

Project Submission: Pomona Publication

Name and Title: Rive Studio (Eade Hemingway & Laura-Jane Atkinson)

Short Biography: (100 words)

Rive Studio was formed in October 2015 by Laura-Jane Atkinson and Eade Hemingway. The ethos of the studio is to explore tangible and speculative material based solutions to social and environmental problems.

Project Title: Japanese Not Weed

Project Text: (400 – 1000 words)

Japanese Not Weed

Rive studio is currently looking into how the impressive behaviour of Japanese Knotweed (JKW) can be harnessed in such a way that could be beneficial to society. JKW is notorious for being incredibly durable and spreadable, able to break apart buildings and destroy house values. The annual cost that JKW has on the British Economy is estimated at £166 million[1]. It can grow up to 20 cm a day, and its roots can span 7 metres in every direction[2]. It has the ability to spread from tiny cuttings and reports suggest that there is no 10 square km in the UK that is without JKW[3]. For these reasons it has several pieces of legislation written in an attempt to abolish it[4], and is regularly demonised amongst members of society.

However, Rive Studio is looking at how this plant that we have in great abundance in the UK could be perceived as an asset rather than a pest. We consider the exploration of JKW to have potential in two settings: A, the current situation and perceptions of JKW in the UK; and B, what a future with JKW could look like.

Category A:

There is an abundance of JKW here in the UK, and whether it is alive and growing in the wild or it is being treated and disposed of, it currently serves no purpose. If this waste could be used as a material resource, it may contribute to solutions for escalating current material issues such as resource depletion and waste. Additionally, the money made from selling it would offset some of the negative financial effects on the UK economy that the plant currently has. And, due to the way the plant distributes its nutrients, if JKW is cut when it's alive the rhizomes weaken and it becomes easier to kill in the future[5]. Consequently, if we were to harvest JKW it would be easier to fulfil the government's aim to eliminate it from the UK if that continued to be the desirable outcome.

If, therefore, JKW were to be used as a resource today it could in fact fulfil economic, political and environmental goals and therefore could play a part in altering the negative perceptions society has of JKW.

Category B:

However what perhaps is more interesting is how JKW could be seen differently in the future and the effects this could have. If people were open to seeing JKW as a resource rather than a pest, its resilience may be seen more valuable than problematic. The fact that JKW can survive both at temperatures as low as -17°C but can also grow in extremely hot conditions[6] may start to be appealing in a world of increasingly severe weather conditions. As other plants die off because of a lack of bees to fertilise them, people may become grateful for plants such as JKW that can propagate without bees[7]. It may also be valued when plants such as JKW flower later than other plants giving bees much needed nectar and hence encouraging the diminishing bee population, and therefore the propagation of other crops in the area.

The very characteristics that have made JKW so unpopular could be the same reason it becomes valuable in the future.

In category A, we are looking at JKW as a temporary by-product of the removal process in the form of waste. In category B we are situating JKW in the future; planning that the plant will still be alive in UK and perhaps even actively grown as a resource. This would require a huge change in society's perception of the plant, both with the public, the environmental agency and the government.

Although JKW is edible and we do support its use as an edible resource, we are focusing our project on finding non-edible uses for the plant as they are somewhat less explored. We will be looking at it both as a material resource for goods (building materials, packaging, craft objects, functional products); and a tool for services (building demolition, bee conservation).

We are researching JKW through playful experimentation, establishing different situations that will allow us to document its behaviour and speculate over the realistic or imagined possibilities this suggests. We have been dissecting, boiling, burning, heating, soaking, blending, stripping, drying, dipping, unpicking and crushing the plant, using these material interactions to form a relationship with JKW. As Tim Ingold describes, we are thinking through making; giving our ideas a foundation in experience[8].

This initiative proposes that this 'alien' species whose original name in Japan translates to 'remove pain'[9], could indeed serve to remove the pain of our depleting resources, more severe climates and landfill extremities. As a society we need to learn to live with Japanese Knotweed to allow this relationship to fulfil its potential.

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