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## OF CLOTHES AND CLAY: CONVERSATIONS ABOUT INTERDISCIPLINARY RESEARCH TRANSLATIONS

*Kat Jungnickel and  
Kirsty Badenoch*

### ABSTRACT

This article is about stories embedded in clothes and clay. We explore patented historic clothing and reclaimed earth bowls as sites of alternative stories, research methods and knowledge. At first glance they appear to have little in common. Yet, they are intimate and mundane artefacts that contain things — bodies and food. They retain their own uses, and hold more, such as stories about lived pasts and imagined futures. Both are central to our research in sociology, art and landscape. We discuss how these ordinary artefacts become extra-ordinary translations in our interdisciplinary creative practice, helping us understand and respond to larger socio-political issues around gender equality, private/public space, citizenship and climate crisis. Critically, we argue that (re)makings of clothing and clay and their translations are containers (of knowledge) and not mere artefacts (of representation).

This article is about stories embedded in clothes and clay. At first glance clothes and clay might appear to have little in common. Yet they are central to our research in sociology, art, and landscape. Through their ability to both be themselves and contain other things — bodies, food, ideas — these ordinary artefacts become extraordinary translations in our interdisciplinary creative practice. Drawing on the work of Ursula Le Guin, we reflect on them as intimate and mundane, ‘containers’ for stories of lived pasts and imagined futures.<sup>1</sup> We are also inspired by Sara Ahmed’s writings on the ‘queer use’ of objects and spaces that opens up the potential of things beyond that of their original intended design or function.<sup>2</sup> Together they help us to articulate how our practices respond to larger sociopolitical issues around gender equality, private/public space, citizenship, and climate crisis.

Kirsty is an artist, architect, educator, researcher, and curator. Kat is a professor in Goldsmiths’ sociology department at the University of London. We first met in 2022 at an event curated by Liam Healy and Luis Hernan at the University of Sheffield. The ‘Creative Enquiry Forum’ was a hybrid symposium and we both presented online. Kirsty led a journey through her interdisciplinary project *Stockpile Garden* and the fertile cracks between academia, making, practice, and site.<sup>3</sup> Kat shared ongoing work from her European Research Council-funded *Politics of Patents* project (POP for short) which examines inventive clothing as acts of resistance to conventional understandings

around gender, social norms, and public space.<sup>4</sup> Even in this brief digital event, we noted our similar investigations with translation, scale, materiality, and mess.

Liam and Luis invited us to reflect further on the intersections in our work. The following conversation, ethnographic notes, and images emerged from sessions where we met to explore, embody, and discuss similarities, differences, and overlaps in each other’s work. We arranged studio visits to see, touch, talk, and get up close to and (as is the case with our practices) *into* each other’s research. In the spirit of the theme of translations, the structure of the article is an experiment in the materiality, embodiment, and dimensionality of practice research.

<sup>1</sup> Ursula K. Le Guin, *The Carrier Bag of Fiction* (Cosmogenesis, 2024).

<sup>2</sup> Sara Ahmed, *What’s the Use? On the uses of use* (Duke University Press, 2019).

<sup>3</sup> ‘Stockpile Garden’, Kirsty Badenoch, n.d. <<https://www.kirstybadenoch.com/#/stockpile-garden/>> .

<sup>4</sup> ‘Researching, Reconstructing & Reimagining 200 years of Clothing Patents’, Politics of Patents, n.d. <<https://www.politicsofpatents.org/>> .

*The following pages set out two conversations between Kat and Kirsty running in parallel on the left and right pages. We invite the reader to meander back-and-forth between the works and words.*

*Kirsty arrives at my research studio at Goldsmiths. She managed to avoid the rain so she is dry but dressed in many layers to ward off the late winter weather. As she peels off jackets, waterproof trousers, gloves, and scarves, I lay out a collection of historic reconstructions of women's sportswear. Nothing is as it seems on the outside — they are all convertible, reversible, multiple, and invisible in some way. All were designed to enable wearers to do more than what might have been allowed or encouraged at the time. This means they don't make a lot of sense away from the body — they need hips, hands, arms, and legs to transform, to reveal themselves, to operate. Kirsty has come prepared to get into my research. I intend to dress her in three convertible inventions: a 1909 Mountaineering Skirt/Cape; a 1918 Sporting Skirt/Jodhpurs; and a 1937 Aviatrix Skirt/Jumpsuit.*

*Kat perches herself atop the sandbags I pile up for her in my little Hackney exhibition space. I feel a brief pang of guilt for not having warned her that this isn't exactly an immaculate gallery but she seems at home amongst the piles of dirt, broken casts, and pinned up photos. It's lunchtime. I invite her to choose a soup bowl amongst the ceramics laid out on the rusty table. She cups the rough form in her hands and I ladle hot vegetable soup into it. An earthy island within the asphalt streets of Dalston, everything in this room has been reclaimed from a construction site in Barking and everything is in construction. The bowls are made from site-reclaimed clay, cast in rammed earth. The table has been buried underground for a month. The sandbags have been heaved across the site a hundred times already. A film above us flickers long still shots of the construction site, reminding everything of where it came from. We cross our legs, raise our bowls, and tuck in.*

KAT: It's so nice to see these research objects back in three dimensions again. I've been looking at them on paper a lot lately, in their patent form, as I write about my practice. But to put you *in them* — another person with another body with a different response — helps to expand my thinking. These are clothes after all, not just ideas. They were designed to be worn, inhabited, and moved in. And they're convertible. They're not just one thing. They shift and change which is always a source of delight and inspiration for me but it's also challenging. How to share these kinds of dynamic objects that take multiple forms and are also in between forms?

How did you feel in them?



Fig. 1. Part way through the transformation of a 1937 skirt into a pilot's jumpsuit.

KAT: My first question relates to the shape of the bowls. How come they are all so different?

KIRSTY: The shapes are based on a typical ramen bowl with the traditional size and proportions. The idea was to take something quintessential, something set by cultural tradition, that we're used to seeing as perfect and refined, and then start to challenge or interrupt it through material agency. So with each casting the soil starts to crumble away, and this very clean perfect form that you used to understand as one thing starts to get disrupted and sort of deform itself into something quite different.

KAT: There are interesting similarities in that I'm not trying to make the perfect historic replica in my practice but rather to learn from the technologies built into these artefacts, to understand how they're made, and reflect on why someone would have invented it. We learn something every time we make something. I've written before about how we 'make things to make sense of things'.<sup>5</sup> And when we make our patterns (from the patents) available to people, we invite others to translate them again. Because we're not saying this is the only way to understand this historic data, this is only one version of it. We're not asking people to try to replicate what we're doing. Many versions are possible. And I can see this in your work on the table.

<sup>5</sup> Kat Jungnickel, 'Making Things to Make Sense of Things: DIY as Research and Practice', in *The Routledge Companion to Media Studies and Digital Humanities*, ed. by Jentery Sayers (Routledge, 2018), pp. 492–502, doi:10.4324/9781315730479.

KIRSTY: I feel like they have their own intent, their own agency. One form of activity or identity doesn't override the other. It's a skirt *and* a jumpsuit and yet still a skirt. All those ways of being and activities, all the actions in between to get there, are allowed to exist next to one another and have a conversation — hiking, going to church, flying, or shopping in the city. There isn't an underdog. They're playing with each other. They've kind of thickened that space between an exchange. They have lively edges, you know, where things can be other things.

KAT: Yes, this is what appeals to me in these inventions. But it is a challenge to capture and document. It's why I take so many photographs when people try them on.

KIRSTY: One photo can't capture the invention because you change and it moves and you hold yourself or behave in a different way when you wear them or transform them. They kind of occupy you as well as you occupying them. That was really curious.

KAT: Yeah, you don't have to be one thing, you can be many things in these garments, and I think that's important in a world in which brave people are pushing at the boundaries and edges of things. Binaries still shape many understandings and organising principles of the world; how we order and how we fit or don't fit into categories. So to push against, to blur the edges, or to simply unsettle established ideas and things, can be powerful. They offer alternatives. And this can be difficult and dangerous. So these objects, to me, hold power in the possibility and potential they offer the wearer to claim multiple identities.

And the wearer didn't always have to transform these garments right? You could happily just wear it while knowing that you had the choice to be or do something different.

KIRSTY: That must have been very exciting, the magic of it. Adventure lies in that — the feeling that you're playing a part but you could very easily play another part. That you're sitting there being neatly contained in your socially acceptable situation but there's wildness within. I'm reading a book about this idea that everyone has a wild twin, a second version of yourself who is born when you are. This twin is exiled as it contains the parts of us that are not socially acceptable; they're the parts of us that we shun or ignore, they're non-conforming so they're estranged from society.<sup>6</sup> Throughout our lives, this part of us yearns for attention, for acknowledgement and for freedom.

KAT: The sportswear part of the project, for example, tells a bigger story about agency and independence and freedom that is timeless. I think wearers can feel the imaginative possibility of having a garment that does more than one thing. It does feel like you're wearing possibilities.

KIRSTY: It's amazing wearing these pieces because there's a sense of communication between the two binaries. I also really enjoy the edges — the seams are the bits where the exchange or the transformation happens. Silver linings; clues to better times perhaps! The colour and craft of these edges is also striking.

<sup>6</sup> Martin Shaw, *Courting the Wild Twin* (Chelsea Green Publishing UK, 2023).



Figure 5. Choosing a reclaimed earth bowl.

KAT: The bright colours in the research collection were chosen to highlight and make the inventive elements 'pop' in order to showcase the convertible technologies. We are more interested in investigating the hidden technologies in the inventions and piecing together the inventors' lives and influences than in trying to replicate perfect dress histories. So the invention pops out and the colours trace the differently shaped bodies. They emphasise the shifts and changes and the radical nature of the transformation that's possible.

KIRSTY: I'd like to talk a bit more about embodiment, the feel of these garments, and the touch of them. What did you learn from this practice?

KAT: I think you ask different questions when you're in a research garment like this. For example, you were curious about all the fastenings that enable the garment to transform. We've been thinking a lot about fastenings because you rarely spend much time on things like buttons and snaps unless they malfunction. Yet these things are part of everyone's daily life and they play a really important role. But they can be very easy to ignore, overlook, and underappreciate, until they fail, when something falls off or comes undone. And even though a button can be easily fixed or mended, often in this time of fast fashion, the garment becomes a failed piece and gets thrown away.

The role of fastenings is amplified in these reconstructions as they enable the transformative action. And most are for sporting, or activities in some form, so they had to be robust to stay on moving bodies. And there are LOT of them, more than a usual garment. So the mundane and ordinary fastening has been unexpectedly very interesting to us.

KIRSTY: All our recipes for clay reclamation and casting are available open source online. The creating and sharing of knowledge is a huge part of our work too. I'm excited to see who might use them and how. You open things up for whole new forms of discovery and interpretation. This is the first time I've seen all the parts of this project together in one room. We literally just sent the books to print and edited the film. All the different parts have been spread across London until now.

KAT: I have been thinking about intimacy, which we didn't talk about much in my studio, but I think it was imbued in the practice of wearing the clothes of others. It is both ordinary and extraordinary when you wear your own clothing but then when you put on someone else's, it takes you somewhere else again. And similarly there's an intimacy in sharing a meal. We are sitting at a table, across from each other, eating and talking. We were putting your body into my research and here we are putting your research into our bodies.

KIRSTY: I hadn't thought about the responsibility of serving a meal in that way, or how generous the guest is in allowing you to engage with them in that way. Thank you! In your studio, we were talking about how you're attempting to physically access someone else's experience through remaking their clothing. I guess you must have thought of that with your patents — the idea that by recreating someone's invention, or following their instruction manual, or cooking their recipe, or making their patterns, you're embodying them and inheriting their ideas.

KAT: Absolutely, and I think there's an ethical responsibility in that practice. We often think of ethics in relation to living or recently living, respondents. But I am studying people who lived over a century ago and I apply the same kinds of ethical standards. I'm looking for traces of their lives, trying to piece them together across distributed archives, and there are many erasures and fragments which make the task difficult. This is especially the case for the people I am studying — women, immigrants, lower-class workers. I try to maintain those gaps and silences because they highlight the politics of representation and erasure. As I sew together pieces of their lives, I'm conscious to render those stitches visible in order to draw attention to the remarkable things they have done and to raise the question of why we don't know about them and why we should know about them.

Feeding people with your research has similarities. It can be about care and sociality but it's also about trust as it's kind of invasive. For instance, I am assuming these bowls are food safe and nothing from the construction sites are leaching into my body?!

KIRSTY: Haha, thank you for your trust! So the outside of the bowls are raw unglazed clay and the interior has a food safe glaze. That is a pure practicality so you're safe to eat your soup. On the intimacy of eating, it's also quite intimate that we're sitting here facing each other whilst undertaking what is a pretty messy and exposing act. It feels it would be more of a social norm to sit side by side, to preserve our dignity.



Figure 2a/b. A 1909 invention transforms from a conventional long skirt into a mountaineering cape.





Figure 6. Three bowls made from a slowly crumbling casting take on new shapes.

KIRSTY: So, these inventions have been used and worn in different places. You've taken them to Scotland?

KAT: Yes, we put them on a group of athletes who took them up mountains, jumped into rivers, rode bicycles and horses, and climbed trees.

KIRSTY: But they all seem pretty clean?

KAT: Ha, yes they are... now. We try to keep them in a reasonable state as they are precious objects as well as being functional designs. But if you look closely they're not perfect. You can tell they have been worn. Parts have been cleaned, mended, and replaced. We will continue to use them and maintain them and they'll hold these traces of their experiences. This is all part of the research.

This kind of wear and tear and maintenance is a form of research. We can gain insights into how and why some design decisions were made when things are used. We can see where the points of weakness are and why something was reinforced. We clean, mend, and repair pieces. I have written about this practice of 'speculative sewing' and as a way of interviewing the inventor through her inventions.<sup>7</sup>

There are also similarities to other forms of academic labour. I often think about overlaps in sewing and academic language. Even if you aren't sewing as a method, it's common to think about stitching ideas together, unpicking concepts, looking for loose threads, or threading something through an argument etc.

KIRSTY: Yes and the intersections, the seams, all have labour ingrained in them. They have time in them. Process. Care. Your vocabulary seems very much about modes of making connections.

KAT: Connecting is an essential part of my practice — both methodologically and theoretically. It's far from straightforward, doing this kind of archival research. And it's very often complex and messy. Mess is an essential part of the practice. I've just tidied up the studio so it doesn't always look like this, especially when we're in the middle of making a research collection. But if you look around, there are piles of things where we've tried to be tidy but they spill out. It's hard to contain a process like this, and you kind of need everything to not be totally contained, because where things spill out and run into each other is often where things happen that you don't necessarily expect. You can't plan everything.

It's also interesting when you get to the point where these pieces start to have their own lives and go on their own journeys. And they start to tell you things, to answer questions, you didn't think to ask.

7. Kat Jungnickel, *Bikes & Bloomers: Victorian Women Inventors and their Extraordinary Cyclewear*, (Goldsmiths Press, 2018), p.6.

KAT: Can you talk a bit about the colour palette of your research?

KIRSTY: So it's not really a design decision, it's just how it is. Everything has been made by the same site so it's all ended up looking how it looks. The main things that have determined any sort of colour variation have been time, heat, and water.

I actually just realised I'm even dressed to match today, like I've been dug up! I think I'm getting rustier each year. We're currently exploring reclaimed glazes. We've been collecting plants from the site which you can burn and the charcoal residue contains the metals that the plants have accumulated from the contaminated soil. And the metals give different colours to the glazes so you can actually read the state of the land, or the health of the soil, through the colour of the bowl you are eating from. It's another patina of the environment, like the table. That process is not yet food safe so we'd have to go through the next set of processes to get that to work. It needs to function.

Clothing is something constructed to be occupied and used, like tableware. It's a container or vessel for the activity to be performed. I read a beautiful piece about regenerative design the other day; it was about seeking potential in things rather than seeing a world through closed objects.<sup>8</sup> For example, you invest in a saucepan because of its potential to be able to cook and eat and feel at home and host and nurture friendships for the next twenty years. So to start seeing the things we use through their expanded potential. I think it's very similar with clothing.

KAT: Ursula Le Guin writes against these ideas of the heroic story, which is often the singular, dominant, and masculine story about large-scale dramatic events. Yet these are not the only story.<sup>9</sup> Containers for gathering and transporting things were just as essential for keeping people alive but they're less dramatic and more mundane. So it's a powerful provocation to look for and recognise other kinds of things and stories that are just as interesting.

KIRSTY: Bowls are really mundane. Mine spend most their lives upside down on a draining board. But through setting yourself a seemingly very simple, domestic, trivial task of making a bowl, you can ask big questions. Even before we could start working with clay and soil agency, we had to work out a bowl-making process, and suddenly you find yourself knee deep in Japanese culinary culture. Something banal is almost always quietly magnificent and through engaging with its magnificence, you start to understand something of the larger systems in which things are situated. Your clothing inventions are also designed to be ordinary from the outside. You shouldn't be able to tell that they're extraordinary. They're almost invisible. That's the point.

KAT: Though I did worry when I was carrying this bowl up and down the stairs. 'Don't smash the bowl!' Because that would be a very... well it would be another form of data, I guess, to think positively on that terrible scenario. But the richness of these kinds of translation practices is that you can be open to the unexpected and reflect on what goes well, what goes wrong, and what happens in between.

8. Regenesis, Pamela Mang, and Ben Haggard, *Regenerative Development and Design: A Framework for Evolving Sustainability* (Wiley, 2016), doi:10.1002/9781119149699.

9. Le Guin, *The Carrier Bag of Fiction*.



Figure 3a/b. A 1918 skirt converts into sporting jodhpurs.



KIRSTY: There are a lot of mistakes amongst the pieces we're sitting with today. There's still mud splattered all up that wall over there from last summer.

It feeds into the idea that neither of us are aiming for a single output in our research. Your process is driven by curiosity, an urge to find things out. It's kind of cumulative and composite. And because of that, there's not going to be a single monument at the end. I feel the same with this material collection of things that we're sitting in right now. I noticed in yours too, that your translations emerge in multiples and you've created almost a community of pieces. Perhaps it's particularly evident because your work is human shaped! But some of them are still ideas, some are miniatures, some are in the mock-up stage, and some have been out in the field fifty times already and are being maintained and mended.

KAT: That's really interesting. Can you talk about the ephemera of the bowls? The fact that these are not meant to last?

KIRSTY: Yes, so the casts are made from rammed earth; each time they're used they degrade. You pour in the slip and wait until the earth has cooled it and set it to the thickness you want it to be, then pour out the excess. This comes after about four days of waiting for clay particles to drop to the bottom of a bucket of water and two days of it lying spread out on a table. So there's something really slow in the crafting process.

It involves a lot of being bored and waiting. A lot of time to think about the long slow geological processes that you're handling and how long it's taken them to form. I was astounded to find that it takes 500 years to form 2 cm of soil! So something of these slow formations are sort of captured in the degradation of the bowl forms. After the big dinner we have planned for the end of the project, we'll smash them back into the ground and they'll carry on doing what they did before.

KAT: Speed, or rather lack of it, plays a big role in sewing. Making clothes takes longer than many people might imagine, when they are used to buying and discarding them. Most of us, in the West, own a lot of clothing these days. In the project, we use sewing time to reflect on the process and pay attention to the small parts of larger systems. I often draw on the work of feminist archivists Nydia Swaby and Chandra Frank who 'propose experimentation as a form of dwelling and lingering in the archive to subvert linear notions of time and place'.<sup>10</sup>

KAT: I noticed the seams are like joins on the bowls. It's like there are two sides, right, similar to clothes, with their seams on the inside. Can you talk more on this?

10. Nydia Swaby and Chandra Frank, 'Archival Experiments, Notes and (Dis)Orientations', *Feminist Review*, 125 (2020), pp. 4-16 (p. 4), doi:10.1177/0141778920931874.

KIRSTY: I guess it's an act of creation so at some point the foetus has grown and there's some sort of baby and then it's a toddler and it has its own agency and you're like 'Oh okay you're that now and you want to go over there'. I'm envious of your studio and having enough space to allow the parts of your project to develop and chat, to tell you what kind of relationships they'd like to have, and that you have space enough to listen. That messy part is not always very comfortable.

KAT: That's true. Do you sew?

KIRSTY: I've made clothes but not to this level. To me, the sewing process feels like a combination of mess and absolute precision.

KAT: Yes, that's a very good point. My mother taught me to sew and I have learned a great deal working with formally trained experts on projects like these. There are multiple layers of precision at work to make inventions like this. There's a lot of dimensionalities at play. We have to think sculpturally all the time to translate the data and make these pieces emerge because we're moving from paper patents and drawings to a 3D garment. There are many steps.

We start with a small iteration in paper modelling to get a sense as to what the inventor might be talking about. And then we make a toile in calico, often small scale, to try to work out the mechanisms. And then we might do a larger toile and then a patternmaker helps us turn it into a pattern and then we use the pattern to turn it into a final full-scaled garment.

There are so many steps along the way to have conversations about the insights that emerge. You have to be open to surprises. The fact that the film has gone on its own journey, and continues to do things and generate interest from audiences that I never would have anticipated, has been a joy. I love that. The *Bikes and Bloomers* project did that as well, it seemed to just go off on its own and I would get invited to accompany it.

KIRSTY: So how do you feel about ownership or authorship?



Figure 7. Handling a drying slip cast bowl.

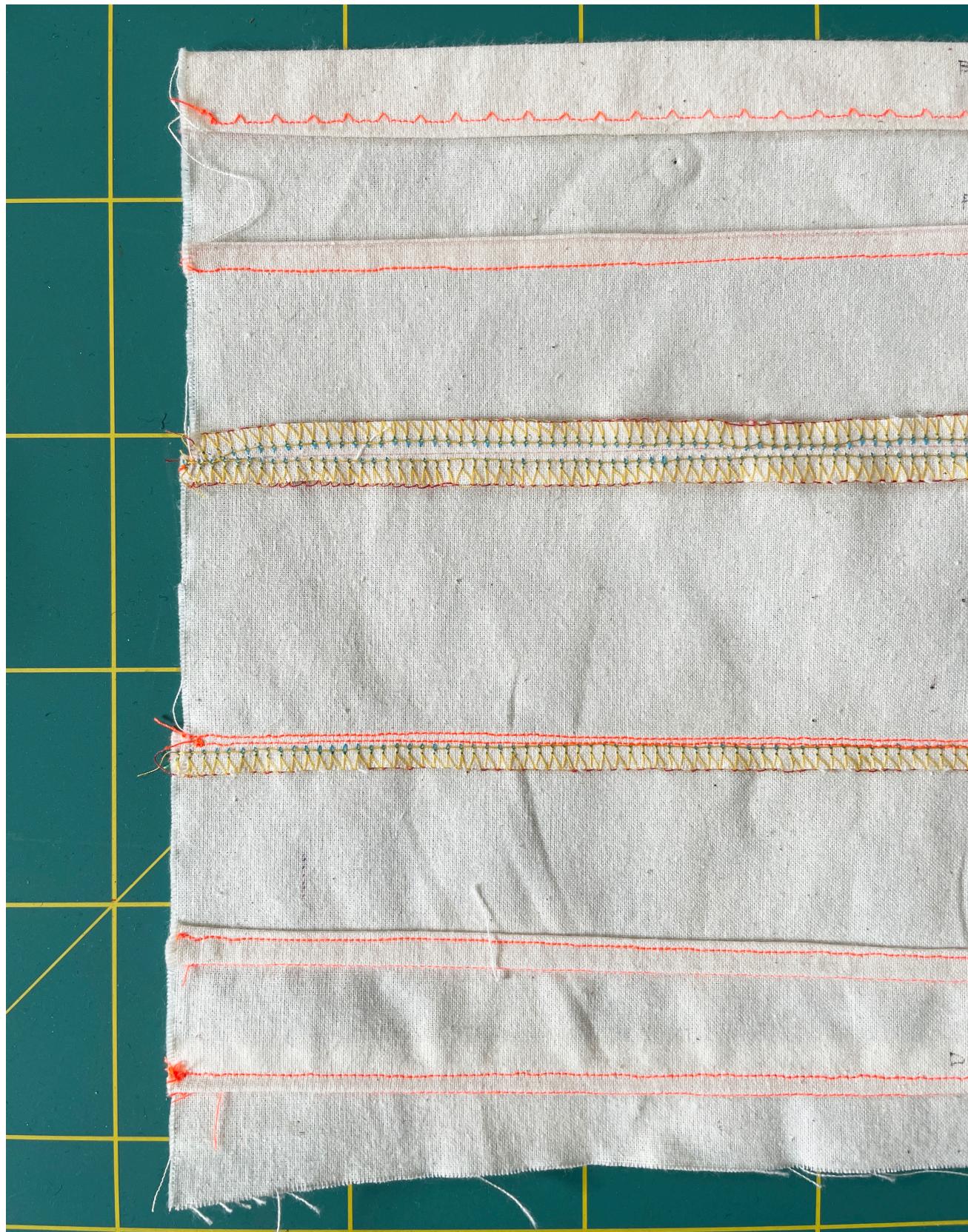


Figure 4. Detail of seams and stitches in reconstructed inventions.

KIRSTY: We don't often think about a seam in ceramics, a lot of tableware is made in such a way that the seams are either not there or have been removed. They're not something that is very obvious. But in a casting process, seams are unavoidable when removing the pieces from their casts. It's a bit weird really, to cast ramen bowls rather than throw them on a wheel. The seams are the connecting points but they're also the moment of division or separation from how they were made. Each time we use the cast, the form of the bowl becomes less clear and the seams or separations get more prominent.

there in order to make the connections between one another. The more connections, or seams, the more resilient the ecosystem and the less damage is done when one point falls out — or one species becomes extinct. It's about bolstering connections.

KAT: We each bring new and different things to the world. Both our projects focus on and value this in their own ways.

KAT: I've written a collaborative piece with an inspiring group who do something called Patchwork Ethnography and talk about 'seamful approach'.<sup>11</sup> This is about recognising and valuing all the parts of your life that interrupt, unsettle, and complicate the doing of ethnographic research. Conventionally, ethnography involved going into the field for a long time, doing lots of research then returning home again. But with less funding, limited time, or having duties, relationships or family needs, the reality is that you might have to pop in and out of the field a lot of times. Or you might invite the field into your life. The main point is not to ignore all the work you've had to do in order to make things work — to not cover over the seams as they're actually important and where a lot of your insights come from. The seams are in everything we do, just sometimes they're polished out or they're cleaned or erased. But they are always there.

KIRSTY: It reminds me of ecosystem theory, where the more parts you have the stronger the ecosystem.<sup>12</sup> If you have three points, then there's only ever one connection between each; once one connection is broken, the whole ecosystem falls apart. But the more points you add, the more connections you're able to have. And it's not about the points, they're merely

<sup>11</sup> Gökçe Günel and others, 'Everything is Patchwork!: A Conversation about Methodological Experimentation with Patchwork Ethnography', *Australian Feminist Studies*, 38.115-16 (2024),

<sup>12</sup>. Regenesis, Pamela Mang, and Ben Haggard, *Regenerative Development and Design*.

KAT: These inventors made their designs available to others. It was via a patent system which controls who can reproduce it. But now, over a century later, these designs are available open access (OA) via the European Patent archives. I replicate OA ethics in my practice; I make as much data available for others to use. I'm not a dress historian. I'm not a historian. I don't aim for perfect reconstructions. I'm a sociologist, doing a sociopolitical study into the histories of wearable technology, so I ask questions about why so many of the problems and issues these designs sought to address still exist today. For instance, how and why are some people included and excluded from things and what can we learn from how they have dealt with the same problems over time? And why did these inventions get ignored and then reinvented again and again? Why haven't we been building on these ideas? The project is about hidden histories as much as what is hidden in garments.

KIRSTY: It feels incredibly powerful to physically wear these inventions and have their dreams and courage on your skin, and to embody their endeavours. There's such freedom, such power in reinventing and rewear these inventions. I feel honoured to have felt that, thank you.



Figure 8a/8b. Detail views of seamed underside of the bowls.







## CONCLUSION

Through our conversations, we looked for, climbed into, ate from, reflected on, and discussed alternative containers of data, knowledge, and experience. To find and understand traces of lesser-known stories and follow less-trodden paths can be difficult. Outcomes can be messy, multiple, and transient. Yet, as Le Guin eloquently writes in her 1986 essay *The Carrier Bag of Fiction*, stories take many forms.<sup>13</sup> Not all are loud, triumphal, and heroic. Some are mundane and ordinary, collective and shared. Some are partial and distributed, scattered across histories and landscapes. To see and share them requires fresh eyes and innovative methods as well as taking time to care.

Le Guin draws attention to the importance of mundane and ordinary things in everyday life. World-making and world-changing insights are not always the result of dramatic and heroic encounters and stories. ‘We’ve all heard about’, she writes, ‘the sticks, spears and swords, the things that bash and poke and hit with, the long, hard things, but we have not heard about the thing to put things in, the container for the thing contained’.<sup>14</sup> Here, essential technology isn’t just weaponry and survival isn’t just about violence and conflict or winners and losers. It can also be about something as useful and humble as a carrier bag. ‘That’, argues Le Guin, ‘is a new story’.<sup>15</sup>

Our containers are made of clothing and clay. Under their smooth surfaces lie rich complexities. Whether it involves scaling a mountain in 1900 or digging up a contaminated construction site in 2024, our storytellers are not the kind to reach the peak and plant a flagpole. (Or even when they did, their achievements went largely unrecognised.) Our kind of process requires us to explore robustly; to be curious, creative, and open. We look for fragmented traces and distributed pieces, pressing and stitching them together to make seams. Yet little is contained by these edges and

joins. Things spill out or fall apart. They crumble and reattach in unexpected ways. Through the clothes that contain our bodies and the vessels that hold our food, we ourselves also become lively containers of stories.

In her book *What’s the Use?*, feminist and queer scholar Sara Ahmed reflects on ‘queer use’ of mundane objects in everyday life. Here, a ‘doorway becomes a meeting place’, a ‘kitchen table becomes a publishing house’ and a ‘postbox becomes a nest’.<sup>16</sup> These objects are used differently by a wide range of users yet they don’t lose or swap meanings. They expand to encompass more as these alternative experiences and uses render ‘them all the more lively’.<sup>17</sup> Beyond their being, the (re)makings of clothing and clay and their translations are containers (of knowledge) and not mere artefacts (of representation).

As practitioners, we are both women who craft. We study the craft of others. We use crafting skills passed on through generations to understand how the world is put together and to question things easily taken for granted. Our everyday artefacts allow us to work with specific stories, sites, characters, and communities. Although very different, both projects seek to surface lesser-known accounts. Sewing and ceramics have distinctive gendered histories historically taken place out of sight, in unofficial or domestic settings. Although essential to everyday life, they remain undervalued and underappreciated. Their stories are largely absent from history. Rendering these kinds of ideas visible in our practice — via the objects we make with their overt seams — is a political act of resistance against centuries of erasure.

As a historically female-gendered activity, craft has always been synonymous with coming together and with making social connections. There is a peacefulness in the slow repetitive motions of making by hand; and whilst hands are kept busy, there is a creative power in the pregnant womb of the story or gossip

<sup>13</sup> Le Guin, *The Carrier Bag of Fiction*

<sup>16</sup> Ahmed, *What’s the Use?*, p. 229.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., p. 29.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

circle that holds the activity of crafting together. In Donna Haraway's introduction to Le Guin's *The Carrier Bag of Fiction*, she recalls witnessing on the fraught Colombian streets 'ordinary people working and playing to stitch, knot, weave and embroider both intimate and public peace, even as it unravels yet again' to keep telling 'the other story, the untold one, the life story'.<sup>18</sup> These endeavours are overlooked, or hidden in plain sight, except by those astute enough to seek them out. It is through this creation of social 'carrier bags' that we are able to tell and retell stories of our own experience, to softly forge a new shared future that rejects weaponry, violence, and battle, and resists engagement with consumerism or technological hyper-progress. The act of coming together and making does not abide by the rules of the hero; 'it is hard to tell a really gripping tale of how I wrestled a wild-oat from its husk, and then another, and then I scratched my gnat bites'.<sup>19</sup> Forefronting these mundane intimacies offers a queer departure, an array of infinite and undefined creative possibilities.

It felt important that our conversations took place in our working spaces. We were surrounded by all the threads and fabrics and soil and castings that our practices grow from, and the clues for where they might go next. Rooms full of threads and clods, toile patterns and practice pieces, mistakes and possibilities.

As we sat and talked, it felt like these spaces embodied the messy, iterative, reflexive, and explorative journeys across geological time and social history that both of us work across. As we talked and made connections, the materials, tools, tests, and artefacts made their own too. We wondered what the artefacts of our projects might whisper about once we had left the room, what plans they might hatch outside of our intentions, and the journeys they are yet to embark upon.

Kirsty waved over to a group of lost-looking students as they floated towards the gallery and Kat got ready to step out into what had turned into a gloriously sunny March afternoon. Although we had reached the end of our studio conversations, the air rang of new projects and future collaborations. There seems fertile ground still to be explored in the seams between clothes and clay.

<sup>18</sup> Donna Haraway, 'Introduction', in Ursula Le Guin, *The Carrier Bag of Fiction* (Cosmogenesis, 2024), p. 10.

Figure 10. Authors sharing a research meal.

<sup>19</sup> Le Guin, *The Carrier Bag of Fiction*, p. 27.

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## AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

### *Kat Jungnickel*

Kat Jungnickel is a Professor in Sociology and Director of Methods Lab at Goldsmiths, University of London. She recently led the European Research Council–funded project *Politics of Patents: Reimagining Citizenship via Clothing Inventions 1820-2020* ([www.PoliticsofPatents.org](http://www.PoliticsofPatents.org)). Together with a team of sewing social scientists she explored citizenship and changing socio-political issues via speculative sewing – researching, reconstructing, and re-imagining a collection of lesser-known clothing inventions from patent archives. Recent publications include: (ed) *Wearable Utopias: Imagining, Inventing and Inhabiting New Worlds* (with Fowles, May & Pugh, MIT Press 2024), (ed) *How to Do Social Research With...* (with Coleman & Puwar, Goldsmiths Press, 2024) and (ed) *Transmissions: critical tactics for making and communicating research* (MIT Press 2020).

## AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

*Kirsty Badenoch*

Kirsty Badenoch is a multi-disciplinary artist, researcher, and educator. Over the last ten years, her practice-led research addresses three interrelated areas: the ecological regeneration of degraded landscapes, participatory design processes, and experimental drawing practice. Having published and exhibited her work worldwide, Kirsty currently curates 'Microscope', an experimental art-and-ecology space in Dalston, and teaches design studios at the University of Cambridge and The Bartlett School of Architecture, UCL. Her practice-led PhD, 'How Forests Draw', explores drawing as a participatory method for multispecies dialogue and interspecies regeneration in the Caledonian Pinewoods.



