

# The Laundry Pile

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# Project Description

*The Laundry Pile* collaborative research project is the first time that curatorial research methods have been used to assign value(s) to the exploration and understanding of existing laundry practices by bringing into a dialogue the work of a group of researchers and artists confronting the topic of laundry and its relationship the environment. Its aim was to engage the public in discussion about environmentally desirable practices. The exhibition featured the works by Dr Jade Lord: *Wastewater Dye Experiments*, 2017-2020, textiles samples and live lab; *Laundrette Photographs*, 2012-2020, photographs; and *One year without a washing machine*, 2018, zine.

**Project Duration:**

September 2017 – July 2019

**Funder:**

2017:

£800 School Research Funding

£1500 Kings College London

2018 :

£1000 School Research Funding

£1500 Bristol Festival of Nature / Bristol Water

2019:

£300 School Research Funding

Exhibition preview sponsored by Magic Rock

**Research Partners/collaborators:**

Dr Emma Rigby [Cardiff Metropolitan University]

Lizzie Harrison [University of Bristol]



Figure 1 The Laundry Pile, London, 2017. Image: Giles Smith

# Research Aims & Objectives

## Research Aims:

- To assign value to the exploration and understanding of existing laundry practices;
- To promote change towards environmentally desirable practices.

## Objectives:

- To identify individuals, across all disciplines, who are researching the field of laundry practice;
- To raise awareness of environmental issues associated with laundry practice, and engage the public with these impacts;
- To promote change towards environmentally desirable behaviour, through a curated exhibition utilising the knowledge gained from collaborative research across a breadth of disciplines.



Figure 2 The Laundry Pile, Bristol, 2018. Image: Naomi Wood

# Research Context

Despite widespread recognition that laundry practices are environmentally damaging, public engagement with issues associated with laundry practice is limited. Consumer laundry practices are an emerging field for research, and the aim of The Laundry Pile was to give a platform to new outcomes in knowledge and understanding. This was delivered through an exhibition in a London laundrette on 27th September 2017 as part of London Design Festival (see Figure 1), accompanied by a multidisciplinary panel discussion; an exhibition at the Arnolfini as part of Bristol Festival of Nature on 7th June 2018 (see Figure 2); and an exhibition at the Huddersfield Temporary Contemporary Gallery between 24th June- 13th July 2019 (see Figure 3).

Laundry is a mundane, habitual and highly routinized social practice. At the same time, it is an inconspicuous act of resource consumption that occurs in the private and domestic realm. It annually uses up massive quantities of finite energy and water resources, and in the process, contributes towards greenhouse gas emissions, global warming and climate change. Beyond resource consumption, laundering can also be linked to solid and hazardous waste generation, air and water pollution including eutrophication, toxicity impacts and biodiversity loss (Bain, J. et. al. 2009). However, this has not always been the case - the increase in environmental impact is largely a consequence of enormous rise in the volumes of clothes that are washed, and the frequency at which they are washed. A report published by the Department of Energy and Climate Change shows that between 1970 and 2014 the amount of energy used to do the laundry has more than doubled (Goodright, V. & Wilkes, E. 2015). While wearing freshly laundered clothing every day is a relatively new phenomenon, it has rapidly become a social norm. As such, the average household in the UK now performs 284 wash cycles per year; equivalent to 5.5 cycles a week, and those with tumble dryers perform 260 drying loads per year (Owens, P. 2012). This acceleration in laundering routines does not reflect an increase in the amount of clothes that get dirty but rather, changes across a broad spectrum of social, technological and cultural areas where expectations and conventions have shifted.



Figure 3 The Laundry Pile, Huddersfield, 2019. Image: Laura Mateescu

# Research Content & Process:

The Laundry Pile looks beyond the mundanities of doing the laundry and explores some of the cultural and social meanings that laundry practices help construct and reinforce. With an underlying focus on the environmental impacts of laundry and clothing use, it brings together a range of work from a small group of fashion activists, researchers and performers who have explored laundry and clothing from a range of different perspectives.

The exhibition was developed collaboratively by Rigby, Lord & Harrison, who all come from a design background. They were conscious that they did not want to just include work from the design discipline in the exhibition. This decision was based on the principle that 'wicked problems' such as environmental issues, cannot be successfully resolved by one discipline alone. Rigby & Lord had existing work to contribute to the exhibition. A discussion took place to select a range of work that was felt would be engaging in an exhibition format. The intention was to create a multi-disciplinary exhibit. The selected exhibits included a mix of practice-based work such as: posters, garments, videos, images, artefacts and interactive installations. The details of the work selected for each exhibition are outlined in Appendix 1.

Much of this work has emerged from qualitative consumer research and/or auto-ethnography – with the intention to show how laundry perceptions can change and washing practices can be conducted towards more environmentally desirable habits. An example of such work is the zine based on the experience of not using a washing machine for one year. The audience experience of the space was considered, including how they would move through the space, and the narrative the work would communicate.

The 2017 exhibition was accompanied by a supporting multidisciplinary panel discussion convened by Rigby, Lord & Harrison, which brought together the viewpoints of experts and academics from a range of disciplines and institutions, including: Professor Kate Fletcher, Centre for Sustainable Fashion, London College of Fashion; Dr Alexander Papiez, Development Chemist, IDEAL Manufacturing; Professor Rosie Cox, Department of

Geography, Birkbeck University of London; Dr Victoria Kelley, Lecturer in Cultural Studies, Central Saint Martin's; Dr Thomas Roberts, Lecturer in Sociology, University of Surrey; Dr Andrew Brooks, Department of Geography, Kings College London.

In addition to the research practice involved in curating each iteration of the exhibition, outcomes of Lord's production of artefacts through her research based practice were included in each exhibition. Detailed in full in Appendix 1, these included photographic series, an installation of wastewater dye experiments, and the production of a freely-distributed zine.

# Research Outcomes & Dissemination

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## Exhibitions and conferences (co-curated and co-convened)

*London Design Festival*, 27 September 2017, exhibition mounted in a London laundrette accompanied by a multidisciplinary panel discussion (participants listed above);

*Arnolfini*, Bristol, 7 June 2018, as part of Bristol Festival of Nature;

*Temporary Contemporary Gallery*, Huddersfield between 24 June- 13 July 2019;

*Making Futures Conference*, Plymouth 19-20 Sept 2019, conference presentation

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## Artwork artefacts (solo-authored, exhibited as part of the events above)

*Wastewater Dye Experiments*, 2017-2020, textiles samples and live lab;

*Laundrette Photographs*, 2012-2020, photographs;

*One year without a washing machine*, 2018, zine.

Through the development of the exhibitions, the research team expanded their in-depth awareness of researchers and research outcomes in the field of laundry practices. To their knowledge, no one else is presenting multi-disciplinary work on laundry practices in this way.

The exhibitions have created an opportunity for researchers within this field to network, and discuss ideas for collaboration. Further to this, the exhibition also appealed to members of the public, with no prior knowledge of the topic. This has helped to bring an important environmental issue into the collective consciousness. Public accessibility was enhanced through the exhibition featuring in widely read popular media including *The Bristol Magazine* and the *GranderMarnier* fashion blog.

<https://thebristolmag.co.uk/the-nature-of-fashion-and-the-problematic-laundry-pile/> <https://www.grandermarnier.com/blog/the-nature-of-fashion>

Audience interaction through social media gives a further indication of engagement through the following statistics:

- Twitter (2017): 15 tweets with #thelaundrypile [from these tweets – total 9 retweets, 54 likes];
- Twitter (2018): 4 tweets with #thelaundrypile [from these tweets – total 10 retweets, 18 likes];
- Instagram: from all posts from @the\_laundry\_pile for 2018 show (13) [198 likes]; all 2018 posts featuring the exhibition using #thelaundrypile (18) [285 likes]; from all posts from @the\_laundry\_pile for 2019 show (26) [437 likes].

Each iteration of the exhibition led to a proposal being accepted for a further exhibition. With each successive exhibition, the opening hours and visitor numbers increased, and extended exhibition opening times offered opportunities for more public engagement and academic engagement activities alongside the exhibition. Attendance numbers for the London exhibition: 45 to exhibition, 35 to panel discussion.

Attendance numbers for the Bristol exhibition: 103

Attendance number for the Huddersfield exhibition: 283

The conference presentation at Making Futures 2019 focused on looking beyond materials when considering environmental impact and circular economies.

# Exhibited Works 2017

## **Emma Rigby (2016) Clothes in Motion [garment installation]**

'A unique year-long study of laundry practices showed that a key reason for frequent clothes washing was to smooth out the stretches and imprint left in garments from the body after wearing. These traces, from baggy knees to twisted seams are made as the body puts pressure on the knit or weave of fibre and stretches the clothing out of shape. Washing removes traces of wear and resets the shape, but often only for a day.

Clothes in Motion responds to this scenario as a design challenge. The trousers are designed, cut and constructed to reflect a lower sitting position while the jacket is designed around arm and elbow movement. In doing so, they skew the usual upright and stationary perspective that garments are designed from, questioning both how design is approached and the cut and construction process. This process of design and the resulting distorted aesthetic circumvents the accumulation of bodily imprints that prompt more frequent laundering to remove stretches and restore garment shape. Clothes in Motion offers an example of how designers can create new aesthetics in everyday wear that encourage greater thought and reflection on garment use and laundry.' (See Figure 4)

## **Jade Lord (2013-2017) Laundrette Photographs [photography]**

'A compelling motivation to collect images of the laundrettes while travelling has led to this unique photographic series. This compulsion first started around the time of giving up using a washing machine for a year as a social experiment in 2013.



Figure 4 Clothes in Motion. Image: Naomi Wood



## Emma Rigby (2016) Clothes in Motion [garment installation]

## Emma Rigby (2010) Energy Water Fashion [garments]

'Most of us have a few clothes in the wardrobe which we wear frequently, but wash less often than other similar garments we own. While none of these clothes have been intentionally designed as 'low wash' garments, certain design characteristics present influence different patterns in our laundry behaviour.

Building on this logic, these garments have been designed as low wash garments. Low wash clothes aim to motivate a move towards 'lower impact laundering', i.e., reducing the amount of environmentally significant resources consumed such as energy and water. They were developed in response to a small-scale survey that collected fifty photographs from different people of seldom laundered but frequently worn garments. The photographs were collectively examined and some common design characteristics emerged. Beyond darker coloured garments which easily conceal spills and stains, nearly three-quarters of the garments were made from cotton or wool, or cotton and wool mixes. In addition, the fit of the garment was also found to play an important role in how often the piece was washed.

These garments lead to the questions: to what extent can clothing design influence laundry behaviour? And, in which other ways could design be used to create conditions for less resource intensive laundry practices to develop?' (See Figure 11)



Emma Rigby (2016) Clothes in Motion  
[garment installation]

Emma Rigby (2010) Energy Water Fashion  
[garments]

Emma Rigby (2019) Microscopic Fibre Drawing

Emma Rigby, Jade Lord, Lizzie Harrison (2019)  
Grooming Tools  
[artefacts]

'Frequent laundering of garments can prematurely age fabrics, as the friction caused by the washing machine drum can damage the fibres and fabric structure. Clothes brushes can be used to remove the marks and signs of wear from our garments, without the need for laundering. This could extend the life of our clothes, as well as saving on the resources used in a washing machine cycle.'

This small collection of garment tools and brushes is inspired by Kate Fletcher's collection, featured in her 2016 book 'Craft of Use.' (See Figure 15)

Jade Lord (2013-2018) Laundrette Photographs  
[photography]

Jade Lord (2013-2019) Wastewater dye  
experiments [installation]

Jade Lord (2013-2018) One year without a  
washing machine [zine]

Kate Fletcher Local Wisdom [photography]

Alice Dunseath (2015) Plastic Shores [video]

The Story of Stuff (2017) The Story of  
Microfibres [video]



Figure 15



The Laundry Pile, Bristol, 2018. Image: Naomi Wood



The Laundry Pile, Huddersfield, 2019. Image: Laura Mateescu



The Laundry Pile, Huddersfield, 2019. Image: Laura Mateescu

# References

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Owens, P. (2012) Powering the Nation: Household Electricity-Using

Habits Revealed. London: Defra

Lord, J. (2017) Wastewater Dye Lab. [Installation]

Lord, J. (2017) Laundrette Photographs. [Photography]

Lord, J. (2017) One Year Without a Washing Machine. [Zine]

Lord, J., Rigby, E. & Harrison, L. (2017) The Laundry Pile [exhibition]

Exhibited at Lila's Laundrette, London 20th September 2017

Lord, J., Rigby, E. & Harrison, L. (2018) The Laundry Pile [exhibition]

Exhibited at The Arnolfini, Bristol 7th June 2018

**Output Type:**

Original artistic works, creative body of enquiry, solo exhibitions, curation of exhibition, contribution to collaborative group exhibitions