Dirty Action
Mr. Clean
Attacks
Snow Boy
Wipp Express
Diss
Wonderful
Ivory Snow

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Dirty washing instructions: coming clean about this exhibition

Dirty Washing is more than a collection of soap powder boxes. Rinse away your preconceived ideas about soap powder and begin to spin semiotic thoughts about design and cultural meanings into the machine. Switch on the first washing cycle and take ‘dirt’ as a metaphor of the repressed language of soap. Begin to understand social obsessions about purity. Come clean about preconceived ideas about dirt, danger and, ultimately, even desecration. See soap powder in a whole new light.

The Dirty Washing exhibition showcases new graphic and product design responses to the soap powder box vernacular. It attempts to reveal why soap powder is not only an everyday product but also a design icon in its own right. Understanding the soap powder box as a legend in our own homes, requires viewers to ‘make strange’ previous ideas about cleaning rituals, and to participate in decoding the hidden language of branding.

Buying into soap powder is all about purchasing graphic design. Package the powder and give it a brand identity and the box will create a life of its own. Designers and consumers instinctively understand the graphic language of soap powder. Starburst aesthetics, swishes, hubs and circles, bold colours, italicised lettering, science-fiction language from the land of Omo may appear naïve today alongside sophisticated ‘lifestyle’ narratives. So why do these generic visual codes work? Design sells us sanitised fantasies about hygiene, security, purity and lifestyle along with the washing powder. Even in the twenty first century, packaging design presents brand identities that are more significant than the powder in the box.

With this exhibition both the conformity as well as the diversity of the design on the boxes are revealed as an enduring and internationally developed graphic form. We offer original design responses to this aesthetic. Can you see the difference? Is the future bright, or is the future dirty...?

Seán O’Mara / Lorraine Gamman

Exhibition themes include: ‘Wasted and Washed Up’; ‘Washes Whiter – Imperial Fantasies’; ‘Mother Knows Best Or Why Real Men Don’t Do Washing’; ‘Future Tense’
Soap box is perhaps the most characteristic of products but boasts the highest visual identity on the supermarket shelves. On some brands of soap powder up to 25% of the cost to the consumer is linked to advertising; to comprehend the ‘magic’ of the soap box, we take a quick look at the history and visual seduction of soap powder packaging. We discuss how a graphic design vernacular emerged with this aesthetic form. While we try to address some consumer questions that informed development of this design ‘vernacular’, our focus on the ‘art’ of the soap box design ‘vernacular’, our focus on the ‘art’ of the soap box "identity on the supermarket but boasts the highest visual salience. Most characterless of products Soap powder is perhaps the most characteristic of products, but boasts the highest visual identity on the supermarket shelves. On some brands of soap powder up to 25% of the cost to the consumer is linked to advertising: to comprehend the ‘magic’ of the soap box, we take a quick look at the history and visual seduction of soap powder packaging. We discuss how a graphic design vernacular emerged with this aesthetic form. While we try to address some consumer questions that informed development of this design ‘vernacular’, our focus on the ‘art’ of the soap box design ‘vernacular’, our focus on the ‘art’ of the soap box

### 1. Pre-wash – Soak in History

Soap, as a product has transmuted. The laundry has disappeared in a society of evolving products, yet Lever launched Sunlight Soap (1894) in distinctive tin boxes. For at least 170 years, powder, flakes, synthetic detergent, detergents, liquid, and now powder, all sit in box. The history of soap powder provides a basis for exploring the development of his form. The letters ‘Dirt’ dispeller, ‘The Dirt Dispeller’ are meant to wash while you sleep’. The first synthetic detergents were made by the Germans during WWI. The development of modern detergents was not a smooth process, but rather a series of incremental improvements. The first synthetic detergents were made by the Germans during WWI. The development of modern detergents was not a smooth process, but rather a series of incremental improvements.

At the turn of the century the boxes that emerged (for example, the early Omo brand 1908) featured simple, straightforward images on the box. The designs used simple graphics and bold letterforms to attract consumer attention. These washing powder boxes are perhaps the closest thing that consumers have to the bar of soap. They are dependent on the use of visual images that appeal to the human body. The development of synthetic detergents was not a smooth process, but rather a series of incremental improvements. The first synthetic detergents were made by the Germans during WWI. The development of modern detergents was not a smooth process, but rather a series of incremental improvements.

### 2. Wash at 40 degrees – new washing machines and choice

The definition of synthetic detergent suggests that it has detergent properties, but it is technically not real soap. The name for the new synthetic detergents was mainly used for hand washing. As Roland Riehl, points out detergents and soap powder understand and represent ‘dirt’ quite differently. He says that powders have a softer form of metaphor than liquid detergents; ‘their function is kit to a more commonplace European households by the late 1920s and 1930s. Without

In 1926, the German architect Walter Gropius, was involved in the design of a large-scale advertising for building facades in Germany. The lettermaster Walter Dessel designed products for Persil who were running a big campaign for their washing powder products. The designs used simple graphics and bold letterforms to attract consumer attention. These washing powder boxes are perhaps the closest thing that consumers have to the bar of soap. They are dependent on the use of visual images that appeal to the human body. The development of synthetic detergents was not a smooth process, but rather a series of incremental improvements.

The redesigns of all these brands found to be kinder to fabrics and represent ‘dirt’ quite differently. He says that powders have a softer form of metaphor than liquid detergents; ‘their function is kit to a more commonplace European households by the late 1920s and 1930s. Without

when parts were reassembled in a different order. In the 1950s, fat-based soap powders co-existed with the new detergents (new similar powders are mainly used for hand washing). As Roland Riehl, points out detergents and soap powder understand and represent ‘dirt’ quite differently. He says that powders have a softer form of metaphor than liquid detergents; ‘their function is kit to a more commonplace European households by the late 1920s and 1930s. Without

According to Roger Sabin, ‘the most significant influence is the Star Wars franchise. The redesigned Dux (1950). According to Roger Sabin, ‘the most significant influence is the Star Wars franchise. The redesigned Dux (1950).

### 3. Rinse with consumerism; Add fabric conditioner to soften the visual politics of dirty washing

The consumer boom in Britain took much longer than in the USA. It was not until 1957 that Harold Macmillan was able to say Britain had never had it so good. The 1950s saw a return to domesticity for many women and a focus on the home after World War II. Washing machine ownership in Britain went from 5% in 1945 to 63% in 1966, although it was not until 1984 that 80% of all British households were found to own their own washing machines. Even without automatic washing machines in the home, laundry became a powerful symbol of the redefined wife/mother role. The task was to bring back the luster on the back of some of the soap powder box designs reflected this. For example Chipso Flakes, as well as Procter and Gamble's Duz was re-designed to imitate the Tide aesthetic. Wisk (1946), Surf

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To sell well in the USA despite the success of synthetic detergents, the soap box image was compared to the box image of Superman (1940). It was more retro looking than the Tide box (1947). But perhaps the most innovative improvement in the soap powder box design was the ‘novel language of early action and Super Hero comics that developed many different types of soap based products, even new brands that competed with existing ‘house’ brands for example Chipso Flakes, they re-designed to imitate the Tide Box.
Like the Duzz box, featured images of women in frilled aprons worrying about whiteness. This language connects the cleanliness of washing with ensuring that motherhood knew its place. Women were encouraged, as Ilene Nadler Valley has observed, “to pour a large amount of chemical livers into the washing ‘because they felt they weren’t quite good enough without brightness of a certain standard’.” Cleaning has been linked to female subjection and it is interesting that there are few images of men on soap powder boxes, except as secondary lifestyle messaging. Mr. Clean – the exception himself – didn’t arrive on the soap powder scene until 1958 when Proctor and Gamble developed the Persil box (complete with tear-off offer for psychedelic tea towels). Avant garde ‘Dirty Girl’ gave inspiration to other personas of male super-hero cleaning products – Persil Man in Turkey (washing powder). There appears always to have been anxiety about men who clean. Don Aslet pointed out 90% of all household work is caused by men and children, and 90% of it is done by women who simply clean more than men. So Mr. Clean (1997) just looked too clean to be true. A suspicion that he might be a ‘Dirty’ Gay emerged, not least because he was featured wearing an earring in some adverts. (The earring doesn’t appear on all packets, for example, in the Philippines.) Proctor and Gamble asserted that the Mr. Clean persona was based on a rugged sailor whose masculine strength could only be an asset to women around the house, and that real men really did do washing.

By the late 1950s the absence of men in washing power box adverts, was not reflected elsewhere in advertising. Fears that technical developments would either lead to total disaster or even alien invasion, produced for example, images of tense men worried about the future. A type of science fiction narrative became common place in some advertising, using ‘flying saucers’ from ‘B’ movies, to help promote consumer solutions. On soap powder boxes, there wasn’t a direct sci-fi referencing, but some boxes were abstractly linked to atomic activity when new brands were designed, such as Atomic Soap Flakes.

Washing powder boxes, of the early 1960s, also invited housewives to engage with scientific ‘experts’ in white coats. At last, some men did appear to know about washing. Housewives were encouraged to participate in science itself just by buying soap powder. Ariel and Bold developed in this period and the language of the packets updates the abstract symbolism of the influential Tide packet to embrace atomic particles and chemical reactions as part of the visual assault. Ironically, it is this ‘biological’ moment in soap powder history (when it was rumoured that some combat aliens know about laundry – when much of the 1970s ‘take us to your laundry’ alien invasion campaign is funnier, not only because it plays with contemporary X files motifs, but a suggest “male” aliens know about laundry). Women are shown being ‘good’ mothers or just living within the secure protection of their existing vernacular.

Looking across the brands of soap powder on supermarket shelves of the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s it is clear that there is no single visual direction, or one direct message, being promoted but much diversity articulated through a narrow graphic design palette. The simplicity of the form lent itself easily to many zeitgeists for adaptation of the messages of the moment. For example, flower power is hinted at on the Silver Dust box (complete with tear-off offer for psychedelic tea towels). Avant garde and prolific designer, Paul Rand, who was a teaching professor at Yale university in 1965 asked his students to re-design the Duzz box. This studio brief continued until the mid 1970s and produced one of the first serious attempts we found to move the graphic language of washing powder away from its existing vernacular.

There is an interesting contrast to be made between the geometric forms and abstract shapes pioneered by the soap box brands owned by Proctor and Gamble in the 1950s, and the 1960s lifestyle image led mother and child approaches that appears on their Ivory Snow box and the family emphasis on Unilever’s Persil. We see how softness and protection through washing our clothes is transformed on the boxes as a metaphor for many of the functions of the perfect family unit. Women are shown being ‘good’ mothers or just living within the secure protection of Persil’s life. Persil’s ‘2001 ‘take us to your laundry’ alien invasion campaign is funnier, not only because it plays with contemporary X files motifs, but a suggest “male” aliens know about laundry.

Finished with by the 1970s, and 1980s it was the turn of the environmentalists become increasingly concerned about the cocktail of synthetic chemicals found in washing machine powders. Yet the happy and colourful packets don’t convey any of these social anxieties at all but instead speak ‘denial’ in luminous colours and bold type.

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Final Spin: This investigation has shown that a powerful soap box graphic design form emerged to promote myths about dirt ‘dispelling’ aimed at usually secondary consumers in supermarkets. This design vernacular may combine an art form, even if we note that the crude ‘clean/dirty – good/bad’ binary oppositions that inform the promotion of washing products are extremely dubious. ‘White’ washing, is often presented as ‘natural’ and ‘happy families’ and, worse, more natural than either dirt or sex, which is obviously a problem. Dirt ‘becomes’ always the bad ‘other’ of ideas about clean, sexual desire becomes a represented component of stereotypes about purity and goodness.

Soap powder boxes are both enticing and beautiful. We understand the irrefutably present in messages on boxes for hand soap such as Love Potion No. 9, Biting the Dust: the Joys of Housework, and Pudlowski’s other messaging tells us male humans clearly do not.

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Don’t do that, it’s dirty by Mark Jenner

Freud once wrote of the habit of ‘setting up the use of soap as an actual yardstick of civilisation’, and the habit, it seems, remains ingrained. Remember how during the 1980s certain politicians presented the distinction between cleanliness and dirt as one of the self-evident moral hierarchies which had been perniciously undermined in the 1960s. In fact such claims for the obvious and objective nature of dirt rest upon flimsy foundations. For once you start investigating cleanliness or dirt, the stability and self-evidence of these categories begins to disintegrate. What’s ‘clean’ in an operating theatre doesn’t count as ‘clean’ in a computer chip lab; both spaces are (I hope) governed by different understandings of dirt from those that apply in your home. Think historically or cross-culturally, and our certainties dissolve even further. In much of pre- or early industrial Europe a layer of grease on the body was healthful protection against chills, not a noxious accumulation to be showered and scoured away. The peculiarities of Western hygiene were beautifully exposed by the remark of an incredulous but generous-hearted native American confronted for the first time by a European using a handkerchief: “If thou likest that filth, give me thy handkerchief and I will soon fill it”.

Mary Douglas’s 1966 classic, *Purity and Danger* remains a key text for anyone thinking about these themes. In it Douglas adapts older definitions, and argues that dirt is ‘matter out of place’. Food, she observes, ‘is not dirty in itself, but it is dirty to leave… food bespattered on clothing. “Dirt is thus a relative idea. “It is the by-product of a systematic ordering and classification of matter”; things become polluting when they violate or threaten a culture’s classificatory and symbolic order. Crucially, therefore, examining concepts of dirt leads us to the symbolic heart of social systems. We impart dignity to situations or people by distancing them from waste matter; campaigns against various forms of physical pollution often coincide with efforts to shore up the social order at times of strain. From this perspective, it is not surprising that the imagery surrounding soap powder so often reiterates distinctions along lines of race and gender.

Douglas’s work can be critiqued and extended. It does not explore the links between notions of cleanliness and modern hierarchies of sex and class as the French sociologist, Pierre Bourdieu, does in *Distinction*. More fundamentally, her argument that dirt is matter out of place, does not examine matter. Ever since Duchamp, Dali and Magritte, artists have depicted and installed objects out of place. Such work may disorient us, may cause us to think about hierarchies of value, but we rarely perceive it as filth in the way that we might the contents of Piero Manzoni’s 1961 tins of Artist’s Shit. Perhaps the visual language of sooty smuts and grass stains in which soap powder is packaged is a form of representation which represses other more intimate substances such as urine, excrement and menstrual blood.


Removes only dirt...

Brightens as it washes and rinses clear as can be!
Keep on taking the tablets

1. Unwrap the two Persil Tablets and place them inside the net (for heavy soiling use three).
2. Close the net, using the toggle and place on top of the wash load towards the back of the drum.
3. The Persil Tablets will disperse and dissolve, evenly and thoroughly, all around the wash.

Simple, yet not so simple that it cannot be considered to be without ritual... How very satisfying, on every level, it is to wash with tablets. With tablets, as opposed to powder, all messiness is removed from the process of eradicating the stains, mishaps and messiness of family life. Piss, poo, dribble and discharge, all are utterly removed, with barely any effort at all. If only I'd known all this before.

You see, I came late to laundry. Until 1997, the year I married and had a baby, I had never, ever used an automatic washing machine. My life was a life of laundrette service washes, fortnightly, and with a single set of bedclothes removed for the duration and then replaced. People used to ask me why I didn’t have a washing machine, and I’d always say it was easier to go to the laundrette. What a fool.

Of course I blame my mother. When I was about four my mother’s ancient machine had exploded, sparks and smoke flying from it, my mother screaming, out of control. What girl-child would not be traumatised? And there was worse to come. A new twin-tub was purchased. But the effort involved in pulling it out, filling it with hoses which always had to be held firmly over the tap, soaking, washing, spinning, drying, seemed massive. Each time my mother washed, the twin-tub had to be lagged with a load of towels placed around the base of the machine, so that water and electricity should never get the opportunity to meet again. For 20 adult years, I avoided having to deal with that sort of nonsense.

My husband brought surprisingly little in the way of material goods to our union. A huge screen with the A-Z of London on it, suitable only for a church hall, an enormous custom-made chair, again useful only in a world of much larger people and a child’s pop-up tent and an automatic washing machine, which pre-term, I ignored. Then came the baby, mountains of whites that needed washing whiter, this minute. At first my laundering was grudging and chaotic. I hadn’t got the hang of it. Then, it gradually fell into place. Laundry, far from being chaotic, was order-restoring, easy, calming. As long as the laundry was done, stacked in the special plastic boxes I bought to sort it downstairs before returning it to its drawers and cupboards, all was serene in the family.

Of course, it was obsessive. Even a few bits on a drying rack offended me. The idea was to grab the dirty gear the moment it hit the floor, get it into the machine, tumble-dry it, then fold it. Ironing was never a factor. Again, my mother. She used to iron dish-towels and pants. I would rebel, by ironing nothing. Folding neatly the moment the drying cycle is finished, I find, precludes all necessity.

The one unpleasant aspect of the whole purifying process was the gunky drawer, and occasionally, a trail of powder on the floor of the custom-built (from a damp hole under the outside stairs) laundry room. No other utilities are allowed in my shrine-room. Even the furniture polish is kept elsewhere. But in this chapel of laundry, the powder was not quite controllable enough. Not entirely without consequences. Frankly, the process was not perfect. But now it is. Daughters, mothers, women, marriage, laundry, insanity. There’s a chain there, you know. But as long as I keep taking the tablets, I can continue to stave off the inevitable. Can’t I?
Scrotal sacs and power balls

Let’s hear it for the scrotum.
Let the scrotum shout it out loud and say: ‘I too am worthy of respect, of adulation, of eulogy and mythologisation even.’ Why, the vagina has its monologue, the womb its role as the gestational crux of a thousand apothegms and turns of phrase, the egg is its own meat, and as for the phallus, manifestly, it stands up for itself. But the scrotum is neglected, the scrotum is derided, the scrotum is the poor cousin of its fellow genitals.
Yet I believe that the scrotum is not only worthy of the profoundest recognition, but that it also has received its due, albeit covertly. The great shame is that the most significant cultural icon of the scrotum is on the verge of disappearing from the collective purview, condemned forever to the pitiful graveyard of product obsolescence. I refer, of course, to the small, white nylon mesh, plastic-toggle-fastened, washing tablet bags, that, for the past few years have been marketed as one of the most – up until now – efficient detergent delivery systems.
Consider the washing tablet bag. Is it not approximately the size of a scrotum? Does it not have roughly the texture of a scrotum? When freighted with its two rectilinear tablets, is it not a virtual simulacrum of the scrotum? When those two tablets are themselves styled ‘powerballs’, wouldn’t you say the comparison is not so much plangent as egregious? And when you further admit the important sense in which the relation between the bag and the wash, is analogous to that which pertains between the scrotum and the world, can you ever again handle one without it becoming a profound act?

Perhaps this is why they’re being phased out. The scrotal power ball tablet bag is placed within the protoplasmic soup of filthy laundry. As – like a centrifuge or a particle accelerator – the washing machine enters its spin cycle, so the contents of the bag begins to commingle with the water of life to produce a whole new world of clean duds. The scuds themselves are the effervescence of the spumescence of the spermatozoic bag. The laundry is both literally and metaphorically spunk drunk. By filling the bag with tablets and placing it in the urethral opening of the washing machine, the launderer is becoming essentially involved in an act that combines the ritual and the practical, the generative and the purgative. Once the false consciousness that cathects itself to the realm of product marketing is exposed, so the nylon mesh sac is revealed, and with it the inclination of the consumer to invest in new and improved detergent delivery systems is entirely vitiated.

Stop the spin cycle – I want capable hands to yank me out. I appreciate that the new phials and capsules coming bobbing on stream are also capable of being subjected to my symbolic reading, but none of them has the raw, textual appeal of the nylon mesh bag. Of course, the iconic scrotal sac will remain present – and potent – in other important fields of human endeavour (for a discussion of its relationship to the logos, see my article: ‘Velveteen Scrabble Bags and the Origin of the Indo-European Language Family’ British Journal of Ephemera, March 1999), but with it ripped untimely from the womb of line laying we are visited with an irreparable loss.

In December of last year I went to Konya in Central Anatolia to witness the ‘semi’ or ceremony of the Whirling Dervishes. As the Sufi mystics in their pure, white robes, lounged a hydra-headed flower of revolving rosettes, so my eye was drawn to the banners of the commercial sponsor that hung around the walls of the basketball stadium. These proclaimed ‘Arcelik’ (pronounced ‘arse lick’), the name of a washing machine manufacturer famed throughout the near and Middle East.
I thought of whirling laundry. I watched the whirling dervishes. Finally, I experienced a kind of peace, a sort of enlightenment.
"No soap, no ball, no mess. Just the simplest way to enjoy all your clothes." Those of us clever enough to really enjoy our clothes properly gave up on soap aeons ago, darling. Enjoying your clothes obviously means washing them more than you ever thought possible. And how we have washed them? Soap powder is so over except in a retro sort of way. Washing liquid? Been there done that and dripped it all over the bloody place. Tablets? Fine if you are sad enough to kid yourself that lumps of soap powder are some sort of technological advance. Sacks and balls? Please. Great for nerds and the gadget obsessive, in other words, men. Fabric conditioner? Don't be soft. No, those of us at the cutting edge of detergent delivery are into capsules. We are young, we are modern, we like little plastic bags full of translucent green gel. We know that the future is clear and round and see-through. We want to be part of a world full of iMacs and Dysons and we want our washing 'systems' to reflect this.

Persil Capsules come in a curved box because we like the new soft shapes. Curves are the new straight lines. Inside is a plastic bag filled with twenty green bubbles. Or are they flying saucers? Ariel's Liqui-tabs on the other hand open up like a box of chocolates with the Liqui-tabs packed in layers, as if they were a luxury good. For in a way they are. Though we over-wash, the fact that we no longer do it by hand has removed a huge amount of drudgery from women's lives. It is often said that the single invention that has most improved the lives of women in the last century was not the pill but the washing machine. Somehow, instead of liberating us, it has actually allowed us to create more ridiculous standards of cleanliness.

This may be why we need constant novelty as a once weekly task in a dose-driven daily one. We end up with the banal reinvention of the detergents that we put into the washing machine. Plastic bags that miraculously dissolve in water added to our clothes. Where does the soluble plastic go you might ask but probably won’t. We prefer not to care what these capsules contain—shower gel, shampoo, toothpaste or the requisite mixture of enzymes, gunk and good old-fashioned soap. We know that green is the magic colour of nature. We don't have to worry about a thing... We chuck away the unnecessary plastic packaging as we gaily purge our clothes of our smells and stains, looking after number one. We are shiny, scrubbed, clever people. We may use too much water, discharge too many chemicals and pile up layers of quite unnecessary plastic waste but individually, selfishly, we are clean and pure and almost see-through. We may have to worry about a thing... We chuck away the unnecessary plastic packaging as we gaily purge our clothes of our smells and stains, looking after number one. We are shiny, scrubbed, clever people. We may use too much water, discharge too many chemicals and pile up layers of quite unnecessary plastic waste but individually, selfishly, we are clean and pure and almost see-through. We are living in a bubble. No man is an island and no woman is a capsule. For in our obsession with cleansing ourselves, we refuse to realize that we actually make the world a dirtier place.
If it’s gotta be clean it’s gotta be Tide, Cheer – keeps colors bright; Ivory Snow – for delicate fabrics, Dreft – won’t irritate baby’s tender skin. These are just four of the brands sold in the United States by detergents giant Procter & Gamble – all are washing powders, all do different jobs. Today each powder, liquid or tablet is formulated for a very specific purpose, but do we really NEED different washing powders for whites, coloureds and delicates? The very notion of ‘need’ is a contingent one, like the notion of ‘clean’ or ‘dirty’. Those who get carried away with the idea that concepts of bodily and domestic hygiene are simply control mechanisms, imposed from above by the dominant class upon the dominated (the working classes, women, colonial peoples), would do well to think back.

The days when one lump of hard soap was used not just for laundry but for hair and bodies, adults and babies, clothes, dishes and floors were, quite simply, hard work. ‘Two pennyworth of soap may have to wash the clothes, scrub the floors, and wash the people of a family for a week…’ A woman who had been using her one piece of soap to scrub the floor next brought it into play when she bathed the baby, with the unfortunate result of a long scratch on the baby from a cinder in the soap. She sighed… and said: I sometimes think I’d like a little oven best, but now it do seem as if I’d rather ‘ave two bits of soap.’

Early branded soaps were sold on their ability to do any number of different cleaning tasks. A 1890s advert for Sunlight Soap lists uses including ‘for the laundry’, ‘for the toilet’, ‘for the household and even for washing dogs’ and ‘for cage birds and poultry’. The time the above description was written, the process of market segmentation was already under way, at least for more prosperous consumers. During the inter-war years, sales of soap flakes and powders grew to equal those of traditional hard soaps. The washing of bodies and clothes became separated in the mass market, with shampoos and toilet soaps coming into common use (though you could buy a bar of Lux for your face which boasted the same gentle properties as Lux Flakes you used for your underwear.). Specialist products for washing dishes, floors, baths and toilets began to be sold more widely, rather than being the preserve of the well-off minority.

The development of specialised laundry, cleaning and personal hygiene products must surely have made life more comfortable over the past hundred years (though comfort is a contingent notion as cleanliness). But has the process gone too far? My household boasts a dozen different products to do the jobs expected of the ‘two pennyworth of soap’ used in 1913. Modern washing powders help to make light work of a once back-breaking task, but if you run out at a critical moment, try using washing up liquid – it does the job fine.

4. Sunlight Soap Advertising Booklet, ephemera collection, Wellcome Library for the History and Understanding of Medicine, c.1890s
It is almost impossible to disentangle the meanings of soap products in their colonial milieu. The combination of soap production, with its fetishisation of hygiene and the domestic ideal of “whiteness”, which evolved from the colonial exploitation of the countryside, in which ideology of “purity” was directly linked to the imperialist drive for colonialism, was linked to the imperialist vigorousness of existing power structures. Ideologically, the soap-driven focus on hygiene, connected with the utilitarian compensation demanded by the colonial exploitation of the countryside, was often the most effective way to resolve the tensions created by colonial exploitation, and by the same token to ensure its continuance. Soap was thus a key marker of this process of colonial exploitation, and the various historical forms of colonial exploitation, as shown here emerged roughly equivalent to the “whiteness” ideology of the American Civil War: underpins the way that blacks feature not as objects of superiority, but as “whites” in a colonial context, the inherently dirty figure of the colonised black. The new market was to be flattened at the expense of the old one, as the various historical forms of colonial exploitation were reduced to the market form of the new one. The implication of Gold Dust’s heap of coins from a pleasantly fantastic Great Depression which, by the early thirties, must have turned the soap packets from this period into a captive market of the colonial frameworks which had held in place a captive market in the 1880s and 90s had not actually shared; and the nostalgically which that ideology of “purity” can be seen as a common with the more missionary-toned British images of the time and yet cannot but be evoked by the very insistence on its opposite. soap packets from this period, with the peculiarly British idea of “whiteness” offered by the soap packets from this period, with the peculiarly British idea of “whiteness”, is that they refer backwards, in each case to a relatively recent past in which the prosperity generated by imperialism in its heyday had peaked, the latter part of the nineteenth century saw the development of high-turnover goods, which became necessary for that economy and the fantasy of an essentially white one, the white consumer becomes nothing at all.

Packaging and advertising images are perhaps the most powerful messages that exist. Their function is not overtly ideological but economic. But what the images here tell us about their vehicle of representation, in context, tell us a great deal about both. While the white sheets the black people themselves – is nothing at all.

Working up to white king
by Judith Williamson

Both these products were manufactured in the Northern states and neither appears to have been aimed at a class with a slave-owning Elliot – Mrs. Fun-to-wash has disappeared from the public realm and in contrast to black with white: that colonisation was good for it was to be another two decades before Rosa Parks refused to budge from her seat on the bus. Since these were pasts which the working class soap-consumers Nordhoff & Labrador, 1982


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Hoven, Industry and Empire (Penguin: Images of

Jesse Casney Smiths (ed), Images of

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Judith Williamson, A Sign in a Fine Investment (Midland), Arts Council of Great Britain, 1983
I wake next to, what one might euphemistically describe as a baby-pink prototype clone of myself, and let out a piercing scream. Mars is transiting my 5th house, indicating a bad start to the day (you may mock, but Ronald Reagan was influenced by astrology too).

My clone and I breakfast together (wheat and bran-free flakes with fat-free soya milk – coincidentally, we’re both lactose intolerant!) and are in deep discussion about whose turn it is to hang out the washing. The doorbell rings. It’s my ex, a stunning red sequinned Gucci bikini – dripping wet. My coming-out-of-the-closet recently, clearly hasn’t deterred her – she’s obviously here to seduce me. If only she knew how transparent she is. The clone snaps vehemently at her with one of his catty one-liners. “Your label’s sticking out.” But she snaps back with the strength of a thousand yards of reinforced designer spandex. “Can’t you read, Peg-head? It says, DRY CLEAN ONLY.” For the first time in my life, I actually feel sorry for her. What an affliction; to be born in the height of the season, a sexy little sequinned swimsuit, only to discover you have the dreaded Dry Clean Only label surgically attached to your hip. Of course, I’d hung out with a lot of filthy little undergarments in my time and had always suspected something was up with this one. The first time we bathed together she shrunk at least two sizes!

“I may never be machine-cleaned or hand-washed again. I’m destined to spend the rest of my shelf-life confined to a shelf – or worse still, hamstrung with dry cleaning chemicals and hung upside down in plastic. I want to be cryogenically frozen and brought back to life in a future society. Free from petty restrictions placed on us. I’ve no one else to turn to. You have to help me dry out!”

But the clone is unfazed by her cold act. She finds some other gristy peg to latch on to. Can’t you see, Greg and I are in love. We plan to adopt a family – a long line of baby pegs – and some day even marry. You can no longer come between us.” She falls, the door bell rings again. It’s a sales agent from the local cryogenics company, cold calling for newly-deads and other potentially fresh flesh clientele. “Hi! We are currently offering special introductory rates for anyone who passes away within the next 28 days.” It’s a miracle! Truly a match made in heaven. The Gucci get-up, finally gets up off the floor. “Oh, how I’ve always yearned to be zipped into a polyurethane freezer bag, stored head down in a steel pod filled with liquid nitrogen and preserved at minus three hundred degrees centigrade!” And off they waft over the horizon.

So, as usual, the planets were right. It wasn’t a good start to the day. And as another sad undergarment falls victim to the underworld of fashions and undercover dry cleaning agents, I look to religion for an answer; is Cleanliness really next to Godliness?
Seán O’Mara is an artist, photographer and writer. He was the creative exhibition director of the Dirty Washing exhibition that explored and analysed washing powder boxes across the world. He has also curated exhibitions of ‘memorabilia’ or ‘cherished collectibles’, but simply as a start, he explains,

"... there are many independent curators, curating the grassroots of the arts themselves, without the aid of galleries or the support of the state. So, I focus on the grassroots of the arts..." 

O’Mara’s work has been featured in numerous exhibitions and publications. He has also worked for many major brands such as Adidas, Shell, BAT, Heron City Agfa and was also responsible for the ‘Dirty Washing’ exhibition in India.

Prior to joining rodneyfitch in 2001, O’Mara trained in experimental graphic design at Dunlaoire College of Art, Dublin and has 13 years’ experience working with blue-chip global brands.

His creative work has been used for clients such as Nike, MTV, Orange and Bravo. O’Mara is a freelance designer and researcher at Central Saint Martins College of Art and Design and has contributed to various publications, including Tank to Japanese newspapers. He is also a research assistant for Design Against Crime.

O’Mara is the author of three short story collections: The Quantity Theory of Insanity, Grey Area and Tough Tough Toys for Tough Tough Boys. He is also a research assistant for Design Against Crime.
Seán would like to personally thank the following individuals as without their support and involvement in scouring the supermarkets and junk stalls of the world this exhibition would not have been possible. The great unwashed are as follows:

Sam Magee - Penny Magee - Troy Litten - Ona Mansfield - Jessicha Molhar - Matt Shave - John Turner - Orla Daly - Eugene O’Mara - Elize O’Mara - Lorraine Gamman - Georgina Gamman - Terry Harrison - Sarah Cromwell - Markham Darbyshire - Lara Farnham - Mark Goldstein - Micheal Morris - Yoshiko Sato - Chris Bradley - Glen Thornley - Anna Sanchez - Hiromi Shibuichi - Gill Thompson - Greet Ben Yaacov - Nathalie Juan - Sioma Riajmakers - Mark Harper - Stuart Johnson - Tara Binsauthising - Richard Powers - Neil Hurley - Julian Roberts - Peter Barwick - Barbara Grezsf - Martand Khosla - Elise Valmorbida - Camilla Lilleskold - Micheal Gibson (last seen in Russia) - Helen Byford - Chiara Grandesso - Steve Hodgkins - Rodney Fitch - Lewis Alan - Giles Marking - Aman Alhi - Kuldip Singh - Anne + David Mobbs - Tim Elcock - Caroline Evans - Carol Tulloch - Joe Kerr - Victoria Kelly for research expertise when it was needed; to Sam Magee For putting up with Seán and much needed help; to Suzanne Mobbs for outstanding dedication; to Marketa Uhlirova for quick response library search; to Anna Gerber and Lucie Russell for their hard work, advice and creativity; to Juliet Simmons for proof reading; and to all our friends for their encouragement, support and labour when it was needed; also to the writers of this volume who helped us make it through the night...

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