



FINDING BALANCE IN SOFT CHOREOGRAPHIES

UNRAVELING STORIES
MEMORIES
AND CARE

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FINDING BALANCE IN SOFT CHOREOGRAPHIES:
UNRAVELING STORIES, MEMORIES, AND CARE

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Abstract

This research unfolds as an intimate journey and a hands-on practice engaging with textiles. It explores the dynamic shifts in personal and communal relationships to material culture. Grounded in both individual reflection and collaborative participation, the research investigates how textile-making processes serve as meaningful rituals of care, healing, and collective storytelling. Through autoethnographic experiences and participatory workshops, it emphasizes the significance of engaging with materials as active participants in our emotional and social landscapes, demonstrating how textiles become conduits for personal memory, identity exploration, and community-building.

At the same time, it acknowledges that working with textiles is not universally soothing or positive – moments of frustration or discomfort can surface alongside healing. Recognizing this complexity early on tempers an overly romantic view, reminding us that even caring creative practices involve challenges.

This approach gives room for a shared dance between the carefully choreographed and the improvised, between structure and the unplanned. Informed by the Chinese concept of Yin and Yang, this project highlights the transformative potential embedded in the intentional and reflective handling of textiles, advocating for a deeper sense of care toward our garments, ourselves, and each other. These insights gained offer valuable considerations for designers interested in exploring emotional connections, collaborative creativity, and reflective approaches to material engagement in their own practices.

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Glossary of Terms

Care

An attentive, empathetic engagement with materials, people, and processes. This thesis emphasizes the emotional and relational dimensions of working with textiles can nurture both individual well-being and communal bonds.

Trauma

Refers to the emotional or psychological wounds arising from a distressing event. In the context of this thesis, trauma specifically points to the car accident I experienced and how textile-related practices became a vehicle for emotional processing, offering a structured-yet-fluid space to work through pain or disruption.

Memory

Reworking or repurposing clothing often acts as a trigger for personal and collective memories, making the fabric itself a narrative tool that holds traces of past experiences.

Wardrobe Practices

Denotes the routines and rituals involved in selecting, maintaining, storing, or discarding clothes.

Yin-Yang

A Chinese philosophical concept emphasizing the interconnectedness of opposing forces—neither side is absolute, and each contains an aspect of the other. In this thesis, Yin-Yang frames how structured (orderly) and improvised (disordered) processes coexist within my textile-making.

Deconstruction (of Garments)

A physical act of dismantling a piece of clothing—removing seams, cutting fabric, or taking apart design elements. In this thesis, deconstruction invites new design possibilities while prompting reflection on material value and personal attachment.

The Emily Carr Soft Shop

The Soft Shop (C4220) is an interdisciplinary textile exploration space. The Soft Shop supports processes such as sewing, pattern making, digital and hand embroidery, weaving, leather working, knitting, crocheting and felting (Emily Carr University of Art + Design, n.d.).



CHAPTER ONE

Starting Points

I come to this research as a designer—not of fashion, but of spaces and experiences. My background is in interior design, but my curiosity has always extended beyond spatial boundaries into the textures, materials, and objects that surround us. While pursuing my master’s degree in interdisciplinary design, I made a conscious decision to shift my focus from interior spaces to textiles and materiality. This was not a sudden or accidental change but a continuation of the questions that had surfaced in my undergraduate years. For my bachelor’s degree, my capstone project was designing a birth and postpartum centre. I was drawn to the ways spaces, materials, and objects support and shape human experiences, particularly in moments of vulnerability and transformation. This work planted the seeds of my current research, where I explore the role of textiles, garments, and material culture in design practice.

As a user and consumer of clothing, I engage with textiles daily. I see textiles as an extension of interiority—both personal and spatial. My engagement with textiles began as a response to theoretical readings on women’s historical relationship with craft and making. Knitting, stitching, and working with materials became a way of processing knowledge, not just producing objects. Over time, these acts of making became increasingly personal, serving as a form of journaling—recording emotional states, memories, and embodied experiences.

My earlier undergraduate experiences reinforced my understanding that design extends beyond physical space to include the tactile and relational aspects of being human. Building on this insight, my master’s research led me to explore craft more deeply, particularly in relation to the histories of women and their work with cloth. Knitting, stitching, and weaving became both methods of inquiry and personal reflection. I became especially interested in how spaces, materials, and objects shape and support human experiences, particularly during moments of vulnerability and transformation. This exploration laid the foundation for my current research, which examines the role of textiles and material culture in design practice.

Then an accident altered my way of making. My earlier intuitive forms became structured, my organic gestures replaced with a need to contain, to systematize, to hold order where there had been none. I began inviting others into my process, a shift not born of mere academic curiosity but of longing—for community, for connection, for the reassurance that I was not, and did not have to be, alone. My participatory work was not only a method but also a reaching out, mirroring my own desire for support.

My participants, like myself, are all designers. Through a workshop, I invited them to reflect on their relationships with clothing by bringing garments they loved and those they were ready to discard. Clothing became an entry point into deeper conversations about identity, consumption, and personal design processes. I observed that sorting through textiles became a way of sorting through thoughts—designers, in particular, approached this act with intention, framing their choices through materiality, function, and sentiment.

I am aware that hacking into clothing has a legacy of work connected to activism and change within the Western fashion system (Fletcher, 2014). This research, however, is not about activism but about care—the role of care in design practice, in material choices, in how we engage with what surrounds us. As De La Bellacasa (2010) states, “caring is more about a transformative ethos than an ethical application”. Clothing is deeply tied to identity, yet in moments of reflection, we find that care, memory, and relationships often hold more significance than consumption. By focusing on garments as designed objects and integral participants in lived material culture, I seek to explore how designers make sense of their own work, their decisions, and ultimately, their own identities.

Osmosis

Growing up in China, the concept of Yin and Yang did not typically appear in textbooks, yet the symbol was woven into my daily life. My earliest memory of it was the round stool my grandfather used, emblazoned with the familiar swirl of black and white. I grew up living with my grandparents, and I remember passing clusters of older adults wearing clothes featuring the Yin-Yang pattern as they practiced tai chi in the mornings and afternoons—on my way to school and again when I returned. The motif was everywhere, so commonplace that I never questioned its meaning. To me, it was simply a pattern, something to tinker with when I colored the small white dot black on my grandfather’s stool while he played Chinese Chess with his neighbors.

Only now, in reflecting on the role of order and disorder in my design practice, do I see how deeply this symbol of balance was rooted in my environment. My childhood familiarity with Yin and Yang—unnoticed at the time—has shaped my present inquiry into how opposing forces can coexist and support creativity in both design and everyday life.

On Order and Disorder

The interplay between order and disorder offers a profound lens for understanding existence, creativity, and the human experience (He, 2014). This dynamic relationship, long discussed in philosophical systems such as the Chinese concept of Yin and Yang, is also reflected in the materiality of textiles. Textiles serve as both metaphor and practice, embodying the tensions and harmony between structure and chaos, predictability and unpredictability. Textile-making and manipulation, is a practical and therapeutic way of exploring how balance fosters creativity and recovery (Odabasi, 2022). Order and disorder are continuously interacting and transforming one another. Their relationship is not oppositional but dynamic, shaping natural and human processes alike.

Textiles, as an expressive medium, represent this relationship through their structured weaves and the disruptions caused by wear, use, and memory. The ancient Chinese philosophy of Yin and Yang provides a conceptual foundation for understanding the balance of order and disorder. These forces are not fixed but fluid, influencing and defining one another through their interaction. Order, akin to Yang, provides structure and stability, while disorder, aligned with Yin, introduces fluidity and unpredictability (Meng and Liu, 2023).

Order is represented by structure, regularity, and organization. In nature, this is evident in phenomena such as the cyclical change of seasons and the consistent movement of celestial bodies. In textiles, the act of weaving or stitching embodies this principle, with its predictable patterns and rhythms (Bristow, 2012). Bristow (2012) describes textiles as “silent witnesses,” preserving life’s organized rhythms through their tactile continuity. The structural nature of textiles reflects humanity’s attempt to impose order on a world that is inherently unpredictable.

Disorder, in contrast, is characterized by confusion, irregularity, and disorganization. In nature, it manifests in unpredictable events like natural disasters or the slow decay of organic materials. Textiles, too, bear the marks of disorder through stains, wear, and tears. These imperfections materialize the unpredictable aspects of life, emphasizing that disorder is an inevitable and meaningful part of existence (Hunt, 2014). Far from being purely negative, disorder introduces the potential for creativity and transformation. Odabasi (2022) explores how textiles hold the hidden potential to heal and reveal traumas, particularly through disruptions in their surface and form. These imperfections challenge existing patterns, allowing for innovation and progress.

Finding Balance

The relationship between order and disorder highlights their interdependence. Excessive order can lead to rigidity, while excessive disorder results in chaos. Textiles adapt through folding and fragmenting, illustrating the dynamic balance between structure and fluidity (Barnett , 2012). Similarly, Beesley (2012) describes reflexive textiles as a means of reconnecting with organic spontaneity, demonstrating how balance fosters creativity and renewal.

Textiles map the tensions between order and disorder, serving as a material representation of balance (Ingraham, 2010). This balance is also central in therapeutic applications, where fabric collage integrates fragmented cloth into cohesive narratives to address trauma (Homer, 2015). Stitching, too, becomes a reflective practice that mediates between structure and spontaneity, offering a tangible metaphor for navigating life’s uncertainties (Whitaker et al. 2024).

All of this perspective informs my study, while rooted in personal experience, my work also has broader implications. It suggests that textile-based practices can serve as a method of coping with trauma, offering a structured yet flexible space for individuals to process emotions. The balance between structured techniques and intuitive making allows for both control and surrender, which are essential elements of emotional and creative resilience.

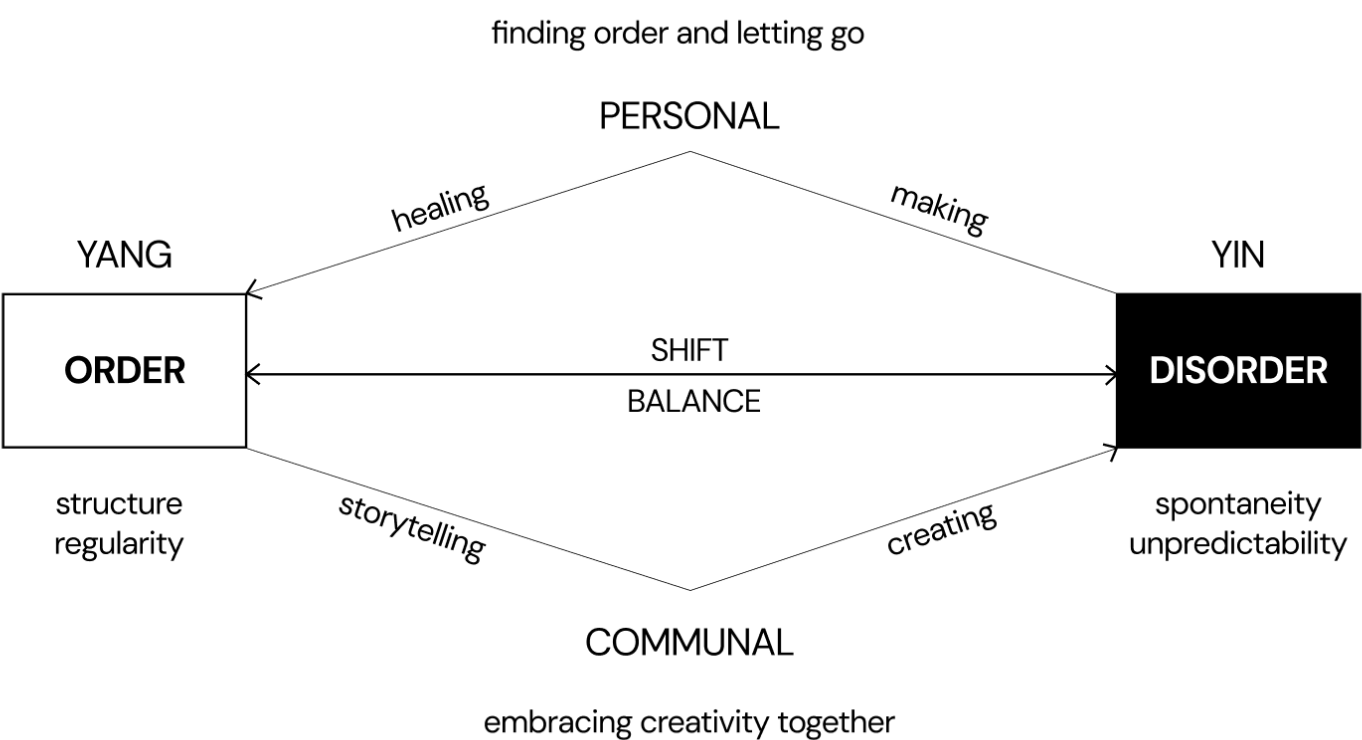


Fig.1 Yin and Yang Diagram

Rituals of Care

In this context, “*rituals*” refer to more than mere routines of garment maintenance. Each action—tearing a seam, hand-stitching a patch, even ironing fabric—takes on symbolic weight, opening up a reflective space where participants can pause and consider the deeper layers of meaning in their closets. These tactile encounters often trigger memories, resonating with individual identity, embodied experiences, and personal or intergenerational trauma. Yet, when these rituals unfold in a shared, participatory context, they also encourage communal empathy. Tending to a tear in a blouse, for instance, becomes a collective act of care: a small but potent reminder that both garments and emotional wounds can be stitched back together with the support of others.

Modern fashion’s emphasis on novelty and detachment discourages these exchanges. When clothing is treated as disposable, it loses its capacity to hold and communicate meaning. In response, acts of repurposing and reworking garments can be seen as small but profound gestures of resistance—ones that reassert clothing’s role as a vessel for personal history, intimacy, and shared experience.

Wardrobe practices are far more than practical tasks; they serve as expressive acts that reveal how people navigate personal identity, relationships, and emotional landscapes (Fletcher & Klepp, 2017; Woodward, 2007; Clark, 2008). The act of revisiting a garment—choosing to mend it, alter it, or preserve it—becomes a moment of self-recognition. It acknowledges the ways in which personal narratives are embedded in fabric, offering an opportunity to reinterpret and carry those narratives forward in new ways. By engaging in clothing care, from mending worn seams to reimagining out-of-fashion items, we shift from passive consumers and users to responsible caretakers of our garments (Gwilt, 2014).

By embracing care, advocating for meaningful shifts, and respecting our materials, we forge deeper connections among people and strengthen our collective design processes.

Experiences

and How They Shape Personal Creative Processes

Personal Experiences

The early stages of my research were rooted in an instinctive, unstructured approach to textile-making. Fabric served as a personal journal, a medium through which I could externalize emotional shifts without the constraints of formal composition. There was no predefined method—pieces were assembled freely, reflecting the fluidity of thought and feeling. Textiles, with their inherent tactility, became both a vessel and a witness, capturing traces of memory and sentiment in ways that written words could not.

However, the unexpected car accident disrupted my engagement with textiles, profoundly altering my relationship with materials. With the sudden instability in my life, I found myself gravitating toward structure and predictability in my practice. Textiles became a means of imposing order, a way to categorize and control what felt uncontrollable. My work shifted toward systematic documentation—creating archives, lists, and structured compositions from soft materials and clothing sourced from my own wardrobe. This need for organization was not purely aesthetic but psychological; by structuring my work, I found a way to restore a sense of stability.

A significant moment in this process was my struggle to coexist with the clothes I had worn during the accident. These garments remained physically intact and wearable, yet psychologically, they carried a weight that made them difficult to confront. Over nearly a year, I found myself resisting wearing them again, dealing with emotions that were difficult to articulate. The textiles became charged objects, both personal and symbolic, embodying the lingering trauma of the event.

This research, then, became a personal and deeply emotional journey—not only to make sense of personal trauma but also to explore broader implications for healing through textile-making. By engaging with these garments through structured creative processes, I attempted to reach a state of coexistence with my experience. This transition from disorder to order eventually evolved into an understanding of interconnected duality, wherein both chaos and structure could coexist within the creative process. This mirrors the principles of Yin and Yang, where opposing forces are not in conflict but in balance, each necessary for the existence of the other.

Textiles, particularly those marked by disruption, often reveal deeper narratives, serving as material witnesses to personal and collective experiences (Odabasi, 2022). The transition in my research process—from unstructured, expressive creation to methodical organization, and ultimately to an acceptance of both—illustrates how textiles mediate between order and disorder. This interconnected duality, informed by own cultural lineage and background is not merely an artistic choice but a reflection of how we navigate trauma, healing, and self-reconstruction through material engagement.



Fig.2 Journaling with Textiles.

Experiences with Others

Following the car accident, my approach to textiles shifted significantly. I was seeking shared experiences rather than solitary explorations, I became increasingly drawn to collaborative textile-making. The idea of a participatory workshop at this time, and potential disorderly responses and actions of participants, was initially daunting. I craved order and stability in the aftermath of trauma. Still, I remained interested in this method. Perhaps my shift toward collaboration stemmed from the contrast between my solitary accident experience and the subsequent longing for support and companionship in my recovery.

The act of making textiles collaboratively provides a meaningful framework for trauma recovery, offering a balance between structured techniques and opportunities for creative exploration. As Homer (2015) suggests, fabric collage serves as a metaphor for the healing process, wherein fragmented materials are reassembled into new, cohesive forms—mirroring the emotional journey of restoration. In this way, working with textiles can act as a physical manifestation of emotional resilience.

Whitaker et al. (2024) further describe stitching as a reflective and communal practice that fosters connection and endurance. In their study on textile-based art therapy, they highlight how stitching functions as a medium for both storytelling and resilience-building: “Art therapy in this context supports community-making and co-production, encouraging agency and resiliency through stitched stories of resistance.” This observation resonates with my own experiences in textile workshops, where participants not only engage in tactile creativity but also weave their emotions and personal histories into their work.

Collaboration in textile-making offers a space for individuals to share experiences, reframe personal narratives, and ultimately transform trauma into tangible expressions of recovery. The process of creating together fosters a sense of belonging and mutual support, enabling participants to externalize inner turmoil in a controlled yet expressive manner. As Hunt (2014) argues, textiles act as both personal and communal archives, bearing witness to stories of pain, healing, and renewal.

By integrating my own autoethnographic experiences with participatory research with others, I aimed to further investigate how collaborative textile-making serves as a bridge between individual trauma and collective healing. This approach not only acknowledges textiles as repositories of memory but also repositions them as active agents in the therapeutic process. Whether through stitching, weaving, or deconstructing fabric, the act of making together becomes a symbolic and literal means of reconstructing oneself.

This discussion emphasizes that by centering care, embracing transformation, and thoughtfully engaging with our repurposed materials, we nurture deeper connections among people and honor the personal and collective narratives woven into every garment.



Fig.3 Timeline of Life and Practice



CHAPTER TWO

Research Qusetions

Based on all of these perspectives and considerations discussed above and the focus on the interdependence of order and disorder in textile-making as a means of personal healing, creative expression, and communal care, this research highlights how structured techniques and intuitive making coexist to offer both control and surrender—essential elements of emotional resilience.

My work in research-creation considers how acts of deconstructing and reimagining garments function both as a personal ritual of care and healing, and as a communal practice that nurtures dialogue about care, identity, and the shared stories woven into material culture. These inquiries lead to the central research questions of this study:

1. How can the practice of intuitive textile/garment repurposing be understood as both a reflective personal ritual of self-expression and healing, and a communal act that encourages dialogue around needed relational shifts with material culture?
2. How do personal experiences, emotional connections to wardrobes, and embodied narratives influence expressive acts that cultivate individual initiative and mutual well-being?
3. How does the interplay of order and disorder (Yin and Yang) manifest in relation to work with textiles and cloth, and in what ways can balancing these forces inform creative processes and outcomes?

Methodologies

In framing the study, I drew on theories from material culture studies, design research, and psychology. Material culture theory informed my understanding of garments as carriers of meaning and memory (Hunt, C. ,2014). Concepts from sustainable design and fashion theory (such as Fletcher’s work on the “craft of use”) provided context for repurposing as a form of design activism rooted in care rather than consumption. Psychological and therapeutic literature on trauma and creativity (including the use of textiles in art therapy) shaped the inquiry into healing. These theoretical influences converge in viewing textile repurposing not merely as a practical activity, but as a symbolic act rich with cultural and emotional significance.

Autoethnography

Autoethnography invites an introspective examination of lived experiences as they intersect with wider social, cultural, and political contexts. As Adams, Ellis, and Holman Jones note, “Autoethnographers believe that personal experience is infused with political/cultural norms and expectations, and they engage in rigorous self-reflection—typically referred to as ‘reflexivity’—in order to identify and interrogate the intersections between the self and social life” (Adams et al., 2015). Working with this method has enabled me to bring forward my own background as a designer and my evolving relationship with textiles, thereby weaving personal narrative with cultural critique.

By merging my personal trauma with a communal, dialogic approach, I discovered that making together not only provided healing but also revealed how shared vulnerabilities can open pathways toward empathy and collective support.

Engaging with textiles daily, I recognize that garments are more than protective layers; they are sites where emotion, memory, and personal identity converge. This autoethnographic lens underscores how working with textiles is deeply intertwined with lived experience, emotional healing, and the human need for connection.

Participatory Methods

Participatory design emphasizes collaboration and shared decision-making, allowing participants to co-create meaning through their engagement with materials and processes (Kensing & Blomberg, 1998). This approach encourages dialogue and collective authorship, where individual experiences are interwoven into a broader creative exploration.

The process of making together created an environment of trust and mutual support, particularly as participants engaged in open-ended, tactile interactions with fabric. The workshop became sites of shared reflection, where personal histories, emotions, and creative expression converged. The act of co-creation, in turn, helped to reveal how material engagement can be both a deeply personal and socially connective experience.

Ethical considerations, including informed consent and the respectful representation of participant contributions, remained central to this methodology, ensuring that each participant's voice was acknowledged and valued. By collectively deconstructing and repurposing garments, my design participants contributed to a fluid collaborative storytelling process that revealed the communal value of materials often overlooked or discarded (Nagano, 2019).

Integration of Methods

Using a research-through-design or research-creation approach, I allowed the making process itself (both personal and communal) to generate knowledge. The autoethnographic and participatory strands were not separate silos; they informed each other in an iterative way (O'Connor, 2017).

This understanding and form of duality opens a space where individual introspection and community engagement can thrive side by side, illuminating repurposing as an act of creativity and care, both within our homes and within our shared material world. This approach reflects the principles of harmony and balance detailed in Yin-Yang philosophy, which underlines the transformative potential of integrating disparate methodologies to achieve a cohesive whole (Meng & Liu, 2023).

Insights from my personal practice shaped how I structured the workshop (for instance, realizing the importance of giving time for storytelling influenced me to include a group reflection circle). Conversely, things I learned from participants made me revisit my personal reflections. Throughout the research, a continuous dialogue between practice and theory occurred, directly informing the insights and outcomes discussed in detail immediately after the description of practices.



CHAPTER THREE

Practices

This section details the personal autoethnographic and participatory research practices that I undertook, which deployed acts of knitting, stitching, weaving, sorting, cutting, tearing, archiving, photographing, and observing (methods of inquiry) to explore the material, emotional, and conceptual dimensions of textile repurposing. These activities became a way for me to critically examine personal wardrobe habits and collective engagements with discarded clothing.

Autoethnographic Research

Journaling with Textiles

Early on in my masters studies, I started documenting my daily emotional landscape on my phone. The process of monitoring my fluctuating moods catalyzed a sense of well-being. This method of data visualization informed my later work and direction. An initial phase (in the first couple of weeks of my studies) involved the collection of textiles and tools, laying the groundwork for what I would later refer to as my “journal.” Utilizing these gathered resources, I was able to materialize my introspections into tangible expressions.



Fig.4 Journaling with Textiles.



Over several months, I created a series of experimental textile pieces as a form of journaling. Each piece was improvised from found cloth, threads, and found materials, allowing my mood and intuition to guide the process.

01

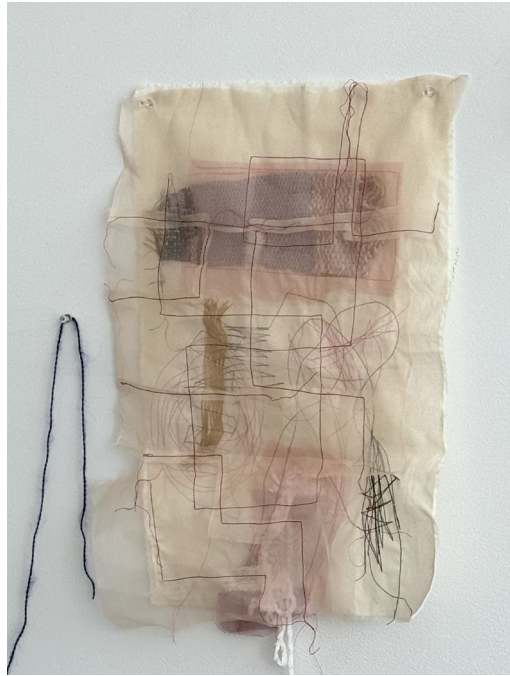


Fig. 5 Vulnerability and memories without words
Journaling with Textiles 1.

In February, 2024, I layered scraps of various fabrics found in the recycling bins in the Emily Carr Soft Shop. My stitching was deliberately uneven, sometimes tight and sometimes loose, mirroring the emotional ebb and flow I felt while working. This piece (Fig 5 above) served as a tactile diary entry: the fraying edges and overlapping translucent layers embodied feelings of vulnerability and the overlapping of memories that I could not easily put into words.

02



Fig. 6 Reaching For...
Journaling with Textiles 2.

Some days, words fail me, so I reach for yarn. The act of selecting yarn became a quiet self-check-in: What do I need to feel right now? What weight of fiber will hold me steady? I turned them into a yarn swatch, but I felt too insecure about it that I had to cover it with a translucent fabric (Fig 6 above).

03

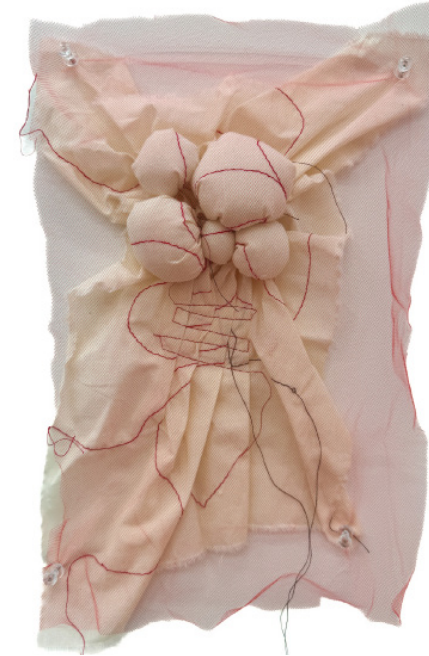


Fig. 7 Comfort and protective moves
Journaling with Textiles 3.

I chose to use only the color red that day. I stitched small pockets of fabric and filled them with cotton, making tiny, graspable cushions. At first, I thought they were just for comfort—something to press into my palms, to squeeze when I felt untethered. But then I thought though I will cover it in a red tulle so that people would not touch it (Fig 7 above).

04



Fig. 8 Unpredictability and slowing down
Journaling with Textiles 4.

The soft hues of plant-dyed fabric hold a kind of patience within them. I turned to natural dyeing at a time when I was trying to be more intentional, trying to care for myself from the inside out. Boiling onion skins, steeping avocado pits, watching the fabric absorb and transform—it all felt like a ritual, a practice in slowing down. The colors weren't predictable, just as my own progress wasn't linear (Fig 8 above).

Autoethnographic Research

Garments in My Wardrobe

My wardrobe/closet is filled with garments that I have collected over time. They are remnants of past choices, physical records of evolving habits, and reflections of attachment, utility, and transformation. Each piece carried traces of its history—some well-worn, softened through repeated use, others barely touched, suspended in an unresolved state between keeping and discarding. In June, 2024, aware of these connections with clothing and seek to deepen my understanding of emotional connections to clothing, personal decision-making in consumption and disposal, and the transformation of garments as a creative and reflexive practice I began to observe and document the things I have.

There were old socks with playful patterns, worn thin yet difficult to part with, their fibers stretched, their form no longer intact. A wool cardigan that once provided warmth but, after an accidental wash, had shrunk beyond wearability—its fibers tightening, transforming against my will. A bathrobe, always slightly too small, yet worn daily for years, the cotton stiffened by time, its presence habitual despite its impracticality. A high school T-shirt that, against expectation, still fit—not just physically but as a persistent fragment of an earlier self. A pair of overalls, an impulse purchase that became a staple, its color unexpectedly rich, its presence spanning multiple destinations, seamlessly integrating into different phases of my life...and many more that shaped by my decisions, bodily interactions, and environmental conditions.

Together, these items varied in texture, style, age, color, scent, and care—some frequently washed, others barely used, their fibers still crisp. They ranged in price, from carefully considered investments to thoughtless acquisitions that found unexpected longevity. Yet, what unified them was their place in the liminal space between function and sentimentality—garments too precious to discard yet no longer active in my daily wardrobe.



Fig.9 Clothing Described Above.



Fig.10 Washing Tags of A Variety of Clothes.

I wondered what it would take to let go, to navigate the tension between preservation and transformation. I initiated a method of documentation that served as both a farewell and an archival practice. In doing so, I drew upon established wardrobe research methods, particularly those outlined in *Opening Up the Wardrobe: A Methods Book* by Fletcher and Klepp (2017). This collection of wardrobe studies methodologies provided a framework for examining the material, emotional, and social relationships embedded in clothing.

I took on a methodical process, first removing the items from my wardrobe, laying each garment out and, photographing them in detail and then systematically cut a small rectangle swatch (around 3x5”) from each garment. As I did this, I noticed the washing tags, the stitching along the seams, the textures that had softened over time, and the areas where fabric had thinned due to repeated wear. My act of documentation and the removal of a fabric from each of my garments reduced them to fragments, all the while preserving their essence in a tangible way. My swatches became artifacts, physical markers of past interactions with fabric, bridging the space between material continuity and material rupture.

Along with this, I also generated a set of guiding questions for myself to critically assess my engagement with clothing:

- *How long did you acquire it? How long have you have it?*
- *Why did you choose to discard it?*
- *Did you regret throwing it away when cutting it? Why?*
- *What is the fabric made out of?*
- *Would you buy something similar in the future?*

05



Fig.11a

06

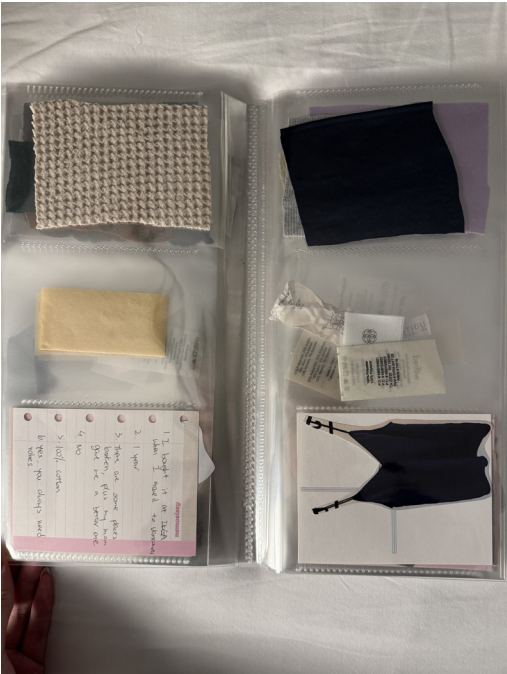


Fig.11b

07



Fig.11c

08

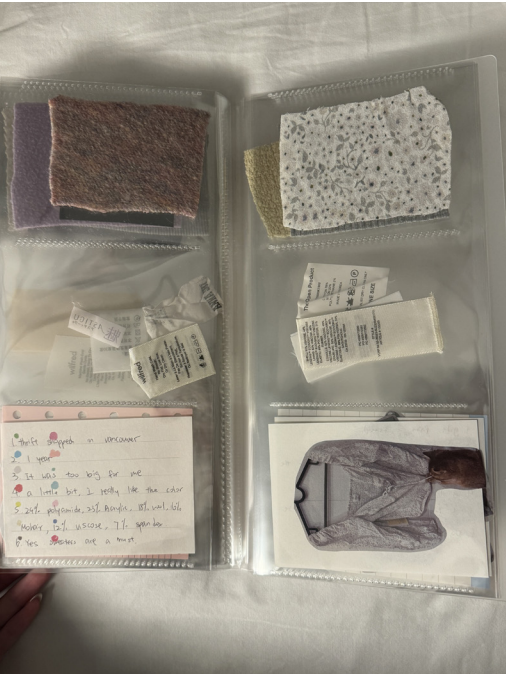


Fig.11d

Fig.11a-11d Archive of Clothing Fragments.

These questions reinforced a tension between order and disorder. The structured act of documentation imposed stability—an attempt to categorize, to control. Yet, the physical act of cutting introduced instability—disrupting the garment’s integrity, acknowledging its impermanence. No matter how hard I tried to detach myself (through my acts of categorization and cutting) material pushed back and reminded me of experiences together.

Through these practices, I have come to understand materiality not as a static quality but as a living, responsive entity. Materials hold memory, embody emotion, and participate in an ongoing dialogue between preservation and reinvention. Some garments had resisted change, persisting through time and wear. Others transformed—shrinking, fading, unraveling—revealing instability. Their textile structures mirrored the balance of creation and dissolution, the negotiation between preservation and loss.

I paid attention to the reasons why certain garments were selected to this archive rather than maintained within my daily wardrobe. The process highlighted the emotional weight of disposal, ranging from guilt associated with wastefulness to relief in letting go of items that no longer served a functional or emotional purpose. The difficulty of physically altering personal garments also underscored the significance of embodied experiences in textile transformation. Every transformation we undertake, grounded in care and attuned to our materials, reflects our commitment to the well-being of the people and communities we serve.

Auto-ethnographic Insights

Documenting and Letting Go

The clearest outcomes of the autoethnographic portion was understanding how the process of documenting and letting go of clothing can transform one’s relationship to personal possessions. By recording details and stories of my garments and then physically altering them, I engaged in a practice of material storytelling that eased the emotional tension of disposal. It became evident that sentimentality and the need for order both influenced how long garments stayed in my life. Items with strong emotional attachments remained tucked away (orderly in storage yet functionally forgotten), creating a kind of stasis. The act of consciously deciding each item’s fate, and carrying out a transformation, broke that stasis and replaced it with a sense of agency and clarity.

One of the most important insights for myself was that order and disorder both have healing roles. Subsequent to cataloging tags, I moved toward a more introspective lens, posing questions to myself (see page 33 above). This self-reflective process revealed that for many of my garments longevity in my closet was dictated by sentimental value or perceived usefulness. Even when I no longer wore these pieces I kept them with me.

Imposing order through archiving gave me a sense of control and acknowledgment of each item’s value. Embracing disorder through deconstruction allowed me to confront change and impermanence. Gardner and Pearson’s statement that “fashion is intimate and personal, yet at its core it is a shared and public phenomenon” was reflected in this process as well: my intimate handling of clothes connected to broader cultural patterns.

I noticed, for example, that many pieces I let go were fast-fashion items I had bought on impulse. This resonates with critiques of consumer culture — things acquired without personal resonance are easiest to discard and often accumulate in excess. By contrast, things imbued with narrative are harder to part with. However, I also learned that we can intentionally infuse narrative into things we make from discards, thereby re-valuing them.

Another outcome concerns trauma and creative practice: Working through the trauma of my accident via textile practice led to tangible shifts in my making style (from chaotic to ordered, and then balanced). This personal evolution supports theories that creativity can serve as a coping mechanism, externalizing chaos into a form where it can be examined and reworked. It's an autoethnographic confirmation of the idea that making is a mode of healing. As I transformed cloth, I was also, in a small way, transforming myself — regaining confidence, processing fear, and reclaiming authorship of my story.

One unexpected personal insight was the joy of resourcefulness I developed. Initially motivated by emotional reasons, I found practical delight in using every part of a garment. After cutting those standardized swatches for my archive, I had lots of offcuts, which I sorted and kept. I donated them to my participatory workshop and let people alter them again. This gave me a chance to emotionally participate in that workshop as well. Giving them to other people and let them do the decision seemed to be the right choice. These clothing items that I had been holding onto carried new potential—once I recognized and confronted the personal stories tied to them I was ready to move them onward - to be repurposed - to take on new roles and possibilities (Fletcher & Klepp, 2017).

This progression makes visible how the intimate work of cataloguing and disassembling my own clothes can evolve into a communal methodology once peers are invited to handle, question, and transform garments together.

Participatory Research

Re- Constructing The Closet

An earlier experience: Group Creation Without Predefined Instructions

After my car accident, I found myself looking forward to the quiet comfort of shared moments. I began inviting friends over more often, searching for that sense of togetherness I'd read about in the Chilean arpilleras workshops of the 1970s, where women stitched their hopes and protests into cloth to cope with and protest political violence; contemporary “craftivist” circles where people come together to make handmade items as a form of gentle activism or support (as documented in Betsy Greer's 2014 work on Craftivism).

One evening, rather than our usual board games, I suggested we try something different: everyone should bring a piece of fabric from home. They arrived with arms full of colored cloth, gently worn scarves, old yarn, and half-forgotten remnants tucked away in closets. We placed these assorted textiles in a bright heap across my living-room table, its surface dappled with lamplight.



Fig.12 Table Setup.

My friends started by tentatively picking up pieces of silk, cotton, or wool. They held the fabrics to the light, folded and twisted them, and tested their pliability. I realized that this phase of tactile exploration served as a kind of ritual initiation—an opportunity to become intimately acquainted with the materials on both a physical and emotional level.

One person arranged layers of transparent fabric over opaque pieces, observing how light interacted with color. Another casually twisted a scrap of cotton into a makeshift flower, prompting a small ripple of shared amusement. Conversations started to flow more readily, punctuated by inquisitive comments and occasional laughter. This spontaneous dialogue highlighted the role of tactile engagement not just in individual creativity but also in building a sense of community. The intimacy of working with one's hands on something soft and tangible seems to invite a parallel softness in conversation, a vulnerability that is buffered by the activity.

As we continued, some of my friends lined up pieces meticulously, striving for a certain symmetry, while others let the edges fray, embracing the imperfect shapes that emerged. This unplanned artistry reminded me of de Castro's (2021) argument that textiles serve as powerful vessels of memory, conjuring personal histories the moment we touch them.

Many recalled memories linked to the textiles they brought, underscoring how deeply embedded these materials are in personal histories and futures. Tulle was associated with childhood ballet lessons, white silk was connected to visions of a future wedding, the texture of coarse wool recalled a scarf knitted by a grandmother. I have come to realize that the patterns of approach reflected the central theoretical framework my research: textiles act as both tangible objects and metaphors for social and emotional complexity.

By the end of our time together my once-tidy table was scattered with piles of fabric scraps, loose threads, and partly finished pieces. Yet within this apparent chaos lay a cohesive narrative of shared discovery. We had engaged not only with the tactile properties of cloth but also with one another's stories, reflections, and techniques. As Pamela Whitaker and her colleagues (2024) suggest in their exploration of Chilean women's textile collectives, these acts of making transcend mere production; they serve as a means of weaving together interpersonal bonds, collective histories, and emotional landscapes.

No one left with a "finished" piece that night. Yet we all walked away with something arguably more valuable: a sense that in the simple act of touching, folding, and talking about fabric, we had discovered new facets of each other's stories—and perhaps of our own.



Fig.13a

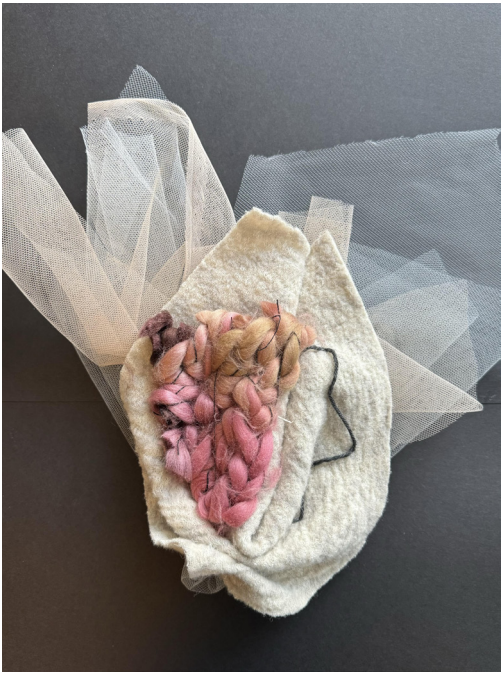


Fig.13b



Fig.13c



Fig.13d



Fig.13f

A Formal Participatory Workshop

Re-Constructing the Closet

Workshop Setup

I arranged the classroom tables into one large rectangle (a conference-style layout) so that all participants could face each other. Participants, who had been asked to bring a garment they were willing to let go of, placed their chosen garment near their workshop workspace. Starting this way afforded the opportunity for all involved to easily observe and hear about the clothing that had been brought in. In the center of each of the workshop’s tables, I set up commonly used tools—scissors, seam rippers, rotary cutters, needles, thread, and a secondary pile of donated garments for those who wanted extra pieces to experiment with. This arrangement encouraged both self-guided exploration and spontaneous collaboration.

Workshop Documentation Process

The workshop ran for ninety minutes. I placed my phone as a digital recorder at the end of the table to capture every spoken exchange, from off-hand banter to moments of focused reflection. A fellow designer acted as an photographer, moving quietly around the perimeter and shooting a continuous sequence of stills that traced both people and garments as they shifted, opened, and fragmented. After the session I produced a full, time-coded transcript from the audio, then colour-tagged each speaker and cross-referenced their comments with the corresponding photographs. Finally, I curated a selection of the most revealing dialogues—those that illuminated attachment, hesitation, or sudden insight—and wove these excerpts into the thesis to serve as evidence of how participants negotiated care through deliberate unmaking.



Fig.14 Workshop Table Setup.

The mix of people for this workshop included designers who I had worked with before as well as additional interested participants. The first group, who had worked with me previously, tended to engage with the materials more quickly, cutting and removing seams with noticeable confidence. By contrast, newcomers showed more deliberation, stopping to study garment labels or gently pinch the fabric to feel the texture. The low hum of conversation commenced almost immediately: participants inquired about each other's garment choices and exchanged first impressions of the environment. Subtle scents—aged laundry detergent, faint perfume, musty cloth—mixed with tiny pieces of fibers, serving as constant reminders of the tactile and intimate nature of working with used clothing.

Early in the session, I posed a series of questions to guide participants' reflections:

“Why did you select this particular garment to bring?”

One participant explained that they chose an oversized sweatshirt that was “too new to toss but too small to wear,” stating, “I was never sure what to do with it, so it just sat in the back of my closet” (Q. Chen, Re-Construting the Closet Workshop, November 22, 2024).

“Has this garment been altered or cared for before?”

Several participants discovered old stitching or label marks suggesting that the piece might have been repaired or altered previously.

“What is your level of comfort in deconstructing this garment?”

Responses ranged from “I'm really excited—ripping fabric feels satisfying,” (Y. Zhou, Re-Construting the Closet Workshop, November 22, 2024) to “I'm worried about ‘ruining’ it and then feeling guilty later.” (J. Dumrath, Re-Construting the Closet Workshop, November 22, 2024).

A few expressed relief that the workshop provided “permission” to finally do something

Early observations revealed participants oscillating between impulses to salvage design details and urges to tear fabric apart. This push-and-pull exposed the central tension between mending and deconstruction: some saw careful unpicking as a way to “honour” the garment, while others argued that cutting was itself an act of respect because it prevented the piece from stagnating in a closet or landfill. Their dialogue demonstrated that unmaking can become a form of care when it consciously acknowledges a garment's past while creating space for a future re-use.

Collective Experimentation



Fig.15 Participants Selecting Garments From the Pile.

Almost immediately, small collaborative groups emerged. One team formed around a tailored black jacket with a pink lining inside, strategizing on how best to preserve specific design features during deconstruction. Another participant demonstrated the technique of cutting along a shirt's grain line, explaining to a neighbor why aligning to the warp and weft reduces fraying. These spontaneous interactions exemplified the workshop's communal ethos (Gardner & Pearson, 2023), where informal knowledge sharing became a central dynamic.

Creative solutions often appear from chance encounters: one participant converted a scrap sleeve and loose threads into a fabric bouquet, while another carefully repurposed an elasticated sleeve for a pet garment. The atmosphere provided an energetic exchange of experimentation woven with purposeful "ordered" decisions—reflecting the thesis's conceptual framework of balancing order and disorder.

As participants progressed, I circulated the room and asked a direct question to spark reflection:

"What emotions surfaced when you started cutting or seam-ripping?"

One participant said, "I don't feel bad because it's not mine," (R. Zhong, Re-Construting the Closet Workshop, November 22, 2024) since they chose something from the donated pile. They admitted, however, that they might hesitate if it was a personal garment from their own closet.

Another participant confessed: "I still feel a little guilty. It's like I'm destroying something that might have a story," (Y. Liu, Re-Construting the Closet Workshop, November 22, 2024) but also acknowledged a sense of relief when the first cut was finally made.

As participants continued, their collective confidence grew. Some elected to tear seams by hand for a raw aesthetic, while others used seam rippers to preserve fragile threads. Piles of offcuts found new life as fashion mockups, small accessories, or purely imaginative assemblages. In line with Barnett's (2012) argument that cloth embodies fluidity and transformation, the very process of rearranging scraps inspired fresh ways of perceiving textile potential. By the workshop's end, most participants were thoroughly immersed in both the physical dismantling of garments and the emotional introspection it provoked.

09



Fig.16 Cutting.

10



Fig.17 Embodied Making.

11



Fig.18 Ripping.

12

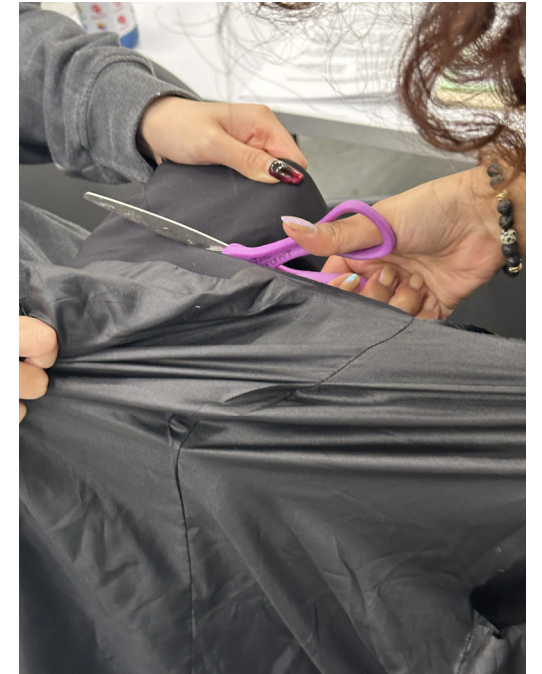


Fig.19 Collaborative Deconstruction.

A brief group conversation captured immediate reactions by the end of the workshop. Participants described surprise at the intricate constructions underlying ordinary garments and the challenge of viewing once-functional items as raw materials. This reflective exchange illuminated new insights into the “order” of garment assembly and the “disorder” introduced by purposeful deconstruction. Simultaneously, participants’ individual emotional journeys reinforced how personal wardrobes carry layered narratives. One participant mentioned the ease for her to deconstruct garments. She explained that in her home country, old garments will be cut into strips and transformed to floor mops instead of thrown away. (D. Nagi, Re-Constructing the Closet Workshop, November 22, 2024) Modern consumer culture, however, often encourages rapid acquisition and disposal rather than long-term garment longevity.

In Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World* (1932), a futurist critique of consumer society, this tendency is captured in the hypnopaedic mantra: “Ending is better than mending.” In the novel, citizens are taught to continually throw away the old and embrace the new rather than repair what they have. Huxley’s satirical vision of preferring perpetual novelty over repair resonates with our 21st-century fast-fashion reality. Ending is better than mending has, in effect, become a widespread mindset: rapid turnover of styles and planned obsolescence dominate mainstream fashion, exacerbating environmental damage and weakening personal attachments to garments. Indeed, we see that Huxley’s “prediction” holds true in many respects. Society today often values the new and cheap over the old and well-cared-for, discouraging personal investment in objects and even in the practices of care and repair.

By the end, participants reported a broadened definition of care—one that incorporated emotional histories, tactile engagement, communal skill-building, and the often overlooked potential hidden within a seemingly “useless” piece of clothing. These reflections underscored the workshop’s core premise: when individuals feel invited to examine why they hold onto certain items and how they approach the process of transformation, they often discover new forms of connection, empathy, and creativity.



Fig.20 Mock Up Fashion.



Fig.21 Wine Covering/ Pet Costume.



Fig.22 Fabric Scraps Bouquet.

Participatory Insights

Creativity, Community, and Balance

The participatory research confirmed and expanded many of the personal findings, showing how they play out in a group context. A primary insight is that textile repurposing can facilitate community-building and shared empathy. The collaborative environment enabled a cross-pollination of ideas (people borrowed techniques and materials from each other freely) and an emotional support system (they encouraged each other through challenges like hesitation to cut). This demonstrates the potential of participatory making as a tool for social cohesion. It aligns with literature on communities of practice and also with the historical role of sewing circles as social support networks.

The workshop illustrated that introducing disorder (through breaking garments) in a supportive setting leads to creativity and not chaos. Initially, one might worry that giving people scissors and freedom could result in a mess or frustration. Instead, the opposite happened: participants felt liberated to try unconventional things (like combining pieces from different garments) because the environment was permissive and even celebratory of experimentation. Here, garments became prototypes for new designs with no fear of judgment. This yielded some ingenious outcomes none of us could have planned: a bouquet made out of fabrics, a pet costume that could serve as a wine covering as well, a complete set of outfit that turned the classroom into a runway... These outcomes speak to the vast untapped potential in discarded clothing, unlocked simply by a shift in mindset facilitated by group energy.

The balance between structure and spontaneity was negotiated in real-time, often through dialogue—when someone was stuck, another might offer a structured approach. Conversely, if someone was overthinking, a peer might encourage, “just cut it and see what happens.” The peer-to-peer interaction therefore helped participants balance their approach, embodying a dynamic yin-yang exchange of creative energies.

The communal act clearly encouraged dialogue around material culture. We saw conversations about fast fashion, personal memories, cultural practices of reuse, and the meaning of caring for clothes. These dialogues were sparked directly by the making process. For example, encountering the insides of clothes led to talk about quality and consumer habits. Sharing why a garment mattered led to talk about identity and memory. Thus, textile repurposing in a group setting was both a catalyst for and medium of discourse—essentially an experiential way of doing research on material culture with the participants, not just on them.

Finally, an insight into design practice and education: All participants were designers in some capacity, but not all had worked with textiles. Many commented on how the workshop opened their eyes to new techniques and perspectives they could integrate into their own practice. This points to a transferable outcome: the method of a repurposing workshop can be a pedagogical tool to instill sustainability and creativity in design students/professionals.

In summary, the participatory component of the research demonstrated that the practice of textile repurposing is both a personal ritual and a collective narrative, validating the dual nature posed in the first research question. It highlights well-being and agency in individuals (through self-expression and skill-building) and simultaneously builds community and dialogue (through shared activity and storytelling). The interplay of order and disorder was found to be not only a theoretical concept but a lived experience in the workshop—one that participants learned to navigate and even appreciate. These outcomes underscore the value of combining autoethnographic and participatory approaches: personal depth and collective breadth lead to a rich, holistic understanding of the phenomenon.

Conclusion

This thesis set out to examine how working with textiles—through acts of deconstruction, repurposing, and collaborative workshops—can nurture both individual healing and communal connection. At its core is the dynamics of order and disorder: the notion that creativity flourishes when structure and spontaneity coexist, and that even our most familiar materials (like old clothing) can become meaningful vessels for care, memory, and shared storytelling. By drawing on autoethnographic experiences as well as participatory engagements, the research has illuminated how personal rituals of making intersect with broader conversations about identity, trauma, and our collective relationships with material culture.

The work navigates a paradox: it treats acts of breaking or deconstructing cloth as acts of care. Traditionally, “caring for” garments implies gentle preservation or mending, whereas here I often carefully tore and reassembled them. This tension between mending and destruction is intentional. By ripping apart old garments in an attentive way, I was able to salvage their essence – understanding their construction, preserving small fragments – and then reimagine them anew. In this sense, the very act of deconstruction became a form of creative care, a necessary disruption that allowed new stories and uses to emerge from the cloth.

This blending of personal reflection with social engagement has also changed how I now make art. Once I started working full time, my approach to creative practice began to lean more toward structure, organization, and—ironically—an openness to letting others help. Developing the detailed archive of my garments and facilitating workshop sessions came about not just from a desire to deepen my design research but also from newly learned habits of seeking help and inviting collaboration. I learned the relief that comes when you can turn to a group and say, “Do whatever you want with these scraps and tools,” and then step back to watch profound and unpredictable expressions unfold. Witnessing how participants wove their own stories into my materials confirmed that textiles can be an intimate canvas for sharing hopes, hurts, and new beginnings.

In terms of scholarly rigor, this research sits at the crossroads of design theory, sustainability discourse, and creative practice. It extends existing literature that frames craft, garment care, and DIY interventions as vital to generating ecological awareness and personal agency. At the same time, it bridges those frameworks with a human-centered perspective—one that highlights the deeply emotional underpinnings of why we keep, remake, or share our clothes. My experiences in interior design became an unplanned supplement to the academic dimensions of this thesis, demonstrating that even when life takes us temporarily “off course,” those side roads can offer knowledge, resilience, and fresh energy to the research at hand.

To be sure, there are limitations to what has been explored here. The scale was small, and the workshops primarily involved design peers. Future research might consider more diverse groups and longer timelines to see if the therapeutic and communal possibilities of textile repurposing endure. Additionally, deeper investigations into how professional environments intersect with personal craft practices—much like my experience balancing design office work and textile-making—could reveal new ways to integrate creativity and care into multiple facets of everyday life.

In conclusion, *Finding Balance in Soft Choreographies: Unraveling Stories, Memory, and Care* underscores that the gentle tearing of cloth, the reassembling of fragments, and the sharing of these acts in community can all serve as conduits for healing and renewal. Working with textiles, particularly in the wake of disruption—be it a personal accident or any other upheaval—provides a tactile language for piecing ourselves back together.

Simultaneously, the collaborative dimension reminds us that we do not need to navigate these transformations alone. By inviting others into our circles of making, we weave our stories into communal tapestries of resilience and care. And in so doing, we discover that the practice of design—whether interior spaces or soft choreographies of cloth—is ultimately about embracing change, providing connection, and crafting spaces where new narratives of hope and possibility can unfold.

Note: The participant-based research described in this thesis document has received official Research Ethics Approval from the Emily Carr University Research Ethics Board.

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The balance between structured techniques and intuitive making allows for both control and surrender, which are essential elements of emotional and creative resilience.

2025, Vancouver

Yahan Xing

Emily Carr University of Art + Design, 2025