

PLASTIC WORLD

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Schirn Kunsthalle Frankfurt

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Initially still rather limited in scope, synthetic materials first found their way into art during the early twentieth century. With an enthusiasm for all things new, in line with technical developments, experiments were carried out with the latest materials available, among them Plexiglas, Styrofoam, silicone, vinyl and polyurethane. Almost everything in our daily lives is made of plastic: airbags, tennis balls, sneakers, sunglasses, toys, dentures, telephones, computers, kitchen utensils – without plastic, our present is barely conceivable. It is cheap and available almost anywhere in the world. It can take on virtually any shape, may be hard or flexible, transparent, opaque, patterned, smooth or textured, and it comes in bright colors to boot. Plastic holds great potential for technology and design. Given the immense creative freedom offered by plastic, it has since become a key material in art.

Its great breakthrough in the visual arts occurred parallel to the waves of consumerism that began in the 1950s. “The hierarchy of substances is abolished”, wrote Roland Barthes in 1957 in his *Mythologies*, and prophesied that “an artificial matter, more bountiful than all the natural deposits, is about to replace her, and to determine the very invention of forms.” Jean Baudrillard likewise stated that all organic and natural materials had meanwhile been replaced by plastic in countless variations. The material had become both a symptom and a symbol of a mass culture that was enthralled by nylon shirts and Tupperware. The “Plastic Age” was born. And with it, a material culture that still dominates to this day and from which we are currently trying to free ourselves under ecological pressure. The success of this useful material has become a burden. Since the 1960s, global plastic production has risen from about 1.5 million to 400 million tons. Synthetic materials are everywhere – small and tiny particles are in the soil, in the water, in the air. Plastic waste is shipped without recycling, the majority of it is packaging.

Against this background, fine art tells a highly interesting material story, ranging from the euphoria of pop culture in the 1960s to the futuristic influence of the Space Age and the trash works of Nouveau Réalisme, architectural utopias, plastic environments, experiments with material properties, and recent ecocritical positions. Following the path that the use of synthetic materials in the visual arts has taken reveals a complex narrative. The use and evaluation of the material reflects its respective social context and quite often holds surprises. Alongside ecocritical works that formulate their objections primarily against the (excessive) use of plastic in everyday life, it is nonetheless avidly used with tremendous enthusiasm for experimentation that has steadily expanded with technological progress. The exhibition is dedicated to this ambivalence, which tells not least of the constraints of the material. Limited durability, age and decay have taken their toll on the once largely beautiful, smooth and seductively perfect surfaces. The exhibition challenges the time-bound nature of artistic materials and takes a look at the complexity and wide-ranging panorama of plastic since the early 1960s.

The exhibition PLASTIC WORLD begins with the art of the 1960s, when plastics suddenly became ubiquitous. Plastic was Pop, equally popular in art and design, and stood for the new lifestyle of the youth, who wanted to set themselves apart from the bourgeois, conservative generation of their parents. Plastic was simply the quintessential material of the time. “Everybody’s plastic – but I love plastic. I want to be plastic,” Andy Warhol wrote to this effect, sending synthetic *Silver Clouds* (1966) floating through space. James Rosenquist captured his motifs on huge curtains made of polyester film,

Claes Oldenburg built washbasins, ice packs, and light switches out of vinyl, while Kiki Kogelnik suspended brightly colored plastic silhouettes from clotheslines.

At the same time, space travel and the moon landing also left a lasting impression. Plastic as a material in Space Age style communicated an unshakable belief in the future and social change. Playful utopian objects and pneumatic aerial architectures made of plastic by Archigram, Ant Farm, Utopia, Coop Himmelblau, and Haus-Rucker-Co emerged where fine art and experimental architecture intersected. Hans Hollein proposed an inflatable *Mobile Office* (1969), Walter Pichler a *TV-Helmet (Portable Living Room)*, 1967. They appropriated technology from the expanding packaging industry for their visionary notions that sought a new relationship between body, city, and space.

Synthetic materials were shaped into walk-through environments, among them Otto Piene's *Air Aquarium*, which in 1976 enabled visitors to experience the underwater world in form of huge inflatable and transparent sea anemones. A purely poetic and playful work at the time it was created, today's reconstruction or re-enactment of the work, which will be shown at the SCHIRN, takes on a broader perspective. The historical notion of using plastic as a celebrated material in art is overlaid by the discourse surrounding the pollution of the oceans by plastic and microplastics. Piene's work is therefore perfectly suited to show the ambivalences of plastic as a material. Furthermore, exemplary reference is made at this point to the time-bound nature and decay of plastic, which makes it necessary to re-produce historical works such as this one, since the deterioration of vinyl has meanwhile rendered the original version no longer functional nor presentable.

As early as the 1960s, Nouveau Réalisme was already aware of these aspects and raised critical questions about the new material. In 1967, Öyvind Fahlström's ingenious recoding of the *ESSO LSD* logo playfully and provocatively satirizes petrochemicals. In his plexiglass *Poubelles* (trash cans), Arman amassed the assortments of garbage of his time and exhibits a box full of old razors. Martial Raysse assembled used plastic bottles into a tree – *Arbre* (1960). In their assemblages, these artists were less interested in the smooth, beautiful material than in what remained in the end.

A further chapter of the exhibition explores the different material properties and forms that plastic can assume. In his *Expansions*, César poured polyurethane into free forms, as did Lynda Benglis, who went as far as to conceptualize the fragility of polyurethane foam directly in the performative pourings of her "Frozen Gestures". All that remains of the works is for the most part documentation. The same applies to Alina Szapoznikow's *Photosculptures* (1971), which she developed from chewed gum. Finally, Hans Haacke in *Welle mit Unterbrechung* (1965), and the *Kondensationsboden* (1963), explored the physical properties of the material and referred not least to its use in research and technology. In a new work, Frankfurt-based artist collective HazMatLab (Sandra Havlicek, Tina Kohlmann, and Katharina Schücke) will set up an interactive laboratory where visitors to the exhibition will be directly involved in the creative material research that the artists are conducting together, using synthetic slime, industrial nail polish, and 3D printing processes.

The relationship between nature and artificiality is the focus of the works associated with Italian Arte Povera. All of them are united by the subversion of traditional concepts of mimesis in the representation of nature. Pino Pascali combined synthetic brushes such as could be bought in any supermarket to create intensely colored, ringed caterpillars in *Cinque bachi da setola e un bozzolo*, 1968. Gino Marotta assembled an artificial paradise as if from a giant model construction kit in *Eden artificiale* (1967–73). He used methacrylate, transparent Plexiglas, probably the most durable synthetic material, for his alternative nature, deprived of any naturalness. Finally, Arte Povera artist and environmental activist Piero Gilardi made electronic sculptures such as *Vitigni danzanti* (1995) from polyurethane, setting out in search of a new artistic language for his political commitment with the aim of bringing pressing environmental problems to the attention of the general public.

The oil crisis of the 1970s, mass consumerism and the throw-away society, and the way in which these issues were challenged, caused a radical reassessment over the course of time. From being a symbol of progress, modernity, utopian spirit and democratization of consumption, synthetic materials turned into an ecological time bomb. As an allrounder without history, plastic was once hailed as the

material of the future; today, we are rather looking at the synthetic eternity we will spend with it. Works by the younger generation of artists in the last chapter of the exhibition reflect a lasting shift in mentality within society. Francis Alÿs, in his 2004 film *Barranderos* (Sweepers), shows street sweepers going about their nightly work of ridding Mexico City of garbage that consists mainly of plastic bottles and other plastic packaging.

Another video, *1001st Island – The Most Sustainable Island in Archipelago* from 2005 by Tita Salina from Jakarta, addresses the accumulation of waste in the Java Sea north of Indonesia. The enormous pollution is caused by the export from the western industrialized countries. The film ends with the impressive image of the artist standing on an artificial island made of plastic waste. The Frankfurt artist Dennis Siering develops a project from his findings of pyroplastics. These are pieces of synthetic materials burned on beaches, on ships or in garbage dumps, which have found their way into the oceans in various ways. They have been shaped by decades of erosion in such a way that to the naked eye they are virtually indistinguishable from natural stones. With his work *1 KG PET bottles fused* (2021), Danish artist Tue Greenfort, meanwhile, examines the ecological footprint and amount of water needed to produce a single plastic bottle. It is in the contemporary positions in particular that a global perspective is opened up, for instance in the case of Pascale Marthine Tayou from Cameroon, who regularly uses plastic bags for his installations.

The exhibition *PLASTIC WORLD* presents in various chapters, by means of objects, assemblages, installations, films, and documentaries, the divergent aspects of the brief history of this omnipresent material from the 1960s to the present day, thus offering a hitherto unique and complex overview of the material history of synthetic materials in fine art. It is worth emphasizing the particular value placed on the extensive provision of documentary material in the exhibition as an integral and, at the same time, indispensable source of information. Historical photos of performances as the only relics of works that have since been destroyed, advertising films, corporate films, texts – they all result in a complex picture, one that extends beyond the impressive works of art.

#### Artists

Raimund Abraham, Francis Alÿs, Archigram, John de Andrea, Arman, Richard Artschwager, Evelyne Axell, Enrico Baj, Joachim Bandau, Thomas Bayrle, Lynda Benglis, Lourdes Castro, César, Christo, Constant, Öyvind Fahlström, Berta Fischer, Richard Buckminster Fuller, Sylvie Fleury, Piero Gilardi, Tue Greenfort, Hans Haacke, Richard Hamilton, Coop Himmelblau, Haus-Rucker-Co, HazMatLab (Sandra Havlicek, Tina Kohlmann und Katharina Schücker), Romuald Hazoumé, Eva Hesse, Gerhard Hoehme, Hans Hollein, Alain Jacquet, Craig Kauffman, Mike Kelley, Kiki Kogelnik, Nicola L., Konrad Lueg, Gino Marotta, Claes Oldenburg, Pino Pascali, Walter Pichler, Otto Piene, Bernard Rancillac, Martial Raysse, James Rosenquist, Tita Salina, Niki de Saint-Phalle, Dennis Siering, Ferdinand Spindel, Alina Szapocznikow, Pascale Marthine Tayou, Paul Thek, Utopie, Andy Warhol, Tom Wesselmann