This text was written on the lands of the Wurundjeri Woi Wurrung people. We extend respect to their Ancestors and Elders past, present, and emerging, and to all First Nations people. Sovereignty was never ceded. This was, and always will be, Aboriginal land.

Anna Dunnill

Hot Compost Home Tour 2024

Making-do, June

Open for Inspection, July

Grow home, September

Homecoming, December

A project by Emily Simek in collaboration with Merri Cheyne, Anna Dunnill, Eric Jong, Mei Sun and Doug Webb, produced on unceded Wurundjeri land.

The house shelters daydreaming, the house protects the dreamer, the house allows one to dream in peace.

– Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space* [1]

Emily asks me to write about this project. Straight away I can see that I could pretty much start writing and continue forever without stopping. Compost! Quilting! Homes! Art! So much to write about, each thought spawning a network of interconnected new thoughts like an ever-growing mycelium.

I have been as concise as I possibly can. But when a project is so big and expansive – and when a textile tradition encompasses so much – how do you decide what to include and what to leave out? It's a rich glorious compost, and I couldn't wait to get my hands in it.

At the core of this project is a quilt, made by Emily, that travels to three different homes in turn, for a month each. Each leg of the home tour is curated by the home's occupant: first Merri, then Eric, then Mei.

Each stop on the tour carries a different expression of what a 'home' means and how a quilt might function within it. A house lived in continuously for thirty-seven years. A one-bedroom flat on a precarious lease. A space extending beyond the walls of the house into community gardens, schools, and the soil we share with numerous small creatures.

There are screen-printed tour shirts.

I start writing.

The Hot Compost Quilt

Here is how art happens: you make one thing, and then it leads to another thing.

You can't get to the second thing without the first thing.

In this project, as in the rest of Emily's art practice, the first thing is broken down to become the second thing. Nutrients are added – new people, new processes – to feed the project. The project is alive and it is hungry. It's warm, soft, it smells like new earth. The project is breaking down to its essential parts and growing into something new.

"In composting," Emily writes, "materials constantly accumulate, decompose and are re-formed."[2]

The Hot Compost quilt began life as a different artwork: *Worm Worlds*, presented as part of Emily's 2021 graduate installation at the VCA. She made this body of work in collaboration with a worm farm compost system.[3] With a contact microphone, Emily recorded the sounds of the worms and other creatures inside her worm farm. She snaked an endoscopic camera through the compost to capture video of the worms munching on food scraps, their bodies translucent, dark blobs of half-digested food visible inside them like strings of beads.

Emily also made 3D scans of food scraps destined for the compost – pumpkin rinds, banana skins – and printed the digital images onto fabric. These were sewn into big soft sculptures that functioned as floor cushions, lined with calico and filled with sugar cane mulch. Large and sturdy enough for visitors to lie on, to watch and listen to the worms.

After the exhibition, Emily dismantled the cushions and spread the mulch on the community gardens at CERES, in Brunswick.[4] She was left with the colourful printed outer fabric and the plain calico linings.

At the CERES garden Emily met Merri, a keen gardener and a textile maker of many years' experience. They began to meet at Merri's house, Merri teaching Emily to dye with plants. Emily cut the calico lining fabric from her floor cushions into sections for dye tests, using flowers and food scraps simmered in water: onion skins, avocado pits, marigolds, oxalis. Soft earthy colours from decomposed plants.

One side of the patchwork quilt is stitched from these pieces of plant-dyed calico. Emily made the other side from the printed compost fabric, cut into irregular strips and pieced back together. Sandwiched between these two sides is a piece of wool batting, to give the quilt warmth and weight.

Worm Worlds, installation view, Victorian College of the Arts, Emily Simek, 2021.

Remix, CERES Garden, Emily Simek, 2022. Photograph: Astrid Mulder.

A short(ish) history of quilts

Soon after I started researching this, it became clear that the history of quilts is basically also the history of the world.

First, a couple of definitions.

Quilting is the process of stitching together padded layers of fabric. The stitching can form rows or more complex designs across the surface of the fabric. Quilted fabric usually consists of three layers: a top and a back, with some form of padding in the middle – wool or cotton batting, old sacks, woven blankets, fabric scraps, horsehair. The resulting fabric might be used for garments, wall-hangings, or bed-coverings.

Patchwork – the process of piecing together scraps into a larger cloth – is a separate but related technique. Not all quilts are patchwork: for example, in a whole-cloth quilt, both the top and back are made from single large pieces of cloth (as the name suggests) with a batting sandwiched between; the three layers are then stitched (quilted) together, often using decorative and intricate designs.

An article by the Victoria & Albert Museum suggests that "if quilting is often associated with warmth and protection, patchwork is more closely associated with domestic economy – a way of using up scraps of fabrics or of extending the working life of clothing."[5]

The 'protection' conveyed by quilting is potentially literal as well as figurative, because quilted padded armour has long been an accoutrement of war. Ancient Greeks wore an upper-body garment called the *linothorax*, while across Northern Africa both horse and rider were often fully covered by sturdy quilted cloth. Medieval Europe had the *gambeson* (quilted jacket), and the Aztecs and Tlaxcaltecs of Mesoamerica wore quilted tunics called *ichcahuipilli*.

Other versions of patchwork and quilting are found all over the world, in numerous applications. The Korean patchwork wrapping cloths called *jogak bo*; the *ralli* quilts of Pakistan and *kantha* quilts of Bangladesh; the *yosegire* (patchwork fabrics and clothing) of Japan; the possum-skin cloak of south-eastern so-called Australia; and on and on. One of the oldest-known quilted textiles – a funeral carpet around 2000 years old, decorated with quilted spirals – was found in the excavated tomb of a Mongolian chieftain.[6]

I might be labouring this point, but you have to understand: quilting really is a global practice.

Contemporary quilting might be stereotyped as the hobby of a certain kind of older white lady – but many of its roots lie in African culture.

When enslaved peoples from West Africa were trafficked to the Americas, their knowledge travelled with them. Textile skills were highly valued in the cotton-growing southern colonies. In the harsh conditions of the plantations, enslaved people scavenged fabric scraps to make quilts that drew on their own rich traditions and iconography, intermeshed with European piecing techniques.[7]

These influences are exemplified by the tiny rural community of Gee's Bend, Alabama, which has become famous for the innovative and expressive quilts still produced there. The people of Gee's Bend are direct descendants of enslaved people who laboured on a cotton plantation, and after emancipation farmed the land as 'sharecroppers' or tenant farmers. Living first in enslavement and then in grinding poverty (since sharecropping was designed to benefit landlords and keep tenants in debt), the resourceful and highly-skilled women of Gee's Bend made quilts out of repurposed fabric, old clothes, and flour bags.[8]

Traditional British pieced quilts tend to be formal and symmetrical, rigid exercises in precision. The Gee's Bend quilts, in contrast, embrace experimentation and asymmetry, vibrating with colour and movement. Patterns and piecing styles have been passed down over generations, young children helping their elders to make the many bedcovers needed for their unheated homes – up to "four or five quilts on a bed, according to the weather," as one quilter recalls.[9] In the late 20th century, museums and art institutions began to recognise the Gee's Bend quiltmakers as a remarkable artistic movement in their own right, and the quilts are now held in collections all over the world.[10]

For thousands of years in the south east of so-called Australia, including on the Wurundjeri lands where the Home Tour took place, Indigenous peoples have stitched together possum skins to make cloaks. Waterproof and wonderfully insulating, a few skins are sewn together to wrap a baby, with more added as a person grows; an adult cloak might use 40-70 possum skins. Intricate designs that told the story of a person's history were incised into the skin side using shell or sharp bone. Cloaks were worn during the day and used as coverings at night; finally a person's cloak became their burial wrapping.[11]

According to the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies, in the mid-1800s many Indigenous people "began using government issued blankets rather than their possum skin cloaks. Woven wool blankets, however, were not as effective as possum skin cloaks. They were not as warm nor were they waterproof and offered little protection from the cold and wet winters of south-eastern Australia. During this time, many

Remix, quilt with repurposed textiles: digital prints of 3D scanned pumpkin rinds, cotton dyed with oxalis flower, 94 x 35cm, Emily Simek, 2023. A younger sibling to the quilt made for the Home Tour. Photograph: Emily Simek.

Making-do, curated by Merri Cheyne, 2024. Photograph: Astrid Mulder.

Aboriginal people became ill and died from common European colds and influenza viruses."[12]

The Melbourne Museum holds two 19th century possum-skin cloaks, one from Yorta Yorta Country and one from Gunditjmara Country. They were 'collected' by colonial settlers in 1853 and 1872 respectively.[13] When I saw the Yorta Yorta cloak on display, the Indigenous guide expressed her mixed feelings about having it in the museum. On the one hand, its preservation has allowed contemporary Indigenous people (led by artists Vicki Couzens and Lee Darroch) to study, relearn and reclaim this important cultural practice; on the other hand this deeply personal object was likely stolen, perhaps from someone killed in a frontier battle. Without the cloak that holds their story and identity, this person could not be properly buried.

Quilting is a living compost of knowledge that spans most of human history.

It has been reinvented again and again, marked by periods of economic hardship, when patchwork quilts are made out of necessity, and periods of relative wealth, when quilting becomes a leisure activity enjoyed by the middle and upper classes.

Culturally, quilting has been used to welcome new babies and to wrap the dead; as an act of war and an act of peace.

It has been continuously transformed by soldiers and housewives, on ships and in prisons, in deserts and tundras, in farmhouse kitchens and church halls, in elegant drawing-rooms and slave huts.

It has absorbed new technologies, borrowed ideas, and stolen wealth and knowledge.

Quilting is a practice of poverty, luxury, necessity, boredom, nostalgia, commemoration, celebration, grief.

As an art form, it's hard to beat.

Home Tour: Making-do (curated by Merri Cheyne)

When I arrive at Merri's place she's out the front, in a small patch of garden next to the street. She shows me the compost pile she's constructed, clippings and prunings heaped together and contained by a little fence of sticks.

Emily's quilt is in the living room. The room is cosy; not cluttered, but nicely full of good wooden furniture acquired second-hand, books, hand-made cushions and throws. There's a heater built into the old fireplace; Merri says it's the warmest room in winter. Her current knitting project sits in a basket next to the couch, ready to hand.

"There wouldn't be much in this house that was bought new," Merri

tells me. “Oh, except this carpet, I suppose.” She points to the rug that covers the living-room floorboards.

“When did you buy that?”

“1988.”

I tell Merri that’s the year I was born. She bought this house a year earlier. It’s a Brunswick weatherboard, and I can well imagine it only took one winter before investing in a floor-rug. The house is homely and filled with creative detritus in a way I find familiar and enticing. Merri has made date scones, and we eat them with butter, sitting on Emily’s quilt draped over the couch, sipping Lapsang Souchong. Smoky and comfortable.

I was away when Merri held her Home Tour gathering, ‘Making-do’. She invited perhaps ten or twelve participants from different parts of her life. They all squashed into her small living room – women she got to know when they were all young mothers; people from the CERES Garden; artists and makers. For Merri, it was important that the people she invited into her home were connected to her already. They all took turns talking about their relationship to mending and repair; stories of frugal grandparents, of dads with workshops and mums with sewing machines. Of learning to patch clothes and fix broken objects.

Merri used to have a white wool blanket that lived in the car as a fire blanket. (She explains that her partner is vegan, but makes an exception for fire safety.) When she and Emily began experimenting with plant dyes, she took the blanket and cut it into pieces: the white wool was perfect for soaking up the different colours they produced. Now she’s got a pile of scraps – mostly yellows, oranges, browns. At ‘Making-do’, she showed everyone how to blanket-stitch around the edge of the wool pieces, preparing them to be joined back together into a new textile.

Merri has been wrapping herself in the Hot Compost quilt in the evenings while working on her own textile projects. Right now she’s knitting a jumper – has actually knitted most of it, but the fit was wrong, or she didn’t like how it was turning out, so she’s re-knitting it. When you unravel a knitted garment it’s called ‘frogging’. Merri hasn’t fully frogged the first jumper, just pulled out a length of yarn and started knitting from the beginning, unravelling as she knits – the first jumper shrinking as the new one grows.

She shows me another project that’s sitting on a chair nearby, a hexagon quilt she started during one of the lockdowns. It’s made using a technique called paper piecing: each fabric scrap is precisely folded over a card template, and the hexagons hand-sewn together with tiny precise stitches. Once an individual hexagon is surrounded on all sides, the back is trimmed and the template removed. Some people make all the hexagons

Making-do, curated by Merri Cheyne, 2024. Photograph: Astrid Mulder.

Open for Inspection, sign, permanent marker, Eric Jong and Emily Simek, 2024.
Photograph: Astrid Mulder.

first and then stitch them all together, but Merri has been joining as she goes. Stitch a few together, slip the templates out, make a few more. She points out the different fabrics: a piece of her mother's dress, a shirt from the 1990s, a scrap from a dress Merri wore when she was eight years old. Textiles have this ability to conjure memories of the bodies they once held.

Home Tour: Open for Inspection (curated by Eric Jong)

The second home is Eric's. I almost wrote 'belongs to Eric', but what does that mean when you are only borrowing? Eric lives in a rented one-bedroom flat in Brunswick. It's up for sale, so there's a viewing every Saturday morning. Eric is instructed that if he's present at these viewings, he can't tell people he's the tenant. If it sells, there's a good chance the buyer won't renew his lease.

Eric knew the flat was on the market when he signed the lease. It's also right at the top of what he can afford. But he'd already spent three months applying for rentals and getting knocked back.

The 'real' in 'real estate' means 'immovable, tangible'. 'Estate' is from an Old French word meaning 'status'.[14]

Real estate: immovable status.

For his Home Tour, Eric holds a series of six public viewings over three weeks. They're at irregular times – Sunday at 11:05am, Wednesday at 6:05pm – and run for 15 minutes each. I attend the first and the last viewings.

The flat is up a flight of stairs that opens out into an open-plan living area. For the first viewing, Eric has arranged the quilt right in the middle of this space, where a coffee table might otherwise sit. It's draped over a wooden clothes-horse lent by Merri. Eric serves tea. In the bathroom – cavernous in the real estate photographs, tiny in person – he projects a 3D scan of the apartment, rotating constantly, visible from all angles. Janky jagged edges where the data stops. The quilt is in this scan, draped on its rack, golden and glorious.

As well as the Home Tour viewings, the quilt is on display during the 'real' inspections, on Saturday mornings. Eric doesn't go to these; the agent, Julian, is in charge. Julian is maybe in his thirties. "How is a person formed by the system," Eric asks, "to become a real estate agent?"

These two sets of viewings, the real and the not-quite-real, the official and otherwise, run in parallel for three weeks before finally they converge. The last Home Tour viewing is at the same time as an official house viewing: Saturday morning, 11am. I turn up to find a dozen punters milling inside, a

slightly-bemused Julian in attendance. He takes down my phone number on his iPad, although at the last second I change the final digit. I am not in the market to buy.

Wandering around the flat, I try to work out who's here for what. The atmosphere is stiff with the friction of different worlds colliding. One couple is diligently examining the cupboards, testing out the stove and the range-hood.

The quilt has been moved to the side, still on its rack but folded against the wall: Julian rearranged it after Eric left. (Eric says that Julian is his unwitting co-curator.) The projection still plays in the bathroom; I overhear the range-hood couple trying to make sense of it, presumably under the impression that it's part of the marketing strategy, like the glossy brochures laid out on the kitchen bench.

A quilt is not real estate; it's real, but not 'real'. It's portable, it can be carried and mended, it can be a shelter and a resting place. Its size and shape correspond to the human body. It is the walls of the house softened and shrunk to body-size; it is the edges of the body extended outwards. A quilt is not a house, but it stands for home.

Eric has left a pile of dishes in the sink – I admire this enormously – and his worktable is cluttered with papers and detritus. A cushion shaped like a giant cigarette rests on the couch; sweaters have been chucked messily on the bed. Later, Eric tells me that the agent had asked him on the phone, perhaps a little plaintively, if he could at least empty the bulging kitchen rubbish. Eric replied solemnly, "I'll see what I can do."

The deliberate act of not cleaning thrills me to my obedient core. In the same position I'm sure it wouldn't have occurred to me: I would have automatically scrubbed, tidied, and generally colluded in the process of evicting myself from my home. A looming rental inspection makes my stress levels shoot through the mildewed ceiling (our landlord insists it's just 'condensation') and sparks the urgent need to prove what a good and tidy tenant I am, desperate to win a gold star and the prize of another 12 months' certainty.

A tidy house, with all traces of living removed, conjures the fiction that there is no occupant. The home performs as an empty space, with room for a buyer to project themselves inside. Eric's dirty dishes have the effect of shattering this illusion. If you buy this home, you do so with the visceral knowledge that you'll be taking it from someone else.

Open for Inspection, video still, Eric Jong, 2024.

Open for Inspection, curated by Eric Jong, 2024. Photograph: Astrid Mulder.

Grow home, curated by Mei Sun, 2024. Photograph: Mei Sun.

Home Tour: Grow home (curated by Mei Sun and her child)

For Mei's Home Tour, the meaning of home stretches beyond the borders of her house, and into the local ecologies she and her young child inhabit. *Grow home* honours the soil and all the creatures it nurtures, from those invisible or overlooked – a busy community of insects, fungi and microbes – to plants and the people who tend them.

Over the month, Mei takes the quilt with her to different local growing spaces, ecologies she is enmeshed within. At a working bee for a neighbourhood habitat garden, Mei puts a contact microphone into the soil, allowing those present to listen to the life it contains. Her child takes the quilt to show their kindergarten class, and introduces it during the Sharing Circle. (Kindergarten: literally 'A garden of children'. A place for children to be nurtured and tended, like young plants. The English word 'nursery' has a similar double meaning.)

Mei describes displaying the quilt at the habitat garden's cafe: "It really warmed the place to have it hanging in there," she says. "It turned into a kind of campfire." Drawn by the quilt's glow, people came up to speak to her: an artist who had worked with compost; another who worked with community. Others shared "their visceral memories of their mothers and grandmothers making quilts", remembering the weight and heft of these potent objects.[15]

Mei's decision to situate the quilt around soil brings it full circle, to its beginnings as a record of decomposing plant scraps. As she writes, this juxtaposition "recall[s] a time when everyday textiles were made locally and told the stories of place, plants and culture."[16] This last Home Tour is at once expansive and intimate, curated specifically alongside the ecological communities that Mei's life is shaped around.

Mei's final Home Tour exhibition is held at Farm Raiser, an urban farm in Bellfield that she has helped tend to. It's Saturday morning, and the quilt is displayed next to the kiosk where farm-grown produce is sold. Emily and I join a gaggle of people for a tour. The farm was started by volunteers in 2017, on a site connected to Waratah Special Education School; they have a peppercorn lease from the Department of Education. It's farmed in long thin plots like the strips of patchwork in the quilt top.

Eve, who shows us around, explains that they sell fruit and veg at the farmer's market and at their farm gate shop. There's also a plot that they work in collaboration with students at the school next door, who visit the farm weekly. For some students this is social time; others manage their frustration and anxiety by hoeing weeds. One student is growing potatoes with the goal

Grow home, Mei Sun, 2024. Photograph courtesy of Mei Sun.

of learning to make potato wedges. What could be better than learning how to connect with our own food? The garden is bigger than itself, bigger than any one person.

In her recent book *The Garden Against Time: In Search of a Common Paradise*, writer Olivia Laing describes an expansive philosophy of gardening that embraces decay and death, weeds and insects, seeing these as not as ugly failings but as "components of a living tapestry".[17]

"Each garden run along these wilder richer lines," Laing writes, "is a participant in a great network: a quilt made by many hands, spread out across cities and villages, encompassing private gardens parks, allotments, balconies and verges, every square different, each one sustaining and supporting life."[18]

I've come to think about this project in much the same way: a quilt made of many hands.

There's the first quilt, the one made by Emily and Merri, perhaps equally made by compost scraps, digital processes, plant dyes and printing inks, woven cotton fibres; by the people who grew the cotton; by the people who built and worked the machines that wove and printed the fabric; by ancient plants turned into oil turned into polyester sewing thread.

Then there's the second quilt, the bigger one: the project itself, made by many hands over many months, a whole huge teeming network. This project was made by Emily and Merri and Eric and Mei, by me and Doug and Astrid and Emilie, by the people at Seventh Gallery, by the people who assessed and funded the project grant, by Julian the real estate agent. By the worms and nematodes in the community garden; by the people who came to the events. By the plants that flavour the tea we share; by the people who grew them. By the people who mined the aluminium and lithium and cobalt in our phones and laptops, by the people who assembled them in factories. By the thousands of generations of people all over the world whose textile traditions have all converged in a single point that is this one orangey-yellowy quilt.

We cannot touch or know all these people and beings. But we can think about how we are all pieces of the same quilt and we can try to act accordingly.

This project is a tiny part of the story of quilts, which is also the story of the world. A great rich compost teeming with life.

Hot Compost Home Tour screen print workshop at Seventh Gallery, design by Merri Cheyne, Anna Dunnill, Eric Jong, Mei Sun, Emily Simek & Doug Webb, 2024. Photograph: Liv McGregor.

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18
Laing, *The Garden Against Time*.

Hot Compost Home Tour is a home-based touring exhibition series by Emily Simek in collaboration with Merri Cheyne, Anna Dunnill, Eric Jong, Mei Sun and Doug Webb, produced with Seventh Gallery on unceded Wurundjeri land.

The home-based tour explores composting as an approach to exhibition practice. Using relational ethics as a framework, the project considers the conditions of the various exchanges that 'create' compost: how and where does it come to exist? How are different collaborators implicated? Instead of a purely material process, composting becomes about the work of relationships within systems of exchange.

Hot Compost Home Tour unfolded over eight months between May and December 2024, and followed a quilt made by Emily that was passed between the homes of Merri, Eric, and Mei, who each curated an exhibition as part of the series. Tour t-shirts were made in a DIY screenprinting workshop in collaboration with Doug at Seventh Gallery. The project cumulated with a publication launch and shared reading of this text, written by Anna, as part of a 'homecoming' exhibition of the quilt at Emily's house.

Merri Cheyne is a knitter, sewist, and gardener who grows and locally forages plants to use as dyes. Her ethos is informed by a long time interest in permaculture, and childhood observation of her parent's depression-era experience of making do and repair.

Anna Dunnill is a Naarm-based artist, writer and curator whose studio practice explores care, ritual and transformation through textile processes. She is especially interested in the poetic possibilities of invasive plants. Anna also runs Side Gate, an occasional domestic exhibition project in her Coburg sharehouse.

Eric Jong is a Naarm based contemporary artist primarily focused on the application of novel technologies in practice-led research, exploring power and empathy through visual art. Their longform investigative driven art practice is informed by a background in photojournalism of which collaboration forms a significant part, and has included universities, NGOs and INGOs, hospitals, councils and independent researchers.

Emily Simek is an artist with a practice in digital art, textiles, installation, writing and gardening. Often working collaboratively, she is interested in relational practices within food webs and local networks of exchange. She is a contributor to *Patch-Work*, a collaborative project on Wurundjeri Land at Joe's Market Garden, and provides technical support at *WORLDWIDEWORMS.NET*.

Mei Sun is an interaction designer and documenter. Her design work, previously in software, is now focused on ecological systems. With a local community group, she tends to a public habitat garden, re-introducing grasslands species that were present at the site prior to colonisation. Her work in documenting ranges from radio documentaries for ABC Radio National to exploring her grandmother's 100 year old traditional Tibetan apron and its relationship to plants.

Doug Webb is an artist whose practice centers around queer ecologies, biodiversity, and conservation. They are a printmaker and work with textiles, installation, and performance. Their works explore the expanded field of printmaking and patterns of reproduction as print, biological process, and sexual act. They draw inspiration from the camp aesthetics of the natural world and have a particular fascination with queer and curious biology.

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