

THE SCHIRN PRESENTS THE MATERIAL HISTORY AND AESTHETICS OF PLASTIC IN VISUAL ART FOR THE FIRST TIME IN AN EXTENSIVE EXHIBITION

PLASTIC WORLD

JUNE 22 – OCTOBER 1, 2023

From June 22 to October 1, 2023, the Schirn Kunsthalle Frankfurt is dedicating a large thematic exhibition to the eventful history of plastic in visual art for the first time. It opens up a broad panorama of the artistic use and assessment of the material from the 1960s until today. The spectrum extends from the euphoria of pop culture to the futuristic influence of the space age, and from the trash works of Nouveau Réalisme to the ecocritical positions of recent times; it includes architectural utopias as well as experiments with material properties. Objects, assemblages, installations, films, and documentation show the diversity of the substances, forms, and materials and thus also reflect the respective social contexts.

Plastic is everywhere. It permeates the present, is cheap, is available nearly all over the world, and is omnipresent in everyday life. Whether hard or flexible, transparent, opaque, patterned, smooth, delicate, or colorful, today it can be used to produce nearly anything. Synthetic substances had their major breakthrough in the 1950s and became both a symptom and symbol of mass culture—the “plastic age” was born. And plastics also found their way into art early on due to their enormous design possibilities, quickly becoming a central material and a vehicle of innovation. In the search for the new, experiments were done with the materials most recently made available, whether Plexiglas, Styrofoam, silicon, vinyl, or polyurethane as well as industrial manufacturing techniques. In the consumption frenzy of the time, Pop Art celebrated the new artificial and inexpensive material with its colorful brilliance and bright hues. Plastic was used in fantastical-seeming spaces and environments; it was inflated, foamed, and poured at happenings. The fascination with space exploration, the moon landing, and high-tech materials inspired both visual art and architecture to create airy constructions and progressive spatial concepts. At the same time, besides the minimalist works of the Finish Fetish artists at the end of the 1960s, there were also accumulations of trash, which examined the excesses of mass consumption and the ecological dimension of plastic. In light of the enormous spread of plastics and the polluting of the environment, such perspectives are increasingly being taken up in artistic works.

“Plastic World” brings together around 100 works by over fifty artists who work with plastic in diverse ways, including Monira Al Qadiri, Archigram, Arman, César, Christo, Haus-Rucker-Co, Eva Hesse, Hans Hollein, Craig Kauffman, Kiki Kogelnik, Gino Marotta, James Rosenquist, Pascale Marthine Tayou, and Pınar Yoldaş. The exhibition makes clear how plastic as a successful, multifaceted material has gone in its brief history from being an embodiment of progress, modernity, a utopian spirit, and a democratization of consumption to being a threat to the environment.

The exhibition “Plastic World” is supported by the Kulturfonds Frankfurt RheinMain.

Dr. Sebastian Baden, the director of the Schirn Kunsthalle Frankfurt, states: “With ‘Plastic World’, the Schirn is presenting a hitherto unique and long overdue overview of the use of synthetic materials in visual art. The versatile material quickly conquered three-dimensional, physical space in sculptures and architecture. This history of the plastic age testifies to a pleasure in innovation and creativity. From an ecological perspective, however, plastic is currently developing a particular urgency; it is still ubiquitous in today's mass culture. Our exhibition points beyond purely aesthetic and formal aspects. Rather, it invites a critical examination of this formative material culture.”

Dr. Martina Weinhart, the curator of the exhibition, explains: “Plastic is *the* emblematic material of our present and it has radically changed art and society in a very short time. What has now turned out to be an enormous burden for the environment denotes a huge enrichment for art as well as for architecture and design. A look at the extremely rich history of plastic as a material opens up a narrative full of ambivalences: of a future-oriented innovative ability and of seductive-seeming objects; of damaging effects, but also the question of new approaches to dealing with this material, which is here to stay.”

ARTISTIC POSITIONS AND TOPICS IN THE EXHIBITION

The exhibition “Plastic World” is structured into seven thematic areas in an architecture by raumlaborberlin.

In the 1960s, plastic became *the* iconic material of Pop Art and was equally popular in both art and design. Fascinated by the culture of consumption and the things of everyday life, **Claes Oldenburg**, for instance, constructed sinks, ice bags, and light switches from vinyl. With his refined recoding of the ESSO logo into LSD in 1967, **Öyvind Fahlströms** satirized the logos of advertising in a playful and provocative way—and reflected not least the ubiquity of petrochemistry. For his large-scale motifs such as *Forest Ranger* (1967), **James Rosenquist**, who began as a painter of advertising posters, made use of BoPET, a tear-resistant polyester film, which, when positioned floating in space, also expands painting. Omnipresent, too, in the male-dominated artworld of this time was the view of the female body, which was countered by women artists such as **Nicola L.** or **Kiki Kogelnik**. For her cutouts such as *Man with Ingredients* (1970), Kogelnik cut out the contours of her male artist colleagues, who lay on the floor and served as models.

With the rapid spread of industrial materials, artists around the Italian Arte Povera, such as **Gino Marotta**, explored the relationship between nature and artificiality and subverted traditional concepts of a mimetic representation of nature in the second half of the 1960s. Marotta assembled his artificial paradise *Eden Artificiale* (Artificial Eden, 1967–73), a modular and sterile non-nature, from acrylic glass with a playful lightness. The aesthetic strategy of the Arte Povera artist and environmental activist **Piero Gilardi**, who depicted details of nature with his *Tappeti* (Carpets), is the exact opposite. These works are made from polyurethane foam, seem deceptively real, and can barely be revealed as artificial by the naked eye. With perfect mimicry, Gilardi’s artificial beach *Spiaggia* (1979) or the synthetic jungle *Palmeto* (1987) make reference not least to environmental issues.

The German artist **Otto Piene** also brought together technology and nature. In a walk-through environment of roughly 160 square meters, the Schirn is presenting a new edition of his *Anemones: An Air Aquarium* (1976/2023). Huge inflatable and transparent sea anemones, up to eight meters in height, as well as other sea creatures make it possible to experience underwater worlds. The poetic and playful dimension of the work’s creation at the time is overlaid today by the knowledge of the pollution of the oceans by (micro-)plastics.

Space exploration, aerospace technology, and not least the moon landing itself left behind a deep impression in pop culture, design, and the utopian spirit of the 1960s. The artistic work and experimental architectures of the space age are defined by weightlessness, mobility, flexibility, and, not least, working in a collective. Visionary models such as **Archigram**’s climate capsule *Air Hab* (1966) deal with the idea rather than its execution. The British group published their associative picture montages with a certain closeness to Pop Art such as *Instant City, Glamour* (1969) starting in 1961 in the magazine *Archigram*. In Austria **Coop Himmelb(l)au** and **Hans**

Hollein opened up new approaches to perception and communication with temporary architectures. Hollein's inflatable *Mobiles Büro* (Mobile Office, 1969), a moveable external plastic shell, promises a new physical experience in urban space. The US-American **Richard Buckminster Fuller**, who examined a systematic interaction of technology and social aspects by using new materials, was also pathbreaking with his series of innovative designs and is famous for his geodesic domes.

The multifaceted possibilities of form and design of the continuously growing family of plastics inspired a huge pleasure in experimentation in artists starting in the 1960s. The French sculptor **César**, for example, realized happenings with polyurethane foam, which he allowed to flow across the floor by the barrelful, developing a life of its own. Besides the *Expansions* cast in free forms, he also experimented, for instance, with methacrylate, which he folded to produce a *Compression* (1970). **Lynda Benglis** worked with latex and polyurethane foam and used the concept of performative pouring in her *Frozen Gestures* group of works, in order to create artworks such as *Untitled* (1969) based on her body's interaction with the material. With her readiness to strike out on entirely new paths, **Eva Hesse** gave her works such as *Sans II* (1968) a fragile and ephemeral character by means of innovative working methods and materials such as glass fiber and polyester resin. Today, the palette of materials has multiplied. For their creative material research, the Frankfurt-based artist collective **HazMatLab** (Sandra Havlicek, Tina Kohlmann, and Katharina Schücke) makes use of unusual substances including synthetic slime, industrial nail polish, and the 3D printing process, as in their sculpture *Coral Cluster* (2021–22).

The striking artificiality, smooth surfaces, and luminous or delicate colorfulness of plastic also inspired so-called Finish Fetish artists like **Craig Kauffman** in California in the late 1960s. His minimalist objects of translucent and transparent materials evince a nearly sensual quality as a result of their perfect, shiny, and almost wetly-shimmering surfaces. Flawless surfaces also distinguish the sculptures of **Berta Fischer**, which, like *Nironimox* (2023), float in space with transparency and lightness. Finally, in his *Technological Reliquaries*, the American object artist **Paul Thek** fascinatingly contrasts the organic texture of an encased piece of rotting meat made of wax with the smoothness of the shrill neon-colored plastic container in which it is enclosed with a seemingly everlasting artificiality.

In the 1960s, artists of Nouveau Réalisme such as **Arman** were already less interested in the smooth, beautiful material than in what ultimately remains. In his *Poubelles* (Trash Cans) of acrylic glass, he accumulated a hodge-podge of the waste of his time. With *Accumulation rasoirs (pour Ben)* (1960), the artist exhibited a box filled with old electric razors, thus making a critical reference to pop culture's enthusiasm for plastic. **Christo** also changed the perspective and as in the early work *Look* (ca. 1965) wrapped the mechanisms of consumer society by inverting the weighting of content and packaging and making the latter the main protagonist in his art. Plastic waste is also central to more recent works, as in **Francis Alÿs**'s film *Barrenderos* (Sweepers, 2004), which shows street sweepers in Mexico City engaged in their nightly removal of mountains of plastic garbage. The large-format material collages by the Ethiopian artist **Elias Sime** reveal, on closer inspection, that they are assembled from the detritus of civilization such as electronic scrap, computer circuit boards, or plastic-coated cables, put together to create a special cartography of our present.

The long-term change in the mentality of society that has taken place with the continuing spread of plastic and its threat to the environment is also reflected in the eco-critical works of a younger generation of artists. In her oeuvre, **Monira Al Qadiri** addresses the dominance of the oil industry, with which she has been familiar since her childhood in Kuwait. She takes various forms of oil drill heads as the model for her sculptures such as *Orbital 1* (2022), which with their mother-of-pearl-

like surfaces seem like majestic crowns and trophies of the Anthropocene. In his most recent work, *Fungi Decomposition* (2023), the Danish artist **Tue Greenfort** takes a look at a mushroom with the name *Pestalotiopsis microspora*, which was discovered in the Amazon rainforest and is able to metabolize plastic and transform it into organic material.

Outdoor, the Schirn is presenting a monumental installation by **Pascale Marthine Tayou**. In his works, the artist from Cameroon, who now lives in Belgium, makes use of plastic buckets, among other things, which form the crown of a disconcertingly beautiful artificial tree as in *L'arbre à palabres* (2012–23). Tayou's works make striking reference to the customary large-scale use of the cheap material (not only) in Africa, and simultaneously offer a commentary on the state of our ecosystems.

Within the framework of the exhibition "Plastic World", **Pınar Yoldaş**'s work *An Ecosystem of Excess* (since 2014) is presented at the Senckenberg Museum. The artist and scientist has been developing a site-specific installation of this work. Oceans—once the origin of evolution and today severely contaminated by plastic—are central to her work. Starting from the Pacific Garbage Patch, she is creating a posthuman ecosystem. It includes "speculative creatures" that metabolize plastics.

A cooperation of the Schirn Kunsthalle Frankfurt and the Senckenberg Naturmuseum Frankfurt.

ALL ARTISTS IN THE EXHIBITION

Raimund Abraham, Monira Al Qadiri, Francis Alÿs, John de Andrea, Ant Farm, Archigram, Arman, Richard Artschwager, Evelyne Axell, Joachim Bandau, Thomas Bayrle, Lynda Benglis, Lourdes Castro, César, Christo, Constant, Coop Himmelb(l)au, Wolfgang Döring, Öyvind Fahlström, Berta Fischer, Richard Buckminster Fuller, Piero Gilardi, Tue Greenfort, Hans Haacke, Richard Hamilton, Haus-Rucker-Co, HazMatLab, Eva Hesse, Gerhard Hoehme, Hans Hollein, Alain Jacquet, Craig Kauffman, Mike Kelley, Kiki Kogelnik, Nicola L., Konrad Lueg, Gino Marotta, Claes Oldenburg, Walter Pichler, Otto Piene, Bernard Rancillac, James Rosenquist, Niki de Saint Phalle, Dennis Siering, Elias Sime, Ferdinand Spindel, Graham Stevens, Alina Szapocznikow, Pascale Marthine Tayou, Paul Thek, Tom Wesselmann, Pınar Yoldaş

NEW: SCHIRN 3D PARCOURS To accompany the exhibition "Plastic World", the Schirn presents an innovative digital and free educational format. SCHIRN 3D PARCOURS enables visitors to move around in virtual spaces that are independent of the exhibition, and to digitally experience the varied material history of plastics. By means of a moderation, informative texts and a sound collage, an immersive experience is created through which the moldability and materiality of plastics and the fascination they exert on artists are discovered in a completely new way. In addition, the ecological consequences of microplastic in the world's oceans can be experienced in an interdisciplinary transfer of knowledge between art and natural sciences in cooperation with researchers from the Senckenberg Naturmuseum Frankfurt.

Available in German and English from June 28 on schirn.de.

SCHIRN 3D PARCOURS is made possible by [experimente#digital](https://www.experimente.digital), a cultural initiative of the Aventis Foundation.

SUMMER PARTY AND OPENING On Wednesday, June 21, 2023, starting at 7 p.m., the Schirn invites to its big summer party and the opening of the exhibition. The exhibition "Plastic World" is open until 10 p.m. There will also be live music by the rapper, DJ, and performer Perra Inmunda and by DJ Soyklö. Admission is free.

SCHIRN KUNSTHALLE FRANKFURT

VENUE SCHIRN KUNSTHALLE FRANKFURT, Römerberg, 60311 Frankfurt am Main
DURATION June 22 – October 1, 2023 **INFORMATION** www.schirn.de **EMAIL**
welcome@schirn.de **TELEPHONE** +49.69.29 98 82-0 **TICKETS** available in the Schirn's online
shop and at the Schirn ticket office **ADMISSION** 12 €, reduced 8 €, free admission for children
under 8 years of age **BOOKING TOURS** Individual tours for groups can be booked at
fuehrungen@schirn.de **INFORMATION FOR VISITING** All information regarding a visit can be
found at schirn.de/en/visit/faq **CURATOR** Dr. Martina Weinhart, Schirn **CURATORIAL**
ASSISTENT Anna Huber **MEDIA PARTNER** Monopol Magazin, VGF **CULTURAL PARTNER**
HR2 **SUPPORTED BY** Kulturfonds Frankfurt RheinMain **TECHNOLOGICAL PARTNER** Samsung
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