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Not the End of the Journey: Exploring re-knitting as a 'craft of use'

Introduction

This paper discusses the possibility of transferring amateur knitting practice from the making of new items to the remaking of existing garments. Remaking can be seen as part of what Kate Fletcher (2013) calls the 'craft of use', and describes as 'the satisfying and resourceful practices associated with using clothes'. While Fletcher researches existing examples of such practices, I explored the possibility of initiating re-knitting as a new craft of use in my PhD research, working through my existing practice as a designer-maker of knitwear.

The research involved a group of seven female amateur knitters, aged between 43 and 66. At the start of the project, I conducted individual garment-based interviews to elicit the initial attitudes of each participant towards fashion and knitting. At a series of workshop sessions, we tested methods of re-knitting existing garments and explored design skills; the project culminated in each participant using re-knitting techniques to alter an item from their own wardrobe. I have included various quotes from the participants in this paper.

Making and remaking

Knitting has enjoyed a surge in popularity in the last decade, and many people are now knitting items for themselves to wear. In sustainability terms, this is positive; amateur fashion-making could offer a more satisfying and less materially intensive alternative to mass-produced clothing. However, the majority of knitters focus on making new items, mirroring – rather than challenging – the linear production-consumption model of the mainstream fashion industry. Gill and Lopes (2011: 312) argue that too many sustainable design initiatives involve the production of new things; they suggest that 'the challenge for the material practices of design might be recast in terms of a negotiation with those things already in existence'. Similarly, Burnham (2009: 16) identifies an opportunity for 'new design processes which are not about the use of new resources, but about the ingenuity to expand the potential of existing ones'. I am excited by these ideas, and see a direct

link with amateur knitting. The reworking of existing garments could be a more radical type of amateur making, which extends the making relationship and disrupts the prevalent fashion system.

There are many examples of wearers restyling and upcycling garments using sewing techniques. In my experience, remaking is most frequently associated with garments made from woven and jersey fabrics, such as dresses, tops and jeans. Fine and Leopold (1993) explain that it was common practice in the eighteenth century to restyle dresses time after time, in order to make the most of valuable fabric. It was also common for children's clothes to be made from outdated adult garments during the same era (Styles 2010). During the Second World War, when resources were scarce, remaking clothing once again became a necessity; Turner (2011) describes various ingenious methods employed by women at this time. Today, fashion labels such as Junky Styling offer ready-to-wear reworked garments and personalised restyling services. Although domestic repair practice has declined in recent decades, restyling and mending are enjoying a current resurgence along with other types of making, with support available via books, magazines, workshops and blogs.

Re-knitting

Sewing techniques can be used to rework knitted garments; various blog posts and books provide tutorials for turning unwanted jumpers into quirky fashion and home accessories. These projects transform knitted garments by felting, cutting and sewing. In contrast, I am using knitting to rework knitted garments. I am focusing on techniques which use a knitter's existing skills and knowledge, and engage with the structure of the knitted fabric; in general they involve adding or replacing sections of knitted fabric within a garment. The processes are flexible in terms of scale, transformation, motivation and visibility, restricted only by my chosen emphasis on knitting. Sewing processes are included if they engage directly with the knitted structure, such as grafting (the seamless joining of two knitted fabrics).

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There is a piece of good advice for knitters that the Shetland Islanders mention over and over again. 'Never, ever sew when you can knit.'
(Pearson 1980: 14)

The knitted fabric that I am concerned with is technically described as 'weft knitted'. There are two varieties of knitting: weft knitting and warp knitting. Warp knitting is solely an industrial process, used for specialist applications such as car upholstery (Spencer 2001). Weft knitting is far more diverse, incorporating hand knitting, domestic machine knitting and industrial production; the vast majority of knitwear in our wardrobes is weft knitted. In weft knitting, the fabric structure is 'progressively built-up from row after row of intermeshed loops' (Spencer 2001: 16). These loops can be retrospectively reconfigured, or – more colloquially – 'tinkered with'.

Rows can be unravelled, to gradually deconstruct the fabric, and be re-knitted. The vertical columns of loops can be unmeshed ('laddered') and reformed. New loops can be picked up within a fabric to create integrally joined pieces. The techniques that I have developed use the knitted structure's capability for reconfiguration, treating each loop as a unit, or a building block. In contrast, methods of reworking knitwear by cutting and sewing treat the fabric as a continuous sheet.

In the past, remaking would have been an integral part of the practice of knitting for many people. Pearson (1980: 13) describes how traditional gansey sleeves are knitted down from the shoulder, 'to enable one to repair any worn parts by simply pulling back past the hole and knitting back down again to the cuff'. Annemor Sundbø, who collects homemade Norwegian garments, has a collection of stockings which 'illustrate the practice of knitting new heels and toes on old stocking legs ... stocking legs may be 100 years older than the feet' (Sundbø 2000: 136–7). Re-knitting has been particularly prevalent during periods of material scarcity, such as the Second World War. A series of knitting books published in the 1940s included entire sections devoted to 'the making of new garments from old'. They show numerous examples of re-knitting, with sorrowful 'before' and glamorous 'after' photographs.

A few of the participants in my research had memories of re-knitting activities taking place within their families. Several mentioned unravelling whole garments to reclaim the yarn; one participant also shared a story of her aunt re-knitting sections of her husband's jumpers.

When it got really ratty, the polo neck would get all stretched and horrible. She would re-do the cuffs and she'd unpick the polo neck, and re-knit a new polo neck for him to keep him snug in the winter.

Although some people still re-knit today – an Internet search identifies various instructions for unravelling jumpers to re-use the yarn – this practice seems to be marginal within the knitting community. Despite the extended contact with amateur knitters I have had in the course of my practice, I have seldom heard of anyone using their knitting skills to rework existing knitted items. The tacit knowledge of how to unravel, alter, replace and re-knit has largely been lost.

Developing re-knitting techniques

Working as a design activist, I want to initiate re-knitting as a new strand of amateur making activity. For this research, I carried out a pilot project in which I developed methods of altering knitted garments using knit-based techniques. I rediscovered knowledge from the past – via knitting books spanning the last hundred years – and used my knowledge of knitting to develop new approaches, creating a re-knitting practice appropriate for the garments in our wardrobes today. For example, 1940s instructions focus solely on hand-knitted items; today, we have many more industrially produced, fine gauge knitted garments in our wardrobes. I included these items in my scope, and learned to work with the tiny loops within fine gauge fabrics.

From these two starting points, I developed a 'spectrum' of fourteen re-knitting treatments: modifications that can be made to existing items of knitwear. These modifications include, for example, 'integral embellish', where decoration is knitted on to the existing fabric; 'afterthought pocket', where the fabric is opened to allow the insertion of a hanging pocket; 'replace edge section', which allows the knitter to replace a worn cuff or hem; and 'cut open and trim', which involves the insertion of new openings. Each treatment has countless variations, depending on the characteristics of the original garment and the design of the alteration. I communicated these treatments via a diagram, arranged according to the way in which the knitted fabric is technically altered (without opening the fabric, opening it horizontally, or cutting it vertically or diagonally). The spectrum is open; it is quite possible that more re-knitting treatments could be identified, and placed as new pathways on the diagram. At the first knitting workshop, I showed the spectrum to the

group and described how it had been developed. I was pleased to find that the participants understood the diagram and the open choices that it represented.

If you start off with your sweater, you can look down there, and think of all the options. You'd start to think of ideas, wouldn't you?

It could be incremental. If you start doing one thing, then you might think: I'll do this as well, depending on how it progresses as you go along.

My next task was to physically explore the possibilities I had identified for altering knitted garments using knit-based techniques, to identify problems and further options. At the same time, I started to develop guidance that would support knitters in planning and carrying out the treatments. Rather than trying to develop every treatment in the same way, and to the same level, I developed some more than others. This approach allowed me to focus on the treatments I thought would be particularly interesting and appealing, and to develop them in whatever way seemed most appropriate, without closing down the opportunity for future development of the other treatments. I worked interactively with the group of knitters during this process, seeing them as co-developers and responding to their requests.

The knitters asked whether the resources I was developing could be made available to them online. In response, I created a re-knitting area in the research section of my website (<http://www.keepandshare.co.uk/research>). Over the course of the project this area grew from a single page to a sprawling, hyperlinked resource in which I recorded the instructions, tools and advice I had developed. The resource is designed to continue growing; some areas are well-developed, while others remain as 'stubs', to be developed in the future. Towards the end of the project, I added introductory information – describing the history and future potential of re-knitting – in order to make the resource usable by knitters outside the research group.

Anticipating re-knitting

In the information I distributed to potential participants before the research project, I said that we would be developing knit-based techniques for transforming existing knitwear. Hence, all of the knitters who took part had expressed an interest in this activity and were intrigued by the idea, as this quote from one participant (referring to a little-worn item from her wardrobe) illustrates:

I'm extremely interested to try and change [it] ... I would be delighted to try and jazz something up.

However, the participants were generally unsure about what re-knitting would involve, or what it might look like:

I can't see it, I can't visualise, I can't imagine what you would do. I'm not very imaginative in that way.

Another participant said that she did not know of any techniques that would successfully enhance a garment:

My experience of altering things, or dressing them up, is limited but ... they always involved changing the buttons or putting lace on it or something like that. And it just never looked right. It was never good enough that you'd want to wear it. It was a lot of effort, and the result was unsatisfactory.

Engaging with re-knitting

At the workshops, the participants quickly embraced the potential of re-knitting, and responded positively to the treatments. Some particularly appealed to them; for example, several participants liked the idea of 'cardiganising' their jumpers using the 'cut open and trim' treatment, feeling it would make these garments more wearable. They liked the finish of the trim used for this treatment, considering it to be elegant in appearance and relatively simple to execute.

As we tested the treatments in the workshops, a number of issues arose which could present barriers to re-knitting. Many of the treatments involve opening the knitted fabric, either by unravelling a row or by cutting. I discovered a shared assumption that any unsecured knitted fabric – whether open stitches not held on a needle, or a cut edge – would immediately disintegrate. The participants were amazed to find that this was not the case; the nature of the knitted structure is such that ladders need manipulation to 'run', and a fabric cut vertically does not come apart without vigorous handling. The experience of deconstruction, therefore, proved to be essential in developing a deeper understanding of the knitted structure and building a willingness to 'open' existing fabrics.

Fletcher (2008: 187) describes the ready-made garments supplied by high street shops as being

'presented to us as complete or "closed", with an almost untouchable or sacrosanct status'. With this in mind, before the project I had thought that knitters might be reluctant to alter mass-produced items of knitwear, and prefer to change items they had made themselves. However, discussion showed that the participants did not feel that this distinction was important. When they talked about selecting items for re-knitting, it was clear that they were less confident about tackling fine-gauge knitwear, all of which would be mass-produced, and therefore shop-bought. However, this concern related to their ability to achieve a satisfactory result when working with the tiny stitches, and to successfully calculate the change in gauge that would be required, rather than the origin of the item. On reflection, I would identify the condition of a garment as more important. Where there was a physical problem with a garment, there was a clear motivation for action and everyone seemed to perceive it as suitable for alteration. In contrast, at one session I asked the group to help me to redesign a plain red cashmere jumper. The jumper was in perfect condition, and I did not identify any problem with it. Although the participants generated a range of ideas for the jumper, towards the end of the activity one of the participants explained that she was having difficulty:

See, I do find it difficult to just look at that jumper, all nice and complete ... I just think it's a very nice jumper.

The other participants agreed. This suggests that the wholeness of the garment made it difficult for the knitters to imagine it being different. While all knitted garments have the capacity for alteration, it is when they become damaged and the structure starts to degrade that this property becomes more obvious.

Re-knitting projects

The project culminated in each participant using re-knitting techniques to alter an item from their own wardrobe. They used a range of different treatments, in each case adapting the techniques to suit the particularities of their own individual garments. Following the project, the knitters reflected on their transformed pieces; they were impressed by their achievements.

I think everything everyone's done has improved on what was there. It's really made it a different original garment.

They also felt positive about the activity of re-knitting:

It's been really quite exciting, what you can do with existing garments that you've got. Just to turn them into something really original, which I think is fantastic ... It's quite a liberating thing. You feel like you can go in and alter and put back together. It's a really nice thing to do.

One participant described feeling proud of having achieved a complex task:

I'm impressed with the way it all works, the construction of it. I think that's really clever. And I'm quite pleased that I've been able to do it.

Others talked about feeling good about having been able to transform an unworn item and return it to wear:

It does feel good (noble ... perhaps, sounds too pompous) to reinvigorate a rather sad garment.

I feel, sort of, justified that I've been able to turn it into something I want. And I shall feel self-righteous when I wear it!

Repair and re-knitting activity

As a process which renews garments, re-knitting can broadly be seen as an act of repair. Clothing repair was once commonplace; it is now carried out less frequently, and generally limited to simple tasks such as sewing on buttons. While a recent study quantified the percentage of respondents able to carry out various repairs (Gracey and Moon 2012), Laitala and Boks (2010: 20) point out that 'different considerations play a role when deciding to repair the clothing or not'. This was certainly the case with the participants in my research; they all reported mending clothes, but described particular conditions under which they would or would not repair:

It depends which ones they are, actually. Not necessarily everything, I would repair. Just my favourite things.

The latest thing I was mending, I've got some very voluminous trousers in a very fine linen, and they were really wearing thin. So, I was desperate to keep them going because there's a jacket with them, and I wanted to keep that going.

I wouldn't darn a jumper. I think if it's got a hole in it, then it's past it.

I've just ripped my working trousers. But that material's quite thin, I don't know if you can mend it. So I probably wouldn't mend that, even though it's a real pain.

These examples show wearers weighing up whether the garment is sufficiently valuable to be worth the effort of repair, and considering the prospect of a successful outcome, given the nature of the problem and their own level of skill. When the research participants engaged in re-knitting, they showed a strong desire to improve on the original item, indicating that re-knitting is a related but separate activity which goes beyond repair. Nevertheless, I found that the logic underpinning re-knitting was very similar. All of the items selected for re-knitting had two factors in common. Firstly, they had one or more identifiable problems, such as holes or other damage; an issue with fit; or being rarely worn. Secondly, each garment was considered valuable in some way, whether in terms of emotional attachment, a valuable or high quality fibre, a garment in too good a condition to discard, or a homemade item representing a great deal of embedded effort. My research shows that there are many such items kept in the wardrobe. They are in a state of limbo, and cause a problem for wearers who feel the items are being wasted. The solution, often, is to hide the items back in the wardrobe:

Put them out of sight a bit, so you don't have to think about them.

From the evidence of this pilot project, I suggest that re-knitting could become an option for resolving these unworn clothes. Re-knitting is a labour-intensive activity, only accessible to knitters with a sufficient degree of tacit knowledge; while the complexity of an alteration can be controlled, to some degree, at the design stage, this activity would not be used for every garment in the wardrobe. However, in suitable circumstances re-knitting would be an effective way of returning selected garments to active use.

Establishing re-knitting as a 'craft of use'

When the workshop sessions that had been originally planned for the research were complete, the group and I decided to continue meeting on a monthly basis. These sessions offered a valuable opportunity to see what the participants chose to work on after the project, and I found tentative evidence that the participants had embraced re-knitting as a 'craft of use'. Several brought items of knitwear that

they wanted to rework, and discussed them with the group; others mentioned various projects that they had in mind. One participant, for example, described having 'a large pile of knits waiting for new futures'. However, to date only one project has been completed, a 'total re-knit' treatment by the most prolific knitter in the group:

Because this cardigan had a deep welt, it was always going up my back. And I like things to be warm, so it irritated me and I didn't wear it for that reason. I considered altering it. I took the band off, and I was going to try and lengthen it by taking the rib off. But when I looked at it without the front band on, I thought, it's not going to work, because of the shape of it. I thought, well I've got this far! (laughs) So I've just pulled the whole thing out, and I've re-knitted it into a jumper, with a lace pattern.

The same participant explained how she was starting to see re-knitting as an extension to her knitting practice:

I think I've realised that knitting the garment is not the end of the journey. Whereas before, when you knitted something, you either wore it out, or got tired of it, gave it to charity. But it's no longer the end of the journey, it can always become something else. I may not think of that extended life at the time I'm knitting it, but it will always be in my mind when the time comes, either it's gone out of fashion, or I've got tired of it. There's another option there.

Another participant alluded to this anticipation of an extended life when discussing her re-knitting project, a much-loved cardigan for which she had knitted new sleeves. She recognised that the sleeves would last longer than the worn fabric of the body, and suggested that she might end up re-knitting the rest of the cardigan at some point.

In considering re-knitting as a 'craft of use', it is interesting to note that the participants had already been keeping garments with the vague intention of reworking them. For example, one participant described a worn-out jumper belonging to her son that she had kept for twenty years, always thinking she would 'do something with it'. In our conversation about disposing of clothes, another participant revealed that she keeps everything, just in case of reworking:

I've always got this mad idea that one day I'll be making loads of stuff. And you think well, keep it, because you know, why chuck it away, I might need that when I create something one day.

As I explained earlier, it is much more common to rework via sewing than knitting. While this project focused on 'pure' re-knitting projects, re-knitting elements could be integrated with sewing techniques, according to the preferences and requirements of the wearer and their garment.

Growing a re-knitting culture

There is definite scope for wider participation in re-knitting; there are estimated to be several million hand knitters in the UK (UK Hand Knitting Association 2009). From my experience, I believe that a significant minority – those who welcome more complex knitting challenges, and the opportunity to be more creative – would be interested in extending their practices to embrace this activity. One way in which a culture of re-knitting might develop is through word of mouth. I have had a positive reaction to the web resource from many knitters, including this email:

I just wanted to say how interesting I have found your PhD project. How liberating to think about personalising knitwear, both from new and also some beloved sweaters in the wardrobe that are showing signs of wear. Joy to realise that I can give them a new lease of life. I am grateful that you have been so generous in sharing these wonderful ideas; I am an 'inside the box' person and it has never occurred to me that I am 'allowed' to add to someone else's design. Copy it yes, but rework it, wow!

While some knitters might be encouraged to have a go at re-knitting from the materials that I have placed online, I feel that further support would be required to build wider participation, develop shared knowledge and build a community of practice. Re-knitting requires the knitter to engage in design; because each garment to be reworked is different, it would be impossible to write a conventional prescriptive knitting pattern, to be followed absolutely. My research showed that many knitters have a strong desire to feel more creative and to work without patterns, and are able to do so by drawing on their tacit knowledge. However, the research participants felt that without the support of the project, they would not have the confidence to experiment with design.

Well, that's been the thing about these workshops, and the space between them, is ... I'm getting permission by being here. To play around with things, and it's not wasteful to spend time doing things and pulling them back. It's a freedom that you have, but you don't know you've got.

In order to support a sustained re-knitting culture – involving design and creative experimentation – the space and permission provided by the project would have to take place on a larger scale. Gauntlett and Thomsen describe the four main characteristics of a culture which supports amateur creativity:

The creative mindset is supported when there are stimulating environments and resources (having), when there is a lot of inspirational activity and the engaging support of peers and mentors (doing), when there is an ethos which supports the passions of makers (being), and where there is a solid body of expertise and knowledge, and support for learning (knowing). (Gauntlett and Thomsen 2013: 7)

Knitting already enjoys a vibrant online culture, in which amateurs share their experiences and projects with like-minded peers. Thus, it would be logical to use the internet to create a larger-scale 'space' to support re-knitting. The re-knitting materials could be developed into a collaboratively produced online resource; this could include a gallery of diverse re-knitting projects and opportunities for peer-supported learning. The participants in my research recognised the value of sharing online in this way:

You get a sort of pool of knowledge, don't you, which seeps into everybody's consciousness, actually.

While an active online space would provide an opportunity to share re-knitting knowledge regardless of geographical boundaries, the research project has demonstrated the value of face-to-face activity in supporting amateur creativity. While specific skills could be passed on at one-off workshops, it was by meeting regularly that the participants gained the peer support that was crucial to their ability to design; our sessions provided the impetus for them to continue and complete their projects. They felt that without further support they might gradually revert to a more conventional approach. They identified my role as particularly important:

I think you're the catalyst for us to be creative.
And to voice what we think. I think without
you, we would retreat into ... we would do
what we know, and continue with that.

Hence, the question would be how I – or other
designers – could provide this sense of catalysis on
a larger scale. My feeling is that a blend of online
support and local (offline) groups would offer an ideal
model, enabling the community to share knowledge
and access inspirational activity, whilst benefiting
from real-world interaction.

Conclusion

My aim was to explore the possibility of transferring
amateur knitting practice from the making of new
items to the remaking of existing garments. The
result was positive; the knitters embraced the idea of
re-knitting and used the techniques to successfully
rework items from their own wardrobes. Discussions
about possible future projects showed that re-
knitting could become a regular activity, which links
a making practice with wardrobe (use) practices.
However, the project also indicated that amateur re-
knitting requires support in order to flourish.

To conclude, I would like to return to the suggestion
by Gill and Lopes (2011) that the challenge for
design is to negotiate with the things that already
surround us. The re-knitting project provides one
example of this negotiation in action. I see three key
principles emerging from this research which could
be transferred to other areas. Firstly, the need to be
sympathetic to the material structures of the already-
made, and to apply the in-depth knowledge we have
as makers to the task of remaking. Secondly, the
need to recognise the social and emotional aspects
of remaking; that is, to understand the factors that
affect what we perceive to be possible and desirable.
Finally, the need to develop a supportive culture
around remaking, in order to foster a sense of shared
practice and gradually build tacit knowledge in
individuals and communities.

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