

Post-event Reflections from Future Fibres Network Plus Townhall Meeting at The Design Museum 22 May 2024

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Key Headlines

1- Future Fibres Network Plus has launched to help bridge the gap between the fashion and textile industry and academia: academia can help provide solutions to industry problems.

2- Funding call announced. Future Fibres Network Plus announced the launch of their funding call to support projects enhancing sustainability in the fashion and textiles industry. Offering community impact grants of up to £5k and mini-project grants of up to £100k, the deadline for expression of interests is 13 June 2024. More information can be found here:

<https://futurefibresnetworkplus.com/funding/>

3- Group action and collaboration can have lasting positive change in the fashion industry.

4-The legacy of the network is to lay the foundations for positive environmental impact by embedding environmental sciences at the heart of the fashion and textiles industry.

Scoping different perspectives on Future Fibres

Professor Tamara Galloway and Professor Kate Goldsworthy opened the event and introduced the Future Fibres Network Plus. They highlighted the environmental damage currently caused by the fashion and textiles industry and emphasised the importance of collaboration for transforming the sector towards more sustainable practices.

“The main focus of the network is to bring environmental science into the heart of the design process.” Kate Goldsworthy

Next, Victoria Gill (BBC Science Correspondent) shared her experiences of being an environmental journalist. She discussed the challenges of communicating environmental issues to a society who is increasingly switching off from the news but emphasised the importance of good storytelling to engage people with these global issues. As Victoria emphasised, people need hope, and our storytelling should inspire positive pro-environmental action.

This was followed by three excellent presentations. Dr Max Kelly, gave an overview of his research at the University of Plymouth on microfibre release during washing, where they found that up to 18 million microfibres are released per wash. Assistant Professor Ceri Lewis then spoke about her research at University of Exeter in the Galápagos Islands, where her team have found microfibres in 50% of the marine invertebrates sampled. Finally, Dr Raquel Prado, showed how Ananas Anam are helping solve this issue through their compostable fibre made from processed pineapple leaves (a waste material from the pineapple industry) Piñayarn.

“We extract the fibres mechanically from pineapple leaves and we process the fibres to textile grade and those fibres can be used in any products that you would use for linen or cotton.” Raquel Prado

A panel session, chaired by Victoria Gill, led to many interesting discussions with the audience around sustainable fibres being unable to financially compete with environmentally damaging fibres, the need for more research to be carried out on the environmental impacts of all fibre types beyond polyester and nylon, and the problems of biodegradable fibres.

“Everyone thinks that biodegradation is a good thing but if biodegradation releases dyes from fibres what toxicity impact does that have on people and the environment?” Richard Blackburn

Leaky Fibres co-creative workshop

After a coffee break and networking opportunity, attendees took part in the ‘Leaky Fibres’ workshop. Led by Dr Rosie Hornbuckle from University of the Arts London, this co-creative session encouraged attendees to work together to define 35 ‘leakages’ in the clothing and textile ecosystem. Participants then took part in a project sprint to develop a project to address one leakage. A range of interesting conversations (and in some cases debates) emerged from the session, with attendees discussing moral, information, value and digital leakages as well as the more tangible fibre and leakages.

“Building a common language is a crucial step in the development of interdisciplinary work that is often neglected. Beginning with the Leaky Fibres workshop we want to bring designers, scientists and industry more quickly a shared understanding using creative approaches and collaborative learning.” Rosie Hornbuckle

Focusing on how to address the challenges

After a delicious vegetarian lunch and a quick wander around the Design Museum, the final session involved three more quick presentations and a Q&A session with the audience. Professor Richard Blackburn presented his research at University of Leeds, to develop a ‘switchable’ dye for polyester, which means dye can be completely removed prior to recolouring or recycling. Tim Cross discussed the thermal polyester recycling technology developed by Project Plan B, which is projected to save 10 million tonnes of polyester from being incinerated or landfilled in the next few years. Finally, Dr Laetitia Forst showcased the Material Lifecycle Map tool she has developed to enable multidisciplinary dialogue around material circularity and impacts during material development or clothing design.

The Q&A session led to conversations around the complexities of repurposing fibres with the audience, This included the need for greater investment in innovative ideas by big brands, the importance of stronger legislation, and the problems associated with using recycled plastic water bottles to make polyester fibres.

After a busy day full of interesting and inspiring conversations, the event closed with Professor Tamara Galloway announcing the Future Fibres Network Plus funding call. This exciting funding opportunity will support projects increasing sustainable practices in the fashion and textile industry and will offer grants of up to £5000 for Community Impact projects and up to £100,000 for mini

projects. By supporting projects helping to address the environmental challenges we currently experience in the fashion and textiles industry, the Network hopes to help make this sector more sustainable.

“We want to embed design principles into Environmental Sciences, and we want to embed Environmental Science ideas into design so that we can design out some of the problems in the system and come up with things that will create a better industry for the future.”

Tamara Galloway

The Future Fibres Network Plus is part of the UKRI Network Plus in Circular Fashion and Textiles: a collaboration between the University of the Arts London, University of Huddersfield, University of Leeds, University of Plymouth and the UK Fashion and Textile Association led by the University of Exeter. For more information go to www.futurefibresnetworkplus.com or email fnplus@exeter.ac.uk.