

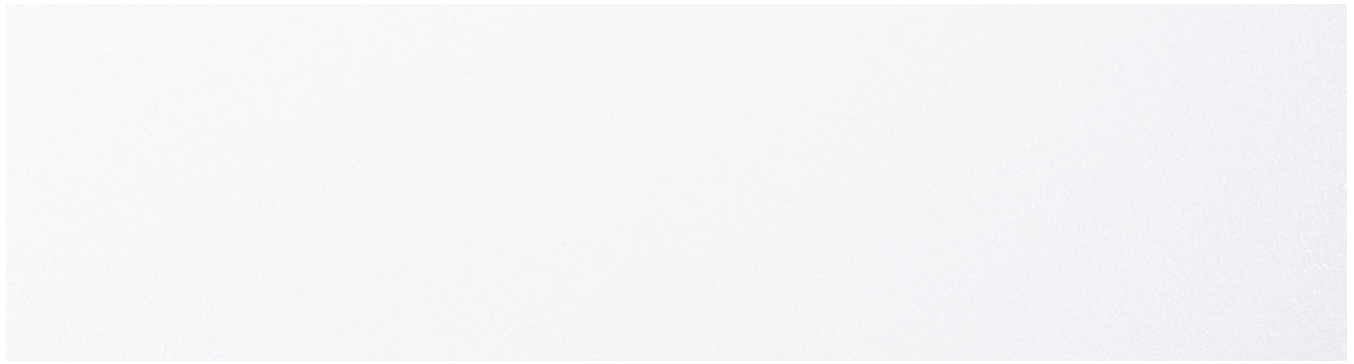
HYPERALLERGIC

Sensitive to Art & its Discontents

Plastiglomerate, the Anthropocene's New Stone

by [Ben Valentine](#) on November 25, 2015





Kelly Jazvac, "Plastiglomerate Samples" (2013), plastic and beach sediment, including sand, basalt rock, wood and coral. All of these found-object artworks are the results of a collaboration between Jazvac, geologist Patricia Corcoran, and oceanographer Charles Moore. (all photos by Jeff Elstone)

The idea of the [Anthropocene](#), a proposed geologic epoch triggered by the effects of humans on the Earth, is increasingly [gaining traction](#). People, myself included, are desperate for a framework in which to understand, discuss, and therefore confront our devastating impact on our planet. The Anthropocene is a large-scale admission of guilt — one that, if accepted worldwide, could hold the power to move us to action in a way that national and international bodies have been shockingly unable to.

The dates, the efficacy of the term "Anthropocene," and even the existence of a new geologic age itself are, however, hotly contested. Scholars in the humanities have joined the discussion recently, [debating](#) the merits of differing terms such as "[Capitalocene](#)" (placing the blame on the overconsumption of capitalism) or "Plasticine" (pointing to the material that is choking our planet). Yet the determination and coining of a geologic epoch are ultimately scientific matters. The idea of the Anthropocene as distinct from the [Holocene](#) was first popularized in 2000 by atmospheric chemist and Nobel Prize winner Paul Crutzen. For it to hold, there must be hard scientific evidence that the geologic era we're living in differs from the one that came before it. Increased CO2 emissions and the acceleration of global warming are possible pieces of such evidence, as is the [Plastiglomerate](#), a term for a new kind of stone proposed by geologist [Patricia Corcoran](#), oceanographer [Charles Moore](#), and artist [Kelly Jazvac](#). The new stone is a fusion, through fire, of molten plastic and natural materials.

I spoke over email with Jazvac about the Plastiglomerate, which she has helped to document, exhibit, and understand. As an artist directly involved with research into the Anthropocene, Jazvac is uniquely equipped to bridge a discussion between the humanities and sciences. Jazvac's positioning of Plastiglomerates as artworks, through found-object "sculptures" and photographs, captures the blurring of "nature" and "culture" embodied in these stones (if there ever truly was such a divergence). Some of the works can currently be seen in a group exhibition at the Justina M. Barnicke Gallery at the University of Toronto titled [Rocks, Stones, and Dust](#).

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Kelly Jazvac, "Plastiglomerate Samples" (2013) (click to enlarge)

Ben Valentine: *How did you come to investigate these rocks?*

Kelly Jazvac: I went to a lecture on plastic pollution at the university where I teach. The guest speaker was Charles Moore, an oceanographer and plastic pollution activist. He spoke about seeing an unknown substance on a beach in Hawaii that he thought was being formed by lava and plastic garbage mixing together. I was very interested in it, as it looked like both toxic waste and sculpture. After the talk I sought out the person who invited Charles Moore, geologist Patricia Corcoran. I suggested that if she ever wanted to collaborate I'd be interested. She wanted to go to Hawaii to check out this unknown substance presented by Moore, but needed a partner to do the field work with, and who would be willing to pay his or her own way. I happily volunteered. She has been a remarkable collaborator ever since — knowledgeable, focused, and open minded.

BV: *These Plastiglomerates are being used as evidence for our being in a new geologic period, the Anthropocene. Do you think that term is important or accurate?*

KJ: I'm glad you asked this question. I think it's an important term but not a flawless one. It's important because it's clearly being used in many debates about human impact on the environment. For example, it's the word that the [International Commission on Stratigraphy](#) and the [International Union of Geological Sciences](#) are currently debating whether to officially use or not to describe our current geologic epoch (I'm not a geologist, but I'm guessing that hasn't happened before). It's also useful to have a word for a very expansive, amorphous phenomenon. It's much easier to talk about

(and therefore potentially change) when it has a widely used name.

However, at the same time, I think it's important to fully assess and debate the term, especially as it comes into prominence. I think everyone who is interested in this subject should read the essay "Indigenizing the Anthropocene" by Zoe Todd, from the book [Art in the Anthropocene](#). Todd argues for complicating the term from an indigenous perspective. For example, the word "Anthropocene" implies that all humans are now a geological force irreparably altering the earth, when in fact not all humans have equally contributed to, nor profited from, actions that have resulted in climate change. She asks us to think about human life on Earth in terms of a network of complex relationships that include gender, race, colonization, geography, power, and capital.





Kelly Jazvac, "Plastiglomerate Samples" (2013)

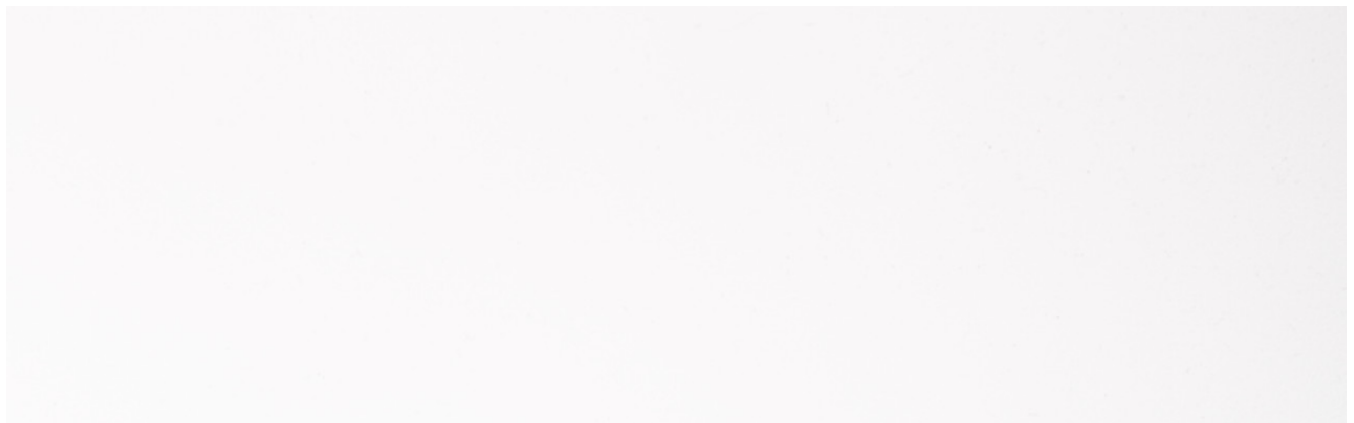
BV: *Why are these stones important in this debate?*

KJ: Our 2013 paper on Plastiglomerate identifies its potential to act as a marker horizon in the future rock record. In other words, if a geologist takes a core sample a long time from now, there is the potential that she could see plastic in it. On Kamilo Beach in Hawaii, Patricia Corcoran and I saw large chunks of in situ Plastiglomerate buried in the sand. Once buried, the plastic will not be subject to erosion from wind and water, and thus has a greater potential to be preserved (unlike plastic floating around in the ocean that keeps breaking down into smaller pieces). Patricia is currently conducting experiments to determine the heat and pressure that Plastiglomerate can withstand. She's also working with graduate student Anika Ballent to determine the quantity of plastic at depth in Lake Ontario.

BV: *There's a material relationship between these rocks and much of your art practice, but how do you see them tying together conceptually?*

KJ: My art practice and Plastiglomerate both consider the permanence of the disposable. Both incorporate materials that seem temporary (like a single-use plastic item) and connect them to a longer scale of time. I sometimes get asked how long my artworks made from salvaged vinyl advertisements will last (say, compared to an oil painting). I put that question to a chemist who works for an adhesive vinyl company, and his answer was, "indefinitely."

My most recent solo show, [Site Words, Spoilers and Shoplifters](#), was a more pointed look at how climate change, gender, politics, resource extraction, and the paranoia of ownership are entangled with culture. At this particular political moment in Canada, the specificity of this exhibition felt very urgent to me.





Kelly Jazvac, "Plastiglomerate Samples" (2013)

BV: *What role can art play in confronting climate change?*

KJ: In addition to the important and simple act of initiating discussion, art can help to visualize things that are very hard to visualize. Climate change is so large and all encompassing it's actually hard to "see" in its entirety. The visibility that artist Chris Jordan has given to [the impact of plastic pollution on albatrosses](#) comes to mind as an immediate example.

Furthermore, I think art can be adept at crossing disciplines, borders, and barriers in sophisticated and productive ways. It doesn't always play by the rules, and as such, it can be slippery and covert. Art can also make things uncomfortable, even if it's just for a moment, and ask us to confront our delusions and presumptions.

It's not a perfect system, of course, and there are lots of historical examples of really challenging art becoming nullified en route to the gift shop. However, I think there are truly remarkable instances of art's transgressive abilities in the pursuit of political and social change (because for me, climate change and political change go hand in hand). These instances include when artists have looked really closely at something in order to both analyze and mobilize. I'm thinking of projects like [Forensic Architecture](#), [Theaster Gates](#)'s work in Chicago, and [Duane Linklater](#)'s sophisticated calling out of internet racism.

[Rocks, Stones, and Dust](#) continues at the Justina M. Barnicke Gallery (Hart House, University of Toronto, 7 Hart House Circle, Toronto) through December 18.

Anthropoceneart and science
[Charles Moore](#)
[Kelly Jazvac](#)
[Patricia Corcoran](#)
[Plastiglomerate](#)