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# Upcycling with Material Debris: Nurturing the Creative Process through Responsible Handling of Waste Materials

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## Abstract

By default, upcycling as a fashion methodology of deconstructing, re-assembling and removing material elements from existing garments, always produces material waste. This waste, with which one would traditionally disengage and place in the bin, is produced through various upcycling approaches—altering motifs, changing silhouettes or deconstructing forms. This waste can be incredibly micro in scale: dust, fibers, the smallest thread, or damaged bit which is produced from breaking down the structure of a garment. Framed more sensitively, this waste can be classified as process debris. Debris conventionally is not clearly understood as a material to reuse, or to value, or to place - as it is small

in scale, fragmented, and allegedly beyond repair. This attitude would usually encourage a disengagement with the material, and it would be de historicized and rendered as waste. In the context of this study, the debris from reforming a historic archive has gained new significance. Analyzing and designing with it invites a larger discussion around notions of care, value and the preservation of certain materials. 'Care', in this case, emerged through my encounter with the material debris itself, and the way that unique encounter instigated a consideration of value and role.

**KEYWORDS:** upcycling, deceased, archives, materiality, object, memory, agency, sustainability, process

*Materiality, Make, Memory and Sustainability-A critical fashion perspective from an upcycler*

Enclosed you will find evidence of our existence:

beaded rope,

the tip of an ostrich plume,

two silk stripe buttons,

glass beads,

cotton yarn,

lace black tape.

black cotton threads.

**'Anything overlooked, will be lost forever: between including and excluding there can be no half measures' (Elsner and Cardinal 1994, p. 1)**

Despite the increasing interest in upcycling associated with the burgeoning field of sustainable fashion, our knowledge of the actual processes and practices of upcycling remains limited. The emphasis of existing research is toward larger, clear and linear transformation processes within industrialized systems, emphasizing final reformed, commercialized outcomes. Such a focus locates upcycling within a consumerist framework that commodifies process and method, highlighting material's economic value within fashion industry's structures and systems. The autoethnographic, practice based data used within this research



**Figure 1**

'The debris'. Debris in box belonging to Mary Ellen Tuite's archive. RACHAEL CASSAR documentation shot 2021.

unpacks an upcycling practitioner's entangled relationship with materials they use, and the creative dynamics established when working with materials invested with past stories, cultural and social histories. This can be an intense way of understanding and working with an object's layered materiality and lived experience, as upcycling is a practice that is preoccupied with a material's past life and possible future. This article focuses specifically on designer's process of attending to material debris produced from upcycling a historic fashion archive (1870–1938), in which through fragmentation, the materials narrative echoes history, function and relevance to both the original and new, emerging archive.

### **The archive**

This study has documented the upcycling of a historic fashion archive from the deceased estate of Australian Mary Ellen Tuite (1852–1938). It documents practice-based research that explores the fashion archive as a material link between the present and the past that resurrects something of the person to whom it once belonged. Clothes may be singular to a life while also belonging to a culture, a time and a place. Fashion items like jewelry, fabrics, clothes, shoes and other accoutrements exert 'power' and 'agency' (Hallam and Hockey 2020) as material objects that beckon us

into the worlds of their previous owners. Such objects are also agentic to the extent that they have their own unique materiality.

The main characteristic of materiality is physicality. As Miller states 'to study material culture is to consider the implications of the materiality of form for the cultural process' (1994, 400). It is for this reason that I shall detail within this article a facet of the upcycling process, which unpacks historic materiality and its influence on creative practice. When reforming the historic archive, materiality encouraged care and focus toward what is conventionally removed and discarded during process. This is important as the materiality of debris deferred attention away from the representational garments within the historic archive. Despite engaging with the iconic historic garments, the debris drew increasing creative focus. The incomplete and broken down fragments (Figure 2) were a powerful force, sensitizing me to my very own process of design and leading me to more sustainable design actions.

Value appeared and grew via a cumulative acknowledgement and collection of debris after each construction change was made whilst reforming. As I collected, I was left with a mass of debris for which I



**Figure 2**

Isolated debris from Mary Ellen Tuite's garments and larger archive. RACHAEL CASSAR documentation shot 2022.

couldn't help but care. I was moved by the diverse histories it embodied and its ability to additionally reflect my upcycling process. Importantly, the materiality prompted me to respond creatively, and design around its relic, fragmented state by encasing debris within the reformed fashion garments. In this way, the debris opened a new way of working with the material which is a noticeable change to my process.

A thorough engagement with debris has made apparent the layered material heritage with which I was experimenting with. For example, debris bare traces of making processes, period techniques, mended sections, a human trace and its original garment function. This awareness is worth discussing when upcycling historic materials, as it pushes designer to be more conscious and inclusive with the materials they are reusing. This promoted experimentation with concepts surrounding conservation and preservation of all archival materials.

### **Understanding process debris as relics**

Before I characterize and outline the encounter with debris, I feel it necessary to outline the definition of a relic and how I have applied this to my material engagement within this article.

Relic is understood as the study of an object that resists most complete categories, an object that in its fragmented condition, sparks memory of time, space and of a deceased (Schweitzer and Zerdy 2014). Under this definition of a relic, I feel it appropriate to characterize my experience with the debris as care toward a type of material relic, because it prompted one to study and care for the materiality with an understanding of a lost or passed history, narrative, and strong reference to people, place and time. A time which cannot be relived.

When debris is acknowledged as a type of material relic, it is helpful to understand how it also relates and differs to the concept of a souvenir. A souvenir operates similarly to a relic, as a fragment attempting to fill the void of lost experience through their partial physicality and the narrative they offer. They are kept to evoke a memory (Martinson 2014). The study of the souvenir discusses how physical items act as stand-ins for absent objects, people, or periods. Stewart (1993) writing on material narratives claims that a souvenir will continue to exist as a sample of a distanced experience, an experience which the object can only evoke and resonate to. For example, objects as souvenirs are used to recall intimacy and authenticity of the past which is symbolized by the object, such an ability means that souvenirs can bridge the void between the present and our imagined past, allowing one to experience that time again.

The debris within this discussion builds on this souvenir understanding, however, it differs in the way it additionally embodies a historical context that of a relic. A relic is further understood as an object surviving from an earlier time, one of historical interest in which a belief by

one or a collective has deemed important (Hahn 2010). The debris biography discussed in this article reflected multiple narratives of fashion, people and time which has been understood through fragmentation. The debris recalled intimacy and authenticity of the archive's past and the present past. Therefore, due to the debris inferred reference to an earlier time and present time, entangled with multiple people, (deemed important to this archive), I characterize the debris as material relics as it became symbolic of the archive's biographical importance, which included its upcycling narrative. Debris inspired creative experimentation with fragmentation, which powerfully symbolized past, present and future.

The following section will discuss my encounter with the debris and the importance of such a process of collecting and aestheticizing historic materials for creative purposes.

### ***Collecting Debris: Identifying and Remembering ...***

During the process of reforming the garments in my studio, I began gathering material debris and layering it in a box (Figure 1). My usual reforming process involves sorting, deconstructing, re-assembling and removing material elements. More specifically, when one reforms, one cuts into, removes and deconstructs sections of garments which produces small bits of textile waste, or debris. In this case, pieces of debris were incredibly small and included: lace, beads, dust, fibers, seams, trims, the tiniest thread or damaged bit that was removed.

These fragments, when accumulated, were very interesting, as they had survived the customary fate of being discarded and placed in the bin. Because of the fragile and aged tactility of the removed elements, I was motivated to collect, understand, rearrange, tangle, and rummage through, which I did often. I would sort through the detritus, moving pieces of debris around and placing them next to each other, until certain textures and forms began to interact.

This prompted me to collect and imbed similar broken-down bits from the archive within the debris box. For example, elements of broken down speculated Victorian purse or capelet (Figure 3) and singular buttons found within the haberdashery. I was drawn to the relic narrative of the debris which was emerging from the incomplete, fragmented materiality.

A 'relic narrative' of an earlier time was visible through the fragile, broken, distressed and piled form of bitsy, aged materials. The debris expressed incomplete, historic narratives. These narratives included the past makers, the wearers and the material's inception. For example, the Victorian purse or part of a capelet (Figure 3) was alluding to a long-worn history through patina, such as: the hand mended elements, incomplete beaded motif and aged threads. The materials expressed the Victorian period through the hand cut irregular jet-black beads, long black incomplete beaded fringe, and faded black silk. These aesthetic qualities together suggested to me that the piece may have been a



**Figure 3**

Remains of a broken-down Victorian purse/capelet? RACHAEL CASSAR documentation shot 2022.

mourning accessory. During the Victorian period, mourning attire was an outward expression of grief, where one would dress head to toe in black (Bedikian 2008).



The visible stitches seen on the remains of the object embodied the multiple people who constructed and repaired the piece, and the sewing techniques once employed. This understanding was important to the transformation of the archive, because by intensely studying the materiality, I forged a connection to its absent information, what the material embodied and to its survival story – both past and present past.

The material's imagined absences encouraged further empathy and understanding toward the materials. The debris' inherent ambiguity was forcing a recognition of a moment or object no longer wholly there. An absent style, form, individual and experience. The ambiguity of the pieces together increased the impact of the debris presence, as it conjured up multiple – yet ultimately incomplete – narratives. For example, I can only speculate that [Figure 3](#) is a remain of a purse or a capelet and that Mary Ellen Tuite may have been in mourning. By acknowledging the debris as relics, as fragments belonging to incomplete narratives, they took on multiple historical meanings, whilst acting as a souvenir of the archive transformation. This enriched my attachment and intrigue with the material.

Surprisingly, the debris as a souvenir was deepening my understanding of my upcycling process, symbolizing the change happening to the archive in the present. The broken-down materiality of the debris (and its cut-away, displaced state) was showcasing my making method of removing and changing an historic object's original form. A likened to an archaeologist, *I was discovering material fragments to my own history*. Accordingly, the debris began to take on a new narrative of representing my process, which shifted its meaning beyond the historical. This entangled dynamic between past and present was appealing, leading my routine action of saving and placing all debris in a box during the reforming process.

Shifting focus from past to present, revealed both the archives tangible and intangible heritage. For example, the cotton lace scraps ([Figure 4](#)) removed from the garment were giving me a tangible connection to an intangible past moment – the moment occupied by whomever made the 1800s bobbin tape lace, or whichever experience caused the tape to be mended in parts. My connection to the material was further strengthened by my own trace of cutting the material away from the larger textile in order to re-work and change the dress. Therefore, this scrap lace could express both the past and the changing present past. It became an old and new object to engage with.

This shifting between states and meanings from the debris expanded my understanding of the historic materials that I was working with - that the historic meaning of material can be extremely powerful and symbolic when broken down, reflecting multiple new narratives. For example, debris is historic remains of something changed, broken, thrown away or destroyed, something that cannot be relived. In other words, the separated materials, the bits of debris, were symbolic of



**Figure 4**

'Deconstructed lace debris' belonging to Mary Ellen Tuite's archive. RACHAEL CASSAR documentation shot 2021.

what they once were, whilst also communicating what they newly are in the present.

This focus toward what is conventionally removed and discarded is important to this research as it diversified my engagement beyond the ready-made objects within Mary Ellen Tuite's archive. Despite engaging with the complete garments, the fragmented materials (Figure 5) have drawn increasing focus through the reforming process, highlighting the powerful force of fragmentation and its ability to encourage understanding, care and inspire design.

The process of keeping debris, sensitized me to the layered narratives that this type of fragmented materiality can imbue: in which I was now apart. Merleau-Ponty (2004) argues that if we are in a position of looking at and analyzing the world, we cannot remove ourselves from the world we look at. In other words, subjective experience is entangled in understanding an object's materiality which permits dual meanings and significances and can affect the way we understand historical objects, and in this case the way we reuse.



**Figure 5**

'The debris'. Adding debris to the box belonging to Mary Ellen Tuite's archive. RACHAEL CASSAR documentation shot 2021.

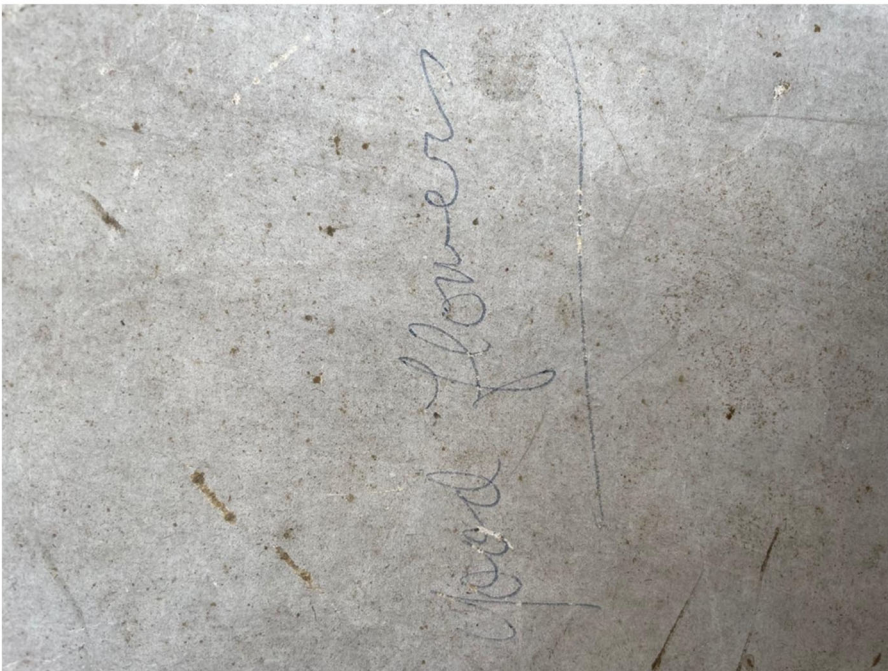
### **'Good Flowers': The Box**

#### ***A place to rest, understand, play and sensually explore the debris materiality***

The box where the debris were laid acted as an integral tool for understanding and harnessing the thought-provoking materiality. The box, (Figure 6), was similar in age to the materials and had as many traces of time present in the way it is faded, battered and broken at the seams. Visible on the lid were bruises of past engagements through old tattered stains, yellowed sticky-taped edges and dirt marks from finger use, topped off with led handwriting on the lid that read "*Good flowers*" (Figure 7). A decorative paper doily trim framed the interior perimeter of the box, aiding aesthetic understanding of its age.

When I placed the debris in the box, it became recontextualised from a scrap to a debris, proving a vital tool for me to investigate, play and then transition the materials from waste to relic.

**Figure 6**  
'Good flowers'. Box from Mary Ellen Tuite's archive. RACHAEL CASSAR documentation shot 2021.



**Figure 7**  
'Good flowers'. Handwriting on box from Mary Ellen Tuite's archive. RACHAEL CASSAR documentation shot 2021.

In this way, the box was performing almost as a reliquary – a means for saving, honoring and transporting sacred substances of relics (Hahn 2010). For example, when debris is scattered and separated from other

materials, its historicity is easily overlooked as it appears as an insignificant material scrap due to its small and broken down form. One could easily overlook and discarded such a scrap of fabric. However, when debris is accumulated, placed, arranged and contained in a box, the waste and its aesthetic qualities immediately elicits study and understanding of its absent presences. Thus, the box encouraged the aestheticization of debris materiality, allowing one to further appreciate, understand and experience its relic attributes and the symbolic meanings it embodied.

The experience of analyzing the debris in the box, could be understood as a method for understanding the archive's absences whilst also prompting reflection on the upcycling process. As Ingold states, 'might we not learn more about the material composition of the inhabited world by engaging quite directly with the stuff we want to understand?' (Ingold 2007, 1–6). Further stating that such engagements with materials offer a more powerful process of discovery than an approach based on the 'abstract analysis of things already made?' (2007, 1–16). In this way, every piece of material from the archive could further unveil and incite historical and upcycling process knowledge.

For example, the box contained years of accumulated debris (Figure 8). layers upon layers of small incomplete material rubble that belonged to the archive. Sifting through the vast densities and scales of materials allowed reflection of my process and of the archive's original forms and structures. The debris working together aesthetically, elicited care, empathy and value.

The *Good flowers* box was a tool for saving all broken-down bits from my design process (Figures 8 and 9). I frequently played with the debris, adding and taking away, inspecting what lived within the box. The scraps all had a place within a confined space; a space that framed the single beads or buttons with the other deconstructed components. Playing with the debris revealed different material relationships which is similar to a collaging process. I could arrange the small pieces within the box to create different material compositions which influenced their reuse.

## Reflection

### ***The Narrative Importance of Debris: Creation and Destruction***

*I stood up from my position on the floor of my studio, where I had been cutting and reworking the lace of the black Victorian dress, (Figure 10). I noticed the tiny black threads snowing onto my legs, and onto my studio floor. The threads joined a large pile of cutting debris that was building up around the base of the mannequin (Figure 11). I ran my fingers through the threaded fibers. I felt the changes taking place.*



**Figure 8**

Debris in box from Mary Ellen Tuite's archive. RACHAEL CASSAR documentation shot 2021.

*The debris was displaying how much deconstruction I had done to the original lace textile ...*

*Remorse was boiling within me and I felt affinity toward the threads I had cut away. I grabbed the "good flowers" box that sat nearby, where within I had previously placed other archive debris from Mary Ellen's collection. Broken beaded threads, rotting rope, single beads. Without thinking too much, I gathered and sprinkled the mounds of threads over the random elements, like a sprinkling of ashes. Once landed, the debris dissolved into comfortable surroundings.*

*Through the dense texture of the deconstructed threads, I could identify certain yarns that had come from specific parts of the dress, singular threads that were still twisted and curled, as they once were when woven into the decorative lace. Some parts remained woven as webbed circles (Figure 12).*

My process of scooping, piling and keeping threads and lace tapes together (Figure 12) displays how I was recognizing the narrative importance of the debris within the original archive. Such importance emerges



**Figure 9**

'Good flowers'. Archive debris placed in a box from Mary Ellen Tuite's archive. RACHAEL CASSAR documentation shot 2021.

when an object is embedded in a narrative and therefore embodies different meanings – reflecting people, place and moments in time. In this way, by viewing the debris as a story, it offered a more complete picture of what the object really is and the layered meaning it might have (Dillon and Howe 2003).

The threads and tapes have multiple meanings. For example, the threads can be understood as yarn. They can be understood for their function, which is a spun thread to hold something together. The threads can reflect the maker and their trace of using the threads. The threads can also insinuate their place in the original textile, from how the thread has been manipulated; what type of stitch has been used and why? In this way, the threads also are connected to Mary Ellen Tuite, as they once interacted with her garment and therefore her body. Additionally, through my process of deconstructing the debris, the threads now are relational to myself and the archive's transformation, as I unpicked and cut them from the garment. When understanding debris in this way, the detritus has layered narratives, and it offers opportunity to realize an object's emerging meaning (Dillon and Howe 2003). Thus, the debris historical importance is re-presented through its new form, and its historicity continues.

For example, the circular woven web (Figure 12), when removed and placed in the box, started to unravel. I pulled on the loose thread, and the circular shape unraveled. I got to experience the rewinding of the

**Figure 10**

'Victorian lace deconstructed producing debris' belonging to Mary Ellen Tuite's archive.  
RACHAEL CASSAR  
documentation shot 2021.



woven circle. The way the thread had been woven around a cross pattern could not be fully comprehended when visually analyzing it within the complete textile. By deconstructing and playing with the debris in the box, I got to experience it, rewinding its make. Thus, when broken down and unraveled, debris continued to embody historical information and offered a historical experience.

Engaging with debris in the box enlightened understanding toward the materials I was working with, period techniques, and the maker through my own involvement of fragmenting the object. In this way, by responding to the debris, I was trying to make sense of it, and at the same time I was involved with it (Dillon and Howe 2003). Thus, sifting through debris, was exposing new narratives and experiences about the historic archive, that could only be fully realized and experienced through the broken-down and fragmented materiality.

*Rummaging through the box forged a new and important dynamic with the archive, likened to visiting a personal demolition site. I was sifting through granular debris rubble and seeking to identify what was once there – feeling bits of memories wrapped up in the way a trim had been frayed or a button was still threaded and covered in silk. Broken*





**Figure 11**

Deconstructed threads cut away from Mary Ellen Tuite's garment. RACHAEL CASSAR documentation shot 2021.



**Figure 12**

Deconstructed circular woven web from Mary Ellen Tuite's garment. RACHAEL CASSAR documentation shot 2021.



**Figure 13**

'Unraveled beaded trim debris' belonging to Mary Ellen Tuite's archive. RACHAEL CASSAR documentation shot 2019.

*beads, fibers, dirt and dust. Signs of long-gone structures, interiors and exteriors, people and place.*

The Good flowers box provided a distance between the reforming work in progress on the stand and the cut away debris in the box, which permitted the treatment of both materials as distinct, as I viewed the debris with a different lens. In other words, the archive and material is abstracted and reinterpreted through fragmentation.

### **Designing with Debris:**

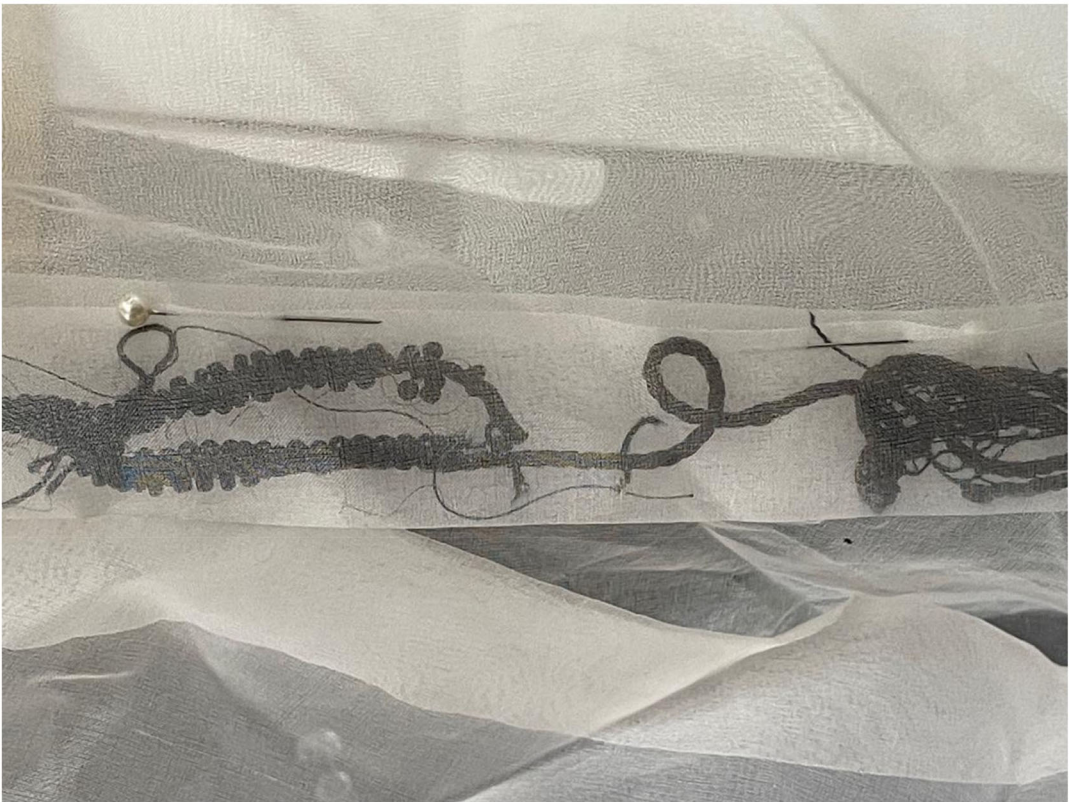
#### ***Keeping memories in place before returning to them in the future***

It is helpful to understand how in my established fashion practice, reworking damaged surfaces is common exercise. Many different techniques can be applied to transform and repair material to a resolved, upcycled state. For example, when one is working with fragmented textiles, common practice would be to stitch all the materials back together

to produce a span of fabric to work with, like a patchworking technique. When one works with broken things, you are negotiating how to work with the fragmented materiality, yet still transform and manipulate it to appear whole again.

Interestingly, the debris inspired new making techniques. In line with this focus upon fragmented materials, I have developed an approach that foregrounds its materiality; rubble of the archive narrative, debris of an upcycling transformation, material relics signaling creation and destruction.

For example, I explored the singular, fragmented aesthetic of the debris, which is imperfect and fragile. An encasing technique was employed to keep the materials as debris, without subjecting it to any textile transformation that might conceal or erase the context. In [Figure 14](#), an incomplete trim is visible through the transparent seam. Having the trim visible, extends a layer of the archive's story, prompting one to seek for the twists and nuances that went into the making of the object (Dillon and Howe 2003).



**Figure 14**

Encased debris, deconstructed beaded trim. RACHAEL CASSAR documentation shot 2022.

**Figure 15**  
'Encased sequined collar in  
Jacket opening'. RACHAEL  
CASSAR documentation shot  
2022.



The debris placement in the garment reflects its largely independent and fragmented form. The form prompts thought toward its previous use. It also prompts thought toward its maker; whomever wrapped the beads around the rope, and why the rope is discolored. This is just one example of how a debris, when encased and focussed upon, can communicate and sustain multiple narratives. Speculating as to the debris history, imagining its past and present is part of our care for the materials. Thus, encasing debris forces a pondering of people, place, time and experiences, connecting us to creative process and to the archive.

In the normal course of creative making, these materials would go unnoticed. Noticing the debris as noteworthy influenced the course of my creative actions with the entire archive. I experimented with preserving fragmented materials in seams that acted as capsules, to represent the material's past and present (Figures 15 and 16). This can be understood as a shifting of meaning from the materials, which foregrounds Lyotard's (1988) argument, that some narratives can sustain an awareness of other narratives. In their mundanity, the debris hinted at multiple pasts including the present past; the reforming of the archive.



**Figure 16**

Encased debris, deconstructed beaded trim and buttons. RACHAEL CASSAR documentation shot 2022.

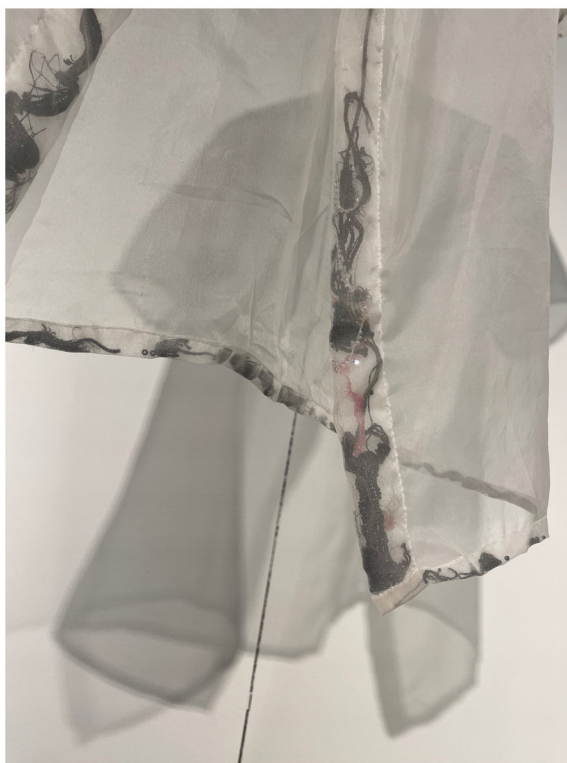
The encased debris can move, change, evolve or corrode further; the channel preserves and provides a platform for aesthetic change. This is an important factor, as I enabled the materiality to be valued for its own aesthetic and symbolic meaning, even in a further unraveled and fragmented state. Like with a time capsule, I was anticipating not only future understanding of the materials past, but the unification of the present future and that future's past (Durrans 2014). For example, encasing debris rendered it as ontologically ambiguous, preserving its matter and attributes for existential understanding (Figure 17).

Encasing debris in garments (Figure 17) and accessories (Figure 18) challenges traditional methods of historical fashion preservation, as the garments and accessories can be worn and are susceptible to change. Caroline Evans discusses fashion's ability to experiment with historical materials and their meanings:

Fashion designers call up the ghosts of modernity and offer us a paradigm that is different from the historian's paradigm, remixing fragments of the past into something new and contemporary that

**Figure 17**

Debris encased in shirt seams.  
RACHAEL CASSAR  
documentation shot 2023.



will continue to resonate into the future. They illuminate how we live in the world and what it means to be a modern subject (Evans and Edwards 2003, p. 9)

In this way, the garments and accessories suggest and echo other objects, providing insights into their functions and purposes (Dillon and Howe 2003). Having the debris visible in seams, allows further understanding of its materiality, reflecting the upcycling process. Therefore, process debris inspired experimentation with concepts of preservation for new creative fashion ideas.

*I walked over to Mary Ellen Tuite's ostrich plumes. I noticed a distressed feather hanging out of place. The top of the feather had snapped at the spine and some of its hairs were missing. I broke off the piece, walked over to the white blouse housing the debris, and slipped the tired feather into the seam crease. Mary Ellen's feather had stepped into the future.*

### **Care and Materiality**

The materiality of debris was particularly significant in eliciting care – the way that it enabled one to collect, organize, and handle it

**Figure 18**

Debris encased in a bangle  
made from crinoline RACHAEL  
CASSAR documentation shot  
2023.



sensitively. Placing the debris in the box recognized the debris as matter that matters, with an important biography. Notions of the aforementioned care have been linked to practices of reuse. For example, conscious care in reuse is described as a ‘reevaluation and care which recall and build upon embedded meaning, affect, social histories and the properties of materials’ (Isenhour and Reno 2019, 1–8). When reuse is framed in this way, it positions upcycling outside circular systems, where the main trajectory for worn materials is transitioning them to a mere resource. Similar to caring for people, caring for used and fragmented materials involves an ethics of attending to the other who matters (Stevenson 2014) and in doing so, positions the material beyond a commodity (Figure 19). For example, the debris matters as its material value is challenged due to attributes of age and fragmentation, which would traditionally render the fashion material as waste and also de-historicise it.

To characterize reuse as a form of care work (Figure 20), means recognizing the reuse of debris as fundamentally ethical and not only aesthetic or resource focused. This then extends our understanding of upcycling as a process which attends to an object’s materiality, as well

**Figure 19**  
'Encased debris' in raincoat  
seams. RACHAEL CASSAR  
documentation shot 2023.



as a concern for its past, present and future. This expanded definition builds upon the importance of engaging with the tangible and intangible realm to materials, understanding them as narratives with embedded meanings which push for a consideration of ethics. A consideration of the debris inspired experimentation with concepts surrounding preservation. The encasing technique preserved the materials historical meanings and value.

For example, when noticing the debris on the floor of my studio, there emerged a moral obligation to understand the materiality and my place within it. This can be understood as a form of attentiveness to the material and to the archive. Attentiveness is a virtue of care, a form of 'moral perception', it can be defined as an awareness and sensitivity to situations that call for a moral response (Blum 1994). In other words, through the acknowledgement that my process involves cutting away part of a fashion narrative, it pushed for an ethos of care toward all materials. This could be further understood as a zero waste philosophy, where every bit of material has value for a more circular system of reusing. Zero waste in fashion is defined as a 'community of fashion producers and users who eliminate waste'





**Figure 20**

'Good flowers'. Caring for and protecting the debris. Mary Ellen Tuite's garment. RACHAEL CASSAR documentation shot 2019.

(Rissanen 2005, p. 2). Reusing debris is a reevaluation of material value, a form of care which makes such debris engagement all the more valuable.

Care was showcased in the way I cradled, protected and attended to the broken-down materiality, by collecting and placing debris in a box (Figure 20). Caring for materials that appear broken or fragile, fragmented or distressed can be appreciated as an activity that maintains, continues, and repairs our world (Tronto 2020). In this way, care is a sensitive dynamic established between practitioner and material and in this research was realized through the reuse of what is typically overlooked and discarded in a studio environment.

Attending to overlooked materials elaborates on care as an emotion, a feeling, a relationship, and an action and in this way, care is a multi-faceted concept. For example, the process of collecting debris provoked an intimate relationship with the archive's narrative. I was caring, laboring, and understanding the debris' historic resonances whilst still obligated to its future story. The action of concerning myself with the debris' future story, exemplifies that reuse practice has the possibility of pushing material processes and experiences in unexpected directions, which can transform one's relationship with waste (Albinsson and Yasanthi Perera 2012). This is evident through my capacity to collect and reuse small material fragments.

## **Material orders of worth**

### ***Arrangement and reuse of things ...***

Within reuse practices, there is an expectation to repair or resituate objects that are out of place. Upcycling, mending and altering is serving to recycle and resituate discarded materials. In this way, order confines objects to a place within a system of networks, limiting and regulating the more sensual, emotional, enchanting and unexplanatory power of things. For example, it is not common practice to keep and play with broken-down threads, let alone wear them without re-working them to appear back in 'place'. While objects equally exist, they do not exist equally (Bogost 2012). In other words, orders of worth usually dictate material relationships, and a materials application. Engaging with materiality challenges orders of worth and in this case by encasing debris, unlikely fashion materials are resituated as worthy.

Furthermore, orders of worth and capitalist logic encourage a 'rational' relationship with materials and materiality, suppressing the agency of the material beyond original function or repair. For example, when garments are too worn, or materials are broken down like debris, capitalist logic would drive discarding and replacing the material. Thus, I read my process of encasing the debris as trying to preserve its value, which challenges capitalist logic and reevaluates a material's order of worth.

Edensor (2005) takes up this point in relation to ruin materials. He discusses a material's worth within social structures and ordering. He debates how order is partly maintained by the predictable and regular distribution of objects in space. Edensor writes:

Rarely subject to conscious reflection, the situation of objects in their assigned places, and the impulse to resituate them 'properly' when they fall out of position, testifies to a common sense idea that there is a place for everything and everything in its place. (Edensor 2005, 211–327)

In this way, process debris is conventionally not clearly understood as a material to reuse, or to value, or to place - as it is small in scale, fragmented, and can be ambiguous in shape and form. This attitude would usually encourage a disengagement with the material and the debris would be rendered as waste. By collecting and reusing process debris, the typically devalued, out-of-place, sensual state of the material is revalued.

## **Shifting orientations**

### ***A nostalgic past and entangled future***

Merleau-Ponty's (2004) two dimensions of 'flesh' chiasm illuminates the entanglement of the debris meanings. The chiasm combines both a form

**Figure 21**

Label tag as debris encased in crinoline bangle RACHAEL CASSAR documentation shot 2023.



of experience (tactile experience) and something that can be touched. It is both 'touching' and 'tangible'. For example, my orientation was shifting between being the subject and the object. The debris triggered tangible actions (gathering, playing, encasing) all the while affecting my existential understanding of the materials and their meanings (past people, experiences, past and present). Within such an entanglement I became the object and subject of the debris materiality, a manner of being; which provides access both to subjective experience and objective existence (Merleau-Ponty 2004). This experience is further articulated by Sampson (Sampson 2018a, 2018b), who argues that the 'artefact and the maker are in a constant and reiterative dialogue, and that in the act of making the maker is themselves remade' (2018a, p. 345). For example, throughout the garments and accessories that house debris, I have encased my fashion label's tag, loose within the objects (Figure 21). This is an existential expression of understanding my trace within the archive and representing myself and my process as debris.

In this way, my design actions express the shifting of orientation with the archive materials which evoked waves of nostalgia; a deep sense of respect for the materials past and an enlightened understanding

of my relationship with the object's future. Hallam and Hockey (2020) describe this type of nostalgic experience with material culture as a mediation with death and the dead; objects, images and practices. They argue that objects can remind us of the death of others and indeed force reflection inward toward our own mortality and trace. For example, the debris was an insistent reminder of the mystery as familiar, as I could empathize with the past maker and wearer, the archive, material and its temporality. This guided creative solutions, where I was responded to the materials meanings by designing with them, mediating such nostalgic sensations.

Seeking and acknowledging clues of fragmented fashion; stories, moments, sentiments, textures, experiences, feelings and memories through material, is a de-commodifying and nostalgic process. For example, encasing debris is a form of nostalgia itself, an affective meeting between subject and object, a summons between bodies human and nonhuman (Kitson and McHugh 2015). Debris represented lost experiences shared by both subject and object, both affecting each other through a material enchantment.

Throughout history, emotional feelings with material culture, brought about by nostalgia have been varied and quite broad (Kessous and Roux 2008). Nostalgia is often labeled a 'state of melancholy to human alienation based on an awareness of one's finite condition' (Kessous and Roux 2008). Nostalgia today is still commonly discussed as a limitation, a process that inhibits progress and development, a quest for lost time which conflicts with contemporary design trajectories. However, my experience with the debris proposes that nostalgia can also be defined as an opportunity to connect back to the sensitivity of our senses. For example, debris is a physical trace, it stimulates sensations of the past, connecting us to heritage, people and place. This is an enchanted process which produced experimentation with concepts of preservation, and re-creation. Experimenting with preservation leads new and innovative ways of relaying historical information.

Through archive material explorations, I identify that I was enchanted by materials and their nostalgic potentials. This attaches me to the material world and to history, providing the affective motive for ethical engagement. Bennett (2001) describes enchantment as 'agentic capacities' both human and non-human affecting perceptions, a somatic sensual felt receptivity. Enchantment energizes and enlivens us by presenting us with a world that lively. Lively engagements can encourage further ethical and sustainable relationships between designer, material and craft. Thus, in this way being enchanted through nostalgic material encounters can challenge concepts of disposability and obsolescence.

The encasing method inspired by the debris engagement, mediated nostalgic sensations with Mary Ellen Tuite's materials and captured the lively relationship that exists when reforming historical materials in the present. For example, when deconstructing a sequined flapper dress, a

hidden floral lace scrap was exposed within a side seam (Figure 22). This lace scrap was placed in the good flowers box, becoming a debris. The scrap was small, and irregular in cut and shape. Such a discovery ignited thought toward multiple narratives; one being a material communication from the maker; inserting secret remnants to tell their own story.

Thinking in this way is a form of nostalgia which shifts my orientation with the archive materials, guiding me to sustain, include and



**Figure 22**

'Hidden floral lace scrap found within blue flapper dress' belonging to Mary Ellen Tuite's archive. Encased in collar. RACHAEL CASSAR documentation shot 2022.

encase the small lace scrap. In [Figure 22](#), the scrap is visible through a collar structure. Thus, my enchantment with this debris is highlighted and celebrated for its historical importance.

## **Conclusion: preserving and conserving debris**

### ***A reflection of change***

A thorough engagement with debris has foregrounded the layered material heritage that I was creatively experimenting with. This awareness is worth discussing when upcycling historic materials as it pushed me to be more conscious with all materials, leading to the experimentation with preservation concepts.

The existence and role of preservation underlying historic conservation is well documented within Architecture (Prudon 2017). The design discipline has an established dialogue of designing with historic materials. Common strategies and philosophies exist when architects work with historical structures. Preservation of memory is embedded in Architecture's social and cultural approach to sustaining historic materials- at least in part due to the postwar preservation movement and its focus on the human and cultural aspects of historic architecture (Prudon 2017). In this way, contemporary architecture and its response to the historic, vastly contrasts fashion's approach to upcycling and reworking historic textiles as conservation and reuse is not typically discussed.

A report on heritage from the Getty Conservation Institute discusses that the aim of conservation is not to conserve material for its own sake but to maintain and shape the values embodied by that heritage (Douglas-Jones et al. 2016). The report suggests that materials traverse an intangible realm – a realm that encompasses multiple narratives and biographies that shape our understanding of history, culture and identity. The report also suggests that by sustaining certain historical foundations, heritage can be curated to maintain present meanings.

Architectural heritage is helpful when figuring out ways to contend and upcycle historic textiles, and the possible implications from how we reform and represent the past. In other words, historical values and heritage can be embodied within redesigns. For example, throughout my design process, it was important to conserve the debris materiality as it was deepening my responsibility to maintain the intangible histories and values attached to the historic materials.

Architecture, due to its many regulated heritage foundations and preservation bodies, promotes sensitive integrations of past and future materials, which forces contemporary innovation when incorporating the fragmented old with the new. A collective design sensitivity exists between history, time, identity, memory, heritage, people and place through an architect's considered reference and use of historic materials and structural traces. For example, within modern renovations or



**Figure 23**

'Grand Design – Ruin transformation build'. <https://www.stuff.co.nz/life-style/homed/latest/128142915/grand-designs-uk-heritageprotected-riverside-ruin-is-bulldozed>.

transformations, old structures and historic details are often seen highlighted within contemporary contrasting spaces. Common techniques such as exposing and highlighting traces of the historic materials in Figure 23, a contemporary clad shape sits within a ruin-like facade. The ruin debris and the new materials within this building are working together at sustaining the materials past in the present, which is understood as vital collective cultural memory to sustain.

Similarly, in this project, encasing the debris in structural seams and hems within a new garment, brought its biographical context back to the archive, and to the forefront of the archive transformation. Debris returned to its position on the body (Figure 24) in an evolved, contemporary mode, comparable to the ruins in Figure 23, where the old stone bricks belonging to a structural ruin were incorporated back into the structure of the new build.

Thus, the findings from this study align with Pye (1968) examination of the idea that every material has inherent properties that can be either expressed or suppressed in use. The agency, value and expression of the debris' historic materiality was displayed through the collection, arrangement, and sustainment of its forms within reformed garments and accessories.

Before being deconstructed, the debris encased belonged to historic garments, hems, cuffs, waists, lace, fastenings, purses, collars, seams and structures, all of which contained fragments of personal histories of the

**Figure 24**

Experimenting with encasing debris within a contemporary form. RACHAEL CASSAR documentation shot 2023.



maker, wearer and designer. Each piece of debris was once part of a collective memory and narrative that represented people, place fashion and time. The results from my analysis showcase that experimenting and searching for an appropriate synergy between including and excluding is an important responsibility and part of the creative tension of upcycling. Thus, responsibility proves to be a vital motivation for upcycling materials.

My auto-ethnographic methodology revealed that when historic materials are deconstructed and reused, debris can open up a space for innovation. This research suggests that scraps, remnants, and detritus should not be disengaged with, but experienced, nurtured, and pulled upon for creative inclusion. Debris express a material's tangible and intangible value, which prompts a dialogue around materiality, people, place, process and preservation. As Stallybrass states, such an experience is 'piecing' as 'peacing': pieces that make peace between the living and the dead (Stallybrass 1993, 2012). In this way, every material fragment has a valuable story and can bridge the gap between the past and the present. Once understood in this way, fragments make one obligated to a material's past, present and future.



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