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Valle Noronha, Julia; Valle Noronha, Marina  
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# IRON WHILE STILL DAMP

JULIA VALLE-NORONHA

AALTO UNIVERSITY/ESTONIAN ACADEMY OF ARTS

JULIA.VALLE@AALTO.FI

## ABSTRACT

This exploratory paper looks into the relationship between people and the things they wear through the lenses of care and domestic labour. More specifically it addresses the practice of ironing and what it can offer to such relationships. The work collects data from wearers via deployed kits—containing a shirt and a diary—and a group discussion on the wearer-worn engagements. The results show that while little academic focus is given to domestic labour, ironing emerges as a practice that can share understanding of what lies behind the visuality of garments. It suggests that designers and researchers invest in further exploring the practice of ironing as a valuable space for design.

## INTRODUCTION

“Everyone does a hell of a lot of noodling maintenance work.”  
“I am a woman. I am a wife. I am a mother. [...] I do a hell of a lot of washing, cleaning, cooking, renewing, supporting, preserving, etc. Also, (up to now separately) I 'do' Art. Now I will simply do these everyday things, and flush them up to consciousness, exhibit them [...]” (Ukeles, 1969)

Can domestic labour, associated with clothing care and maintenance, be used as a source to inform the process of designing? The quotations above, extracted from artist Mierle L. Ukeles' *Manifesto for Maintenance Art* (1969) inspires this exploratory paper to question what are the potentials of domestic labour involving clothes. Speaking from the perspective of contemporary art, Ukeles underlines the intensity and presence of such practices in the everyday, proposing it as a topic of discussion and inspiration for the arts. Could clothing and fashion also benefit from a similar project? The findings in this work directly address the matter of care in relation to the materials, methods, and processes in (fashion) design practice and research.

MARINA VALLE-NORONHA

AALTO UNIVERSITY

MARINA.NORONHA@AALTO.FI



Figure 1: Edgard Degas, *Women Ironing* (1884)

Clothing and Fashion are recent fields of research growing at a steady pace. Initially receiving contributions especially from sociology and semiotics (cf. Thornquist, 2014; Negrin, 2015), it enjoys now a more interdisciplinary configuration as it welcomes works from a range of disciplines from outside and within the field of fashion itself. But despite this growth in plurality, the general interest in clothing and fashion usually leaves aside what happens inside the domestic space of the home. Domestic labour—such as washing, cooking, ironing, caring—is usually still not understood as ‘actual’ labour, unless one can afford to have it done by someone else (Vishmidt, 2011).

This repetitive labour without remuneration performed at home by many of us might still pass unnoticed as responsible for actually keeping things alive and running. Possibly related to such activities being perceived as the tedious, repetitive and not ‘proper’ work, some researchers have problematized this as a clear gap in fashion studies (cf. Cwerner, 2001). But in fact, though unremunerated, domestic labour provides an environment where other things can take place. “The home is a sort of a factory, and [...] domestic work is what makes every other form of work possible.” (Federici, 2018, p. 81). By refusing to continue to ignore it, as Federici urges, we open up possibilities for design engagement.

Recent efforts have started to investigate some of these different practices. Existing examples look into laundering (Rigby, 2017) and mending (Splawa-Neyman, 2014). This study looks into another practice tightly connected to clothing and domestic labour: that of ironing. Overlooked by academic endeavours in the field, the practice is an essential part of the making and maintenance processes of many clothes and may disclose more than a general normatization related to clothing aesthetics.

The practice of ironing is commonly associated with the unnecessary, laborious, if not the work that is exclusively done by an employee—be them a maid, a clothes' store or a laundry worker. The fact is that ironing fabric, with its intense heat and steam, is as much part of the design and manufacturing process as it can be part of the wearing, maintaining and exhibiting the clothes themselves. In the design process, one can consider the practice of ironing in giving shape to the expected visual outcome. In the manufacturing process, ironing is an essential part of preparing cut textiles pieces to be sewn together or of fusing support textile to give structure to the outer fabric. In the everyday wearing or in exhibiting clothes (the catwalk, store racks or photo shooting), ironing takes the role of 'preparing for presentation'. The act of ironing extends the wearer-worn relationship to the extent of one getting to know the other—garments, materials, wearers. Though instructions exist for the practice, ironing is personal, and different ironing styles exist. It is personal and direct interaction between the material being ironed, the sequence of (repetitive) movements performed by the act of ironing, the environmental features—like temperature and moist—and the (board) surface supporting the ironing. For many, involved in the everyday of caring for the home, instructions as the one that gives the title to this work are as familiar as embodied practices.

However, individuals increasingly reject ironing, a choice symptomatic of a search for more practical and efficient lifestyles. Additionally, ironing is problematized within sustainability studies due to its environmental footprint. Minimum maintenance, thus minimum domestic labour, becomes a priority when choosing what to buy and wear. Against this scenario, what is the rationale behind ironing in a time where things praised are practicality, energy saving, time saving. What does it afford? Why is it important?

Artist-architect Elizabeth Diller (Diller, 2010) proposes a shift to the ironing pragmatics in 'Bad Press' (DS+R, 2018). Through a series of propositions to ironing the same white shirt, she reviews the required skills in the practice of ironing suggesting it new purpose by exploring creasing and pressing garments. What is most potent in Diller's work (aside from the strong criticism to domestic labour as a gendered role) is the attention it

draws to ironing as a laborious practice of 'giving shape'. In this exploratory paper, we suggest ironing as a practice with undisclosed potentials that should be given consideration. Can 'bad' ironing add expression to clothes or affect wearer-worn relationships?



Figure 2 Shirt part of 'Bad Press'. Retrieved from Diller (2010)

## THE METHOD

The insights to this exploratory paper came from a broader study on wearer-worn engagements. In it, the relationships between individuals and clothes were investigated via 'wardrobe interventions' (Valle-Noronha & Wilde, 2018) and 'ironing' emerged as a practice to be further explored. The wardrobe interventions are developed similarly to Cultural Probes (Gaver & Martin, 2000) via probing kits. In the experiment that produced the data used in this study, kits were deployed to ten participants in a three-stage process. Each kit consisted of a bag containing a garment designed by the researcher, a diary and a consent of participation (Figure 3). The diary served as a source of information on the research process, as well as guidance to ensure that the data collected be consistent among participants. It included guiding questions, which should be answered for each time the piece was used, and blank pages, that could hold further reflections and information. The process included: kits deployment in one-to-one meetings, use phase in which participants generate data about their individual experiences via diary notations during one month and a group discussion with all available participants. The

method allows that the data be collected longitudinally on site, where the intimate practices of getting dressed and caring for garments take place. The table below presents all the data raised during the experiment:

Table 1: Description of data generated in the study

Stage	Description	Users	Data
Deployment	One to one meeting, audio recorded. Seeks to guarantee uniformity in instructions given.	10	About 5 hours of audio, transcribed and translated.
Use-phase	Self-recorded on wearing experience. Participants take notes on diary to each time the garment is used.	10	10*72 pages diaries. Partially transcribed.
Group Discussion	Mediated group discussion.	6	About 2 hours of audio, transcribed and translated.

In this study, the data was approached via a deductive coding in two steps. First, the material was read twice in order to locate quotes related to ironing and initial codes were added. In the second step, codes were revised and led to the final results.



Figure 3: The deployment kit

## DEPLOYMENT

The experiment deployed 10 white shirts in natural unbleached cotton poplin produced under an

experimental approach to clothes making. Despite the ‘experimentalism’ clearly present in the creative process behind the pieces (see Valle-Noronha, 2016), the shirts were meant to be worn in the everyday. To ensure wearability, pieces were tried on in a one-to-one meeting and adjusted to fit its wearer, case necessary.

During the period of a month, participants engaged with the piece as they would to other clothes owned by each of them, but with a substantial difference; they should record their thoughts, reflections, and impressions on a given diary every time the piece was worn. The one-month experience period ended with a group discussion, which included all participants available. In it, they exposed their individual experiences prior to engaging in a group discussion with other participants based on key concepts that emerged. They all shared information about how they felt about, with and in the shirts and how new practices emerged. The group discussion provided room for thoughts to develop and concepts to start taking form. The contents of both diaries and group discussion are interpreted in the next section.

## RESULTS

Participants commented that a white shirt ‘demanded’ special care, not always part of their routines. Hand washing with specific soap or being particularly careful as to avoid stains were some of these special cares. Among them, ironing emerged as a distinctly powerful domestic labour practice able to impact wearers’ routines and reflections on clothing. It is good to note, though, that this owes to general western cultural understandings on shirt as work-wear (Anderson, 1988) and creases as a sign of ‘laziness’ (cf. Ferrier, 2015). Out of the 10 participants, only two stated that ironing was easy, or felt natural to them.

On the other hand, they generally agreed that the materiality of the cotton is better (aesthetically) expressed when ironed. This ‘demand’ for ironing, afforded by the white cotton poplin shirt, was frequently related to as time-consuming, though not always in a negative sense. It was used as a justification for postponing use and for raising awareness on the level of involvement between wearer and worn. Additionally, the ironing activity affected wearers’ routines, as described in the participants’ quotes below:

I woke up early to have time to iron the shirt  
(Diary)

I couldn’t wear it as often as I wanted. The time it took for ironing was too long  
(Group Discussion)

My pieces are very practical, I don’t have to iron anything [...] and they don’t demand spending time with them. Then I started thinking that I defend so much the use of time, to live a life with



more quality, but I don't think I do this with my clothes. So I thought it was like a warning, that I need to get more involved with my clothes  
(Group Discussion)

Additionally, ironed clothes were associated with being dressed-up (cf. Anderson 1988) and brought confidence and the feeling of being well dressed to participants:

I felt the shirt was all ironed and pretty. But since I was very busy that day, [the experience of wearing] it wasn't like going to a party, it was more like routine. [...] I was very safe with it. I felt well. (Group Discussion)

I tried combining with so many different things but nothing worked. I didn't want to put on with jeans, after all that ironing! (Group Discussion)

But more unexpectedly, participants raised awareness of growing knowledge on the materiality and design process of the piece through the practice of ironing. The cut of the shirts, hand stitches, and other details only became visible to participants as they engaged in ironing:

I only realised the very specific details of the shirt when I ironed it. It was very nice to perceive the hands of the designer there. I think it was at that moment that I could realise these things. (Diary)

I started thinking about so many things while washing, it looks so good, it smells so good. I was transported to another place while I was washing it. I thought I was at the beach, and I could still wear it, because it's a fresh piece, and would protect me from the sun... but then I woke up. It dried really fast. [...] When I ironed I got to know more about the pattern, I could see the details from the artisanal making, I found it very special. (Group Discussion)

Ironing it was more important than dressing it and washing it to know it. [...] When I ironed I got to know more about the pattern, I could see the details from the artisanal couture, I found it very special (Diary)

This process of growth in understanding happens through time, adding to the development of the relationship between wearer and worn. But the exact ways in which this phenomenon affects the relationship cannot be measured through this work. What can be concluded is that by sharing knowledge with users, designers can raise awareness and visibility to the making processes, which may enable more conscious consumption and use practices.

The findings make visible the importance of ironing as a practice to be explored by designers and researchers in the fields of fashion and domestic labour studies.

Especially, it brings to light how the domestic practice of ironing can emerge as a support for growth in understanding how clothes are designed and made. In applying the findings of this study to the practice of designing clothes, designers could further explore ironing—and ironing instructions—as a means to share knowledge on the making process or have wearers engaged in exploring the plastic properties of textiles. For example, ironing instructions may, when combined with shapes that could support this exploration, aid wearers in re-shaping the piece multiplying its use.

## CONCLUSION

The encounter of clothes and care practices via domestic labour (e.g. washing, ironing and, mending) is a rich phenomenon little explored within literature (cf. Rigby 2017, Durrani 2018). This study highlights the opportunities for investing in such practices as a space for designing clothes. Especially, it discloses how the act of ironing can make visible the work of fashion designers and seamstresses as well as the affordances of the matters of clothes.

Though looking at ironing provides research with findings about the relationship between wearer and worn, we suggest that it is not seen as an isolated practice. We believe that it is precisely the enmeshing of different practices related to and around clothing and domestic labour that can offer more to research in the field.

In the project described here, ironing was not intentionally encouraged as a space for knowledge growth, creation, and design, but rather afforded by the textile used. In participants' quotations, the notion of ironing clothes still leans towards a more conventional understanding. It is discussed especially as domestic labour—time consuming, repetitive work done inside the home environment. Despite that, we strongly believe that the findings point to a shift in perspective from the users. They allow us to imagine ways to explore ironing within clothing and fashion design and make space for an exploratory relationship between wearer and worn. With this opening, we envision the act of ironing guiding fashion beyond conventional aesthetics norms.

It is certainly true that many people make choices on their ironing practices because they enjoy being perceived as well dressed or because they do not conform to the 'well-dressed norms'. One of the questions raised through this study is why some people appreciate ironing, especially in its unconventional forms? And what can this offer to the wearer-worn relationship? For us, the relevance of the work does not lie around fabric flattening, wrinkle removing techniques. Instead, we envision future applications of

this research around ways to add expressions to garments, such as increasing textures by 'bad' and experimental ironing.

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