



§Cura: care - cure - curate

CHER MÉTIS - Mutualism Through Repair

di Francesca Gotti

Cher Métis

In February 2023, EAVT (Ecole d'Architecture de la Ville & de Territoire) Paris Est has hosted a Winter School on the topic of "Caring/Curing Architecture" [1]: one week of workshops that interpreted the broad themes of caring and curing, reflecting on the ways these principles can relate to architecture at various scales. In this context, together with a group of 16 students, we have tested out repair as a practice of care, an experiment we called CHER MÉTIS. The work has started with a debate on the practices of repair on buildings, artefacts and technologies, retracing recent and contemporary virtuous experiences in art, architecture, and design. We have analysed the work of architects Flores e Prats in Barcelona for *Sola Beckett* (2014-2017), that of Lacaton & Vassal for *Palais de Tokyo* (2012-2014) in Paris, and the *Public Infrastructures* built in Merida in 2014 by Pico Colectivo and Arquitectura Expandida; we have discovered the series of *Bastard chairs* (2004-2017) by photographer Michael Wolf of an of *100 chairs in 100 days* (2007) by designer Martino Gamper, *Mending Piece* (1966) by Yoko Ono, and *Badewanne* (1960-1970) by Joseph Beuys; and we have browsed through the "Complete Guide to Home appliance repair" by Evan Powell (1977) and "Repairing Cities" by Marcó Navarra (2008).

The references to repair in the realms of art, architecture, and design are abundant and consistent, serving to formalize and legitimize to the broader public the myriad informal repair practices that are most prevalent in the so-called "peripheries" of Western metropolises and across the global south. Repairing practices, whether applied to buildings, artifacts, or technology, permeate social contexts characterized by economic instability, where inhabitants are unable to embrace the disposable culture propagated by Western countries (Graham, Thrift, 2007). Furthermore, these fragile contexts bear the brunt of the surplus, discards, and waste generated by the very disposable culture itself. The unsold and discarded masses of fast-fashion garments, the malfunctioning appliances, computers, and mobile phones, all gravitate towards countries in the global south, inundating their cities and untouched lands. However, the people living in these regions have developed a remarkable ability to salvage and repair these vast quantities of resources, drawing upon a deeply ingrained and widely shared informal knowledge of repair (van Der Velden, 2021). The first action of CHER MÉTIS consisted in the exploration of the surrounding of the University campus and of the buildings themselves. We have observed, registered, and mapped their broken and neglected components, unveiling a geography of damages, that included all kind of surfaces, objects and materials: from windows, to pavements, to gates, tiles, greenery, benches, lamps, plastered walls, tables. During this exploration we have collected abandoned broken artefacts of various typologies, working on them individually to develop a specific way of repairing and creating new narratives around them. The repair process required as a first step the identification of the damage, being it mechanic or aesthetic: a diagnosis of the issue, that implied a first approach to and understanding of the object through its weaknesses and its physical components. Material, structure, texture, colour, mechanism, volume have been dissected, tracing back the production process, its artisanal or industrial quality. The structure of the objects has been understood by disassembling the parts that needed care, proceeding with cleansing and small restoration works.

Alongside this, students were asked to reflect on the meaning and function of the artifact itself: imagining the life of the object, the daily rituals around it, and the ways it used to occupy a certain place, were essential aspects to explore the relationship between the object, the space, and the previous users. It was equally fundamental to build a new narration. Students envisioned a new function for the objects, that would not destroy its initial characteristics or erase its original meaning, but that would be a reinterpretation and enhancement of its form and impressions. This exercise required a critical approach and a strong intention, in order to create an additional personal value to an existing artifact: an approach that evokes the ready-made methodology developed by artistic practices in the 1950s (Gildersleeve, Guyotte, 2019). A violin wooden case has become a portable secret bar; a shoe rack has been turned into a foldable reading cabinet; a plastic drawer has been repaired to host a greenhouse for aromatic herbs; a salt-spreading-machine has become a seeds-machine. Students have brought their personal and family stories inside the production of the new objects, creating connections between intimate and collective imaginaries. Reinventing an artifact allows to equally invent a new use of a space, to reinterpret it, to generate a new place into an existing space, being it a garden, a house, a parking lot: artifacts can be transformed into devices to take care of spaces, repairing a simple object can activate a bigger effect in our surrounding.

Throughout the work, the central space of the University – an open room used for meetings beneath the main conference hall – has become a repair workshop, but also a space to exchange knowledge and stories, and other students have joined forces to bring support and advices to their colleagues. This proves, as well, how manual work of care can initiate mutual support: objects, and spaces, can be understood as occasions of exchange and mutualism, of sharing personal experiences and contributing to each others growth, as challenges that faced collectively can be richer and stronger results. The re-appropriation and production of public spaces, achieved through the collaborative construction of objects, has emerged as a prevalent approach among designers engaged in the revitalization of neglected sites. Within these spatial practices, the manual act of caring for these spaces through small-scale interventions and the introduction of domestic elements has become a recurring theme. Notably, this approach is embodied in numerous projects undertaken by design collectives such as Ramulabor and Constructlab in Germany, Collectif Etc and Bruit du Frigo in France, Colectivo Warehouse in Portugal, and Orizzontale in Italy.

In these remarkable endeavors, the act of caring for the physical spaces goes hand in hand with caring for the individuals who inhabit them, fostering a symbiotic relationship. Here, the artifacts and mediums employed serve as vessels for negotiation and collaboration among the various stakeholders involved. The primary aim is to engage the broadest possible public and establish a shared foundation for intervention and communication. Through the act of caring for spaces and the collaborative construction of objects, these designers are able to navigate diverse perspectives and interests, seeking common ground and shared goals. The resulting interventions serve as catalysts for social interaction, enabling individuals from various backgrounds to come together, engage, and connect. These projects become sites of convergence, where different actors converge to shape the space collectively and engage in meaningful communication (Colombo, Gotti, Leveratto, 2022).



Discarded Landscape of Ecole d'Architecture de la Ville & de Territoire_Pictures by the Author

Repair, the right to care

Every action engenders both production and consumption, giving rise to a transformative process that can either deplete or preserve resources. It entails the manipulation and displacement of virgin materials and energy or the adaptation of previously manipulated elements. This principle applies not only to tangible entities like artifacts, buildings, and landscapes but also to intangible substances, thereby establishing interconnectedness among all these subjects. Among the various ways we interact with our surroundings, employing, reusing, recycling, and repairing emerge as distinct approaches, each characterized by its own intentions and consequences. These approaches shape our relationship with the environment in profound ways.

Undeniably, production represents the most extractive means of inhabiting a place, despite attempts to explore "green" alternatives. When artifacts or buildings are created from scratch within an industrial chain and on a large scale, substantial investments of resources and logistical efforts are required. Such endeavors make it challenging to offset the impact through energy-saving solutions and material recycling (McDonough, 2002).

Repair operates on a distinct level, setting it apart from other approaches. Upon completion of the repair process, it seemingly leaves little trace of its intervention, as if nothing had occurred, without any excessive alterations—a quiet and delicate act. Unlike recycling, repair does not involve the deconstruction of a space or an artifact, where components are disassembled and reassembled into new forms and configurations, often erasing the original meaning and rendering the initial substance unrecognizable through an intricate and resource-intensive process.

The practice of repair stems from an understanding that every existing place and artifact possesses a profound value that surpasses its material condition and state of decay. This value is not tied to economic worth, exchange rates, efficiency, or perfection standards. Instead, it is rooted in the materials, actions, and energy invested throughout the entire production process, encompassing not only what is visible in the final form but also all those associated with the various stages. Furthermore, this value is intertwined with the narrative of the place or object, the experiences that connect it with users and inhabitants, and the ways in which it has been appropriated and actively participated in everyday life (Appadurai, 1996). Repair embraces and acknowledges the presence of these concealed values and memories, seeking to preserve them while enabling the place or object to continue being experienced, thereby adding new layers of significance and memories. Engaging in repair is akin to unraveling the true essence of things, retracing their production process through an examination of their malfunctions: failures, breakdowns, and neglect serve as the starting point for an entire process of learning and redefinition. The practice of repair raises pertinent questions about manufacturing chains, the daily resources we utilize, and the expertise necessary to construct various components of our reality. It does so with an awareness that failure is not an irreversible outcome (Perzanowski, 2022). Planned obsolescence, a tool rooted in capitalism, is responsible for a disposable culture, relentless cycles of updates and upgrades, fast fashion, and consumerism. These manifestations are emblematic of a forcibly imposed mentality that compels disrespectful and unsustainable behaviors, resulting in devastating consequences (Pope, 2017).

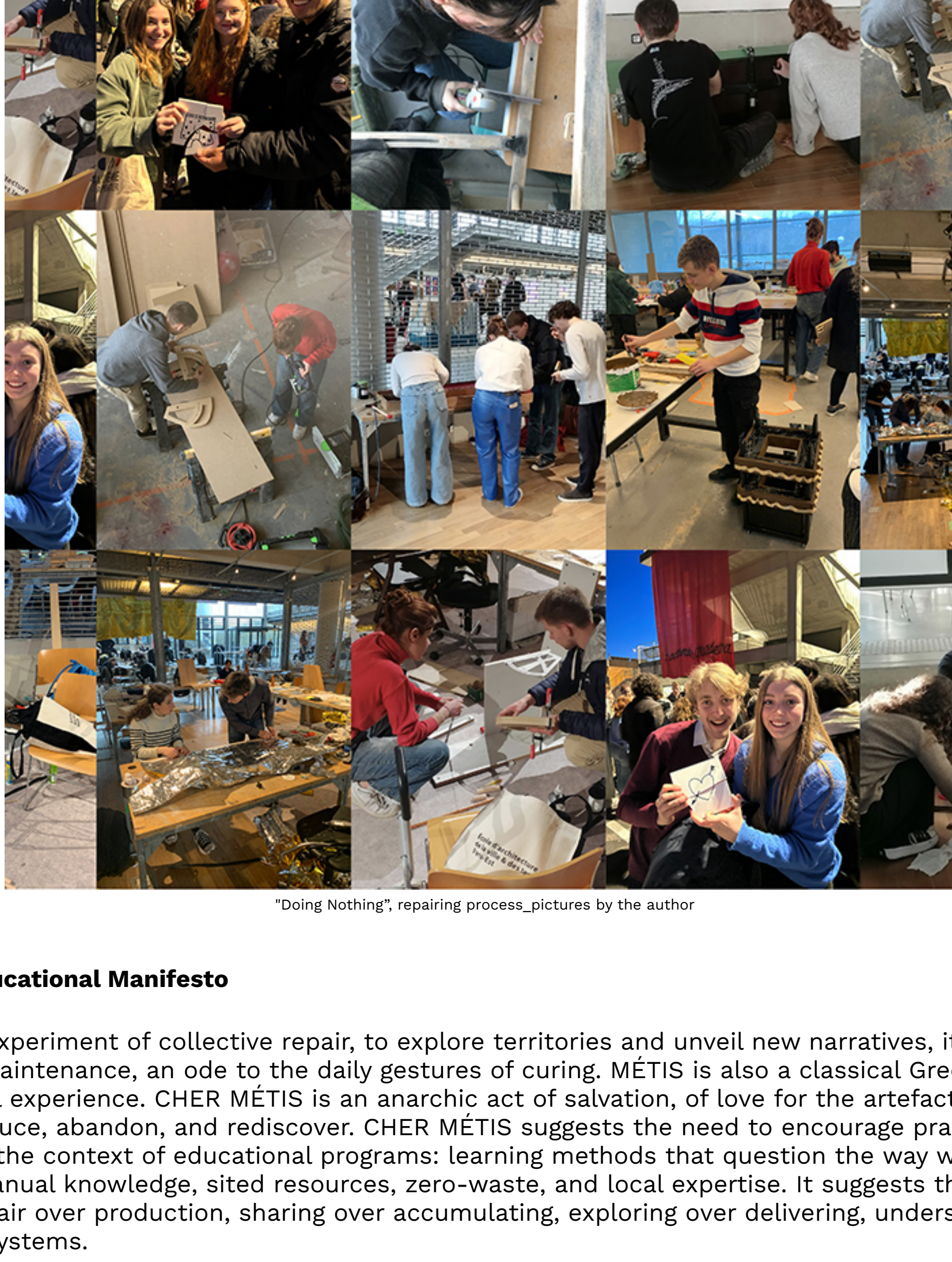
Repair carries a profound social and emotional value. Through the act of repairing objects and spaces, we cultivate the ability to embrace fallibility, acknowledge mistakes, navigate contingencies, understand limitations, and appreciate imperfections that permeate our daily lives. We consciously prioritize the significance of time and process, recognizing their importance over instant gratification and superficial outcomes. We hold personal memories and shared experiences in high regard, understanding their intrinsic worth. In the practice of repair, we discover that healing our wounds does not involve avoiding or suppressing our sufferings. Instead, we integrate these experiences into our personal growth and development. By confronting and addressing the challenges we encounter, we embark on a transformative journey that allows us to transcend and evolve.

Engaging in repair creates an environment of exchange. We openly share our own mending endeavors with others, establishing a mutual learning process. This exchange of knowledge and skills becomes a means through which personal incidents are transformed into collective stories. By offering our own mended creations to others, we foster a collaborative atmosphere where skills are acquired, shared, and expanded upon. In this communal framework, a personal incident takes on a broader significance, becoming part of a collective narrative (Twitchin, 2021). Moreover, repair enables us to rediscover hidden resources and skills that are deeply intertwined with the geographical and cultural contexts in which we exist.

Within various European rural traditions established during the Modern Era (especially the Italian and British ones), it was customary for families to convene in the barn during the winter season, devoting their time to mend clothes and repair farm tools and furniture (Gregson, Crewe, 2009). Material possessions held immense value, not due to their representation of economic prosperity, but because they guaranteed the family's survival and upheld longstanding traditions. For low-income households, these belongings symbolized a significant economic investment. Family members would dutifully pass down their garments, instruments, and assets, while repair became a habitual practice of preservation. By extending the lifespan of their belongings through repair, families maximized their meager resources, making every investment count.

In this context, repair became a profound act that transcended the mere restoration of material objects. It served as a tangible manifestation of resilience, resourcefulness, and intergenerational bond. Through the practice of repair, rural families embraced their heritage, preserved their traditions, and celebrated the inherent worth of their belongings, ensuring their endurance for future generations (Ambers, 2009). Simultaneously, skilled laborers would traverse villages, wielding their tools and expertise in various trades such as pottery, chair repair, and umbrella mending. Their invaluable knowledge accompanied them as they traveled across the countryside and eventually made their way into bustling cities. These craftsmen were distinguished by specific names, reflecting their specialized roles. In Italy, those adept at repairing ceramic dishes were known as *conciapiatti*, while the experts in umbrella repair were referred to as *ombrellai*. When families required the restoration of chairs, they would seek the assistance of a *sbigliaro*, and for blade sharpening, they eagerly anticipated the arrival of the *arratino* (Leone, 2007). Both the family gatherings in the barn and the encounters with itinerant repairmen swiftly transformed into opportunities to share cherished memories or conjure up captivating stories to entertain the group. The act of repair transcended its utilitarian nature and assumed the role of a communal ritual, fostering a sense of conviviality and creating a narrative backdrop. It served as both an official occupation and a social occasion, blending the practical with the imaginative.

With the first Industrial Revolution, the practice of repair underwent a significant evolution to adapt to the changing landscape of available artifacts in the market. Welders, mechanics, blacksmiths, chimney sweeps, plumbers, and electricians emerged, each bringing their expertise to the urban environment (Ambers, 2009). These skilled professionals traversed the country, offering their specialized services to address the diverse needs of the growing population. However, in Western countries these longstanding traditions and resources gradually fell out of favor, progressively overshadowed by the rising complexity of technological goods and the pervasive influence of disposable culture. Repair, once valued and revered, began to be perceived as outdated and a waste of time. The prevalent mindset shifted towards a preference for readily replaceable items, disregarding the potential of repair and embracing a culture of disposability as a sign of progress (Krebs, Weber, 2018).



"Doing Nothing", repairing process_pictures by the author

Doing Nothing as an Educational Manifesto

CHER MÉTIS offers an experiment of collective repair, to explore territories and unveil new narratives, it is a manifesto of invisible care through practical experience, an ode to the daily gestures of curing. MÉTIS is also a classical Greek term for knowledge gained through practical experience. CHER MÉTIS is an anarchic act of salvation, of love for the artefacts that inhabit our lives, that we constantly produce, abandon, and rediscover. CHER MÉTIS suggests the need to encourage practices that values non-extractive processes in the context of educational programs: learning methods that question the way we produce space, fostering mutualism, manual knowledge, sited resources, zero-waste, and local expertise. It suggests the need to foster learning practices that value repair over production, shared over accumulating, exploring over delivering, understanding chains and relationships between systems.

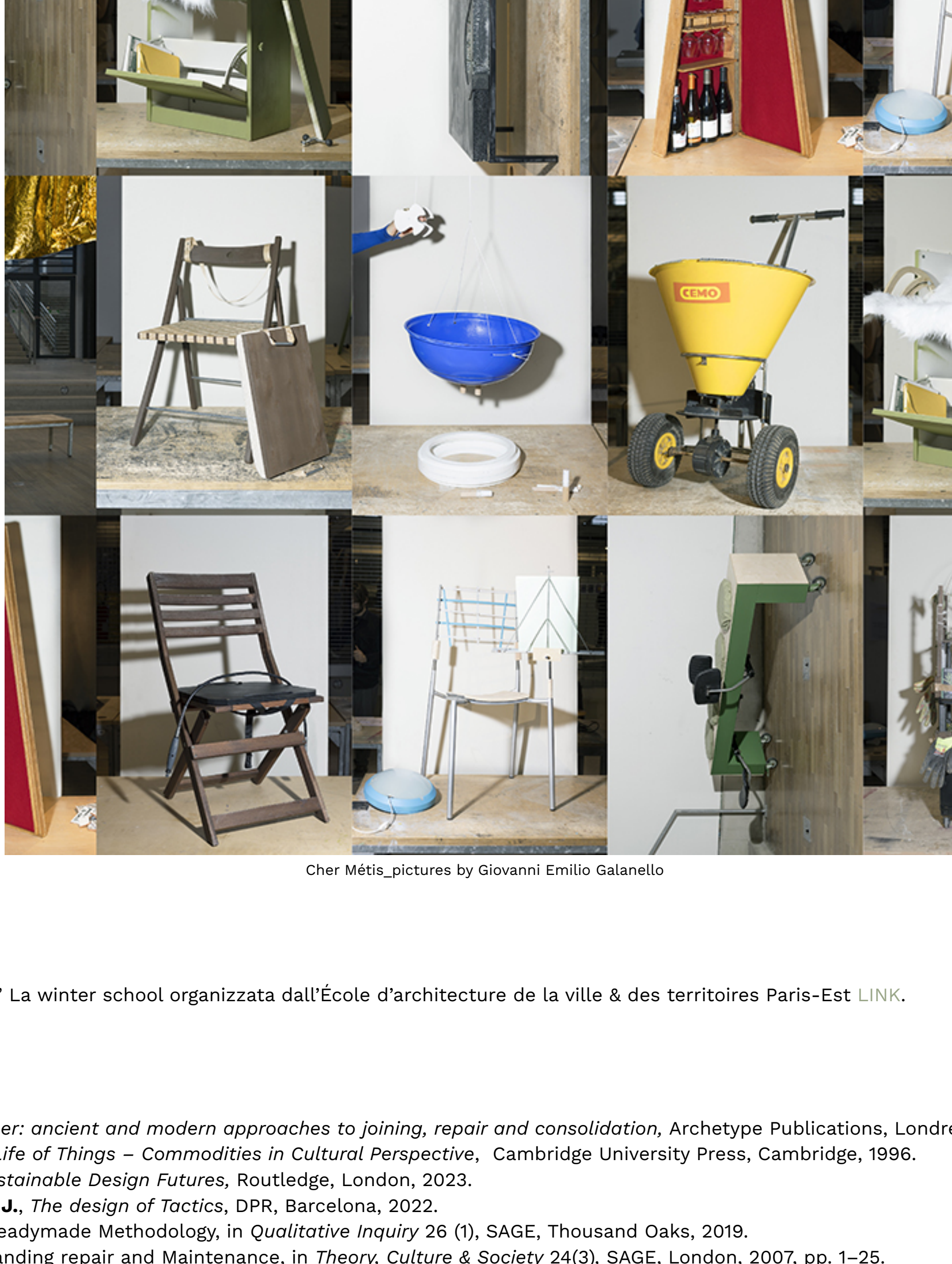
In 2009, the Amsterdam-based design collective Platform21 produced a *Repair Manifesto*, a bullet-points list of 11 must-actions that "calls for designers to produce goods that consumers can easily repair". Their manifesto stems from a broad on-the-field work carried out by the collective between 2006 and 2009 through interventions, workshops, exhibitions, and whose principles are now carried forward by Joanna van Der Zenden (2009 the founders), mainly through community projects (van Der Velden, 2012).

Architect Markus Berger and curator Kate Irvin have recently published the book *Repair – Sustainable Design Futures* where they trace the history of repair, and explore contemporary reparative thinking and practices across fields and disciplines – urbanism, politics, business, ethics, architecture, sociology, pedagogy. For Berger and Irvin "the praxis of repairing and caring for the web of interdependencies, which make up life, becomes a means to overcome the most destructive aspects of the technological drive to shape worlds." (Berger, Irvin, 2023).

Repair not only presents us with pressing inquiries but also offers an opportunity for designers, educators, architects, researchers, activists, and citizens, both individually and collectively, to explore critical and innovative solutions, both in the short and long term. It serves as a catalyst for experimentation and opens doors to transformative possibilities. Moreover, repair poses a fundamental dilemma that lies at the core of our actions and the environments we occupy: Do we possess enough care and concern for things to mend them when they fail? Are we prepared to confront the disarray that arises when established systems break down and embrace the process of unlearning and starting anew?

These questions prompt us to reflect on our relationship with the material world and the values we hold. Repair challenges us to examine our attitudes towards durability, sustainability, and the disposable nature of our current systems. It encourages us to reconsider the significance we attach to objects and spaces, and the extent to which we are willing to invest time, effort, and resources into their preservation and regeneration.

At its core, repair urges us to contemplate our role as caretakers of our surroundings. It calls for a shift in mindset, inviting us to move beyond a culture of convenience and disposability and towards one of responsibility and stewardship.



Cher Métis_pictures by Giovanni Emilio Galanello

Note

[1] "Caring/Curing Architecture" La winter school organizzata dall'Ecole d'architecture de la ville & des territoires Paris-Est [LINK](#).

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