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# Circles and Mistakes:

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*Interview conducted by Blanca Callén  
and Melisa Duque via email  
in February 2023*

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# Interview with Tim Ingold

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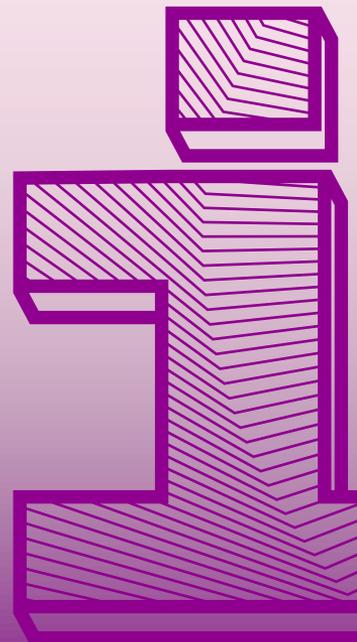
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**Interview**

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**Diseña**

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Tim Ingold is a British anthropologist, Social Anthropology Professor at the University of Aberdeen, Fellow of the British Academy, and Fellow of the Royal Society of Edinburgh. He has explored the relationship between anthropology, architecture, art, and design; and through his work, has invited us to ‘think through making’ and ‘learn by doing’.

Ingold is the author of *Evolution and Social Life* (Cambridge University Press, 1986); *Lines: A Brief History* (Routledge, 2007); *Making: Anthropology, Archaeology, Art and Architecture* (Routledge, 2010); and *Anthropology: Why it Matters* (Polity, 2018), among many other books. In this interview he responds to some questions about the practice of repair in his own daily life, but also the role and comprehension of repair in his intellectual work, and the possible connection between such action and the act of design.

The reasons for this brief interview on repair are clear: if, for Tim Ingold, design, art, and architecture are possible ways of exploring how human beings imagine, perceive, create, or transform the worlds we inhabit, could we understand repair as another way of exploring and understanding how we give continuity, through time and material wear and tear, to this world we inhabit?

Situating his position in what he calls the 'ontogenetic turn' (2021, p. 359), Ingold urges us to explore how things come to be: the processes by which sentient attention, consciousness, techniques, and materials flow, permeate each other, in tension and friction... until they reach a compromise that makes the existence of things possible. And is it not this same permeability, tension, and temporal commitment that also permeates any reparative gesture?

For Ingold, "things are alive because they leak" (2008, p. 10). If so, then repair and maintenance, understood as improvised creative practices, seem central to achieving the material, but never definitive, sustainability of the ecosystems we live with. As Ingold himself states, "life is open-ended: its impulse is not to come to an end, but to keep itself going" (2008, p. 10).

Echoing the example that Ingold will adduce later in this interview, in his book *The Life of Lines* he writes about knots and joins through the example of carpentry. He says that "carpentry is otherwise known as joinery, the carpenter as a joiner" (2015, p. 22) who creates these joins by establishing "relations not of articulation but of *sympathy*" in a process of 'correspondence' with materials and with the memories these hold (2015, p. 25). Below, we find this sympathy with materials in Ingold's description of his process of repairing the joins of a wooden chair inherited from his grandparents, which he uses to play the cello.

The joins in this chair can be a reminder of their humble role, more broadly, in keeping things in place while often being subjected to imperceptible stresses and tensions. These are joins that reveal themselves at points of breakage, and in doing so make hidden stories accessible. Such stories then become clues in processes of repair, where the sequence of loose joins informs the repairer of where to go next. In the course of this process, the sounds of Ingold's cello are exchanged for those of handling and maneuvering the chair's bars and legs, using his own hands in an embodied, sensory, and reflective combination of movements. These intentional moves, similar yet different from those of handling the cello's bow and fingerboard, aim to restore the stability of the chair, so that the cello sessions can resume. In a continual loop of

overlapping temporalities, the present repair leads Ingold to conclude that in the future he will be “bound to have to glue it together again!”

The detachment of these wooden joints and the silence of the wooden cello in its case may also create a space for design reflection, to acknowledge the histories of these materials before they acquired their current forms. It reminds us that the wood, both of the chair and the cello, came from trees that once stood in the forest. Would these trees have made a sound when they fell, even if no one was there to hear? Repairing the chair while listening to the music of the cello and the sounds of re-joining the wooden legs, gives us a chance to imagine the sounds of these falling trees. This can prompt us to think about the possibilities of repair in sympathy with broader ecologies, while repairing the loose joints in our relationships with the material world with which we are all bound up.

Sounds, Ingold says, are:

**Products of a fission/fusion reaction. Whether sung or played with an instrument, they pour from the silence of pitch as colour from the blackness of tar. There is, then, no opposition between the musical or melodic line and the line of sound. When I play, the line that issues from my cello is a line of sound, and it is the line of sound that you hear, and hear with, when you listen. Sound breathes life into the line just as colour does. It is a phenomenon of atmosphere. (2015, p. 111)**

With these words vibrating in your mind, we invite you to listen to the sounds of Ingold’s responses, below, as you read. Maybe listening to cello music can create a pleasant atmosphere for finding with it your own lines of thought, and interpretations of how repair and design can continue to work forward, hand-in-hand.

Perhaps in the answers to these questions, Ingold, as a repair practitioner, has not only told us about his experience, but has shown one of his ways home.

**Could you share an image, scene, memory, or experience of repair that you enjoyed? Or felt frustrated with?**

The other day I was repairing a wooden, wheel-back chair. I don’t know how old it is, but it must have been made at least a century ago, as it has come down to our family from my paternal grandparents’ house. I use it when I play the cello, since the seat is of just the right height for the purpose, and it has no arms that would get in the way. But when I play, I lean forward, almost on the edge of the seat, and this puts a

lot of pressure not only on the front legs but also on the frame as a whole, which includes a horizontal bar connecting each front leg with the corresponding back leg, and another crossbar linking these two bars at their center-points. Each joint is formed by fitting the round leg or crossbar into a corresponding hole. The problem with the chair was that under pressure of use, several of the joints were working loose, with the risk of imminent collapse.

The repair job was simple. All I needed to do was apply wood glue to the adjoining surfaces and press the components back into place. But it was easier said than done! I had to wriggle around to get the glue into the right places, and it often happened that as I was fixing one piece, the piece I had previously fixed would fall out of its hole and I would have to go back and start again. It would be fair to say that I came to regard the chair in a quite different light from how I had seen it before, in two ways. First, rather than a single object, given all at once, I began to see it as a looped sequence: first A, then B, then C, then A again, then D, then C again, then E and F, then D again, then finally G. And second, I saw it not as a flat surface to sit on, but as a complicated arrangement of legs and bars, around and between which I had to improvise a passage with my arm and hand.



### **What roles have repairing and its family of practices played in your work?**

My work is mostly thinking and writing. Thus, I ask myself: are thoughts and writings the sort of things that can be repaired? And if so, what would this entail? Certainly, when writing, I often find that there are things that need to be fixed. Maybe I find that I have contradicted myself, or said something that just doesn't make sense, or misused words, or phrased something in a way that is open to being misread. I fix these things in the usual way, by editing the text. In this sense, all editing is repair work. And since I think as I write, and write as I think, it isn't really possible to distinguish the repair of writing from the repair of thinking.

It is much the same with playing the cello. You play something, find that you have made a mistake, and correct it by going over the same passage again, and again, in the hopes that it will eventually come out right. That is practice. But with playing as with thinking and writing, every correction is an original performance. It is going over the same thing again, but with a difference. I wonder whether it is the same with the chair. After a while, I am bound to have to glue it together again!

**If the practice of repair and the practice of design were two characters of a vignette, what would they say to each other?**

**Design:** “I think we should go this way, to the right.”

**Repair:** “I’m sure we’ve been here before, and last time we went left.”

**D:** “Well, we are going right anyway.” Sometime later...

**D:** “Hmm, we seem to have gotten a bit lost; this isn’t where I imagined we would be by now.”

**R:** “I told you so, we should have gone left back then.”

**D:** “Sure thing. We’ll have to retrace our steps and turn left this time.”

**R:** “Lucky you have me with you, to show you where you’ve gone wrong. I can correct your mistakes.”

**D:** “And it’s lucky that you’re with me, or we’d never get anywhere at all but end up going round and round in circles.”

**How could repair be a design and research method?**

Repair is a research method almost by definition. Literally, ‘repair’ means to go back to some place you were before and begin again from there—as in the vignette. And ‘research’ means ‘to search and search again’. It is a second search. In research, every move doubles up on what you did before, but is yet an original intervention that invites a double in its turn. Thus, to my mind, ‘research’ and ‘repair’ mean pretty much the same thing. What both research and repair are trying to do is to find a way beyond wherever you are now. And that is also what ‘method’ means—from the Ancient Greek *meta* (‘beyond’) plus *hodos* (‘way’). And if you succeed, and you do actually manage to move on, well, that is design!

**What are the possibilities and limits of repair at political levels?**

I suppose this is a question about whether you can repair a broken society, and if so, how. The question is very relevant these days. But perhaps all politics is repair, insofar as every political intervention is intended to fix or correct something that is perceived to have gone wrong. The corollary of this is that no society can be constructed from scratch. Like it or not, no one can intervene save from some position in the social world to which each one of us owes our existence. If we cannot exist outside the social world, it follows that every change has to be instigated from within it, as an alteration or correction to an existing state of

affairs—or, in short, as a repair. Could we characterize social life itself as an ongoing process of mutual reparation?

**What would you ask a repair practitioner?**

The same as I would ask anyone, since we are all practitioners of repair. “Can you tell me the way home?” **D**

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