the experiential in artistic practice.*

*These proceedings contain selected contributions from attendees of the symposia, in which they reflect on their own personal experience of art practice. Their papers are disparate in approach, ranging from formal examinations of art theory, to visual and poetic explorations of artistic creation. Through their analysis, as well as their variety of form, these works offer a window into the diverse and deeply individual experiences at the heart of an artist's creative process.*



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