

# Large Text

## Plastic Heart: Surface All the Way Through

Organized by Synthetic Collective

September 8–November 20, 2021  
University of Toronto Art Centre

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Works by Christina Battle, IAIN BAXTER&, Sara Belontz, Leticia Bernaus, J Blackwell, Amy Brener, Hannah Claus, Sully Corth, Heather Davis and Kirsty Robertson, Aaronel deRoy Gruber, Fred Eversley, Naum Gabo, General Idea, Kelly Jazvac, Woomin Kim, Kiki Kogelnik, Les Levine, Mary Mattingly, Christopher Mendoza, Tegan Moore, Skye Morét, Meagan Musseau, Claes Oldenburg, Meghan Price, Françoise Sullivan, Catherine Telford-Keogh, Lan Tuazon, Marianne Vierø, Joyce Wieland, Nico Williams, Kelly Wood

Art  
Museum

# Plastic Heart: Surface All the Way Through

*Plastic Heart* is an experimental exhibition that examines plastic as art material, cultural object, geologic process, petrochemical product, and a synthetic substance fully entangled with the human body. The exhibition includes new commissions, historical and contemporary artworks that relate to plastic as a politically-loaded material, and investigations into the paradoxes of plastic conservation in museum collections. The exhibition acknowledges plastics as both lubricants of artistic, gallery, and museum practices and also as ‘wicked problems,’ made even more complex by their use and discard in the COVID-19 pandemic.

*Plastic Heart* mobilizes practices of institutional critique and proposes alternative methods of exhibition development and presentation that address ecology and sustainability in content and form. It also features data visualizations of a study conducted by the Synthetic Collective that provides a first-ever snapshot of post-industrial microplastics pollution on the shores of the Great Lakes. This exhibition links scientific and artistic methodologies to show how arts-based approaches to thinking and working can make viable contributions to environmental science and activism.

## Our Supporters

The Art Museum gratefully acknowledges operating support from the Canada Council for the Arts, the Toronto Arts Council, and the Ontario Arts Council, with additional project support from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council and the Jackman Humanities Institute.

# Exhibition Essay

*Plastic Heart: Surface All the Way Through* is an experimental exhibition with plastic at its heart. As an art material, cultural object, geologic process, petrochemical product, and a synthetic substance fully entangled with the human body, plastic is a politically loaded material. By acknowledging plastics as both lubricants of artistic, gallery, and museum practices and also as “wicked problems,” intimately linked to the fossil fuel industry, *Plastic Heart* includes an auto-critique as an essential component of its making.

This exhibition grows out of the work of the Synthetic Collective, an art and science collaboration that recently completed a study of microplastics pollution on the shores of the Great Lakes. *Plastic Heart* features data visualizations of this study by Skye Morét, as well as artworks created by Synthetic Collective members Heather Davis, Kelly Jazvac, Tegan Moore, Kirsty Robertson, and Kelly Wood in response to our Great Lakes research. It also includes new commissions by artists Christina Battle, Woomin Kim, Nico Williams, Marianne Vierø, and Mary Mattingly, as well as works from other contemporary artists considering plastic, most of them located in the Great Lakes Region. In wanting to give a sense of both the history of plastics in art, and how plastic challenges some of the norms of museum cultures, contemporary art works are juxtaposed with historical art installations, paraphernalia, objects, and documentation from artists IAIN BAXTER&, Sully Corth, Fred Eversley, Naum Gabo, General Idea, Kiki Kogelnik, Les Levine, Claes Oldenburg, and Joyce Wieland. Some of these historical artworks that used

early plastics are now degrading, drawing into the exhibition questions of conservation and preservation. We also include plastic hearts and other plastic models used in medical contexts to draw connections between the uses of plastic during the COVID-19 pandemic and the aestheticization of plastic that takes place outside of art contexts.

When plastics entered the art world in force in the 1960s, artists both embraced and resisted the peculiarities found in the flexible materiality of this new medium. Thus, we find artists such as Françoise Sullivan, Les Levine, Aaronel deRoy Gruber, and Eva Hesse pushing the boundaries of plastic, working directly with fabricators in plastics factories, excavating and playing with the flexible properties of the material, (re)defining more literally the historical description of the “plastic arts.” Environmental resistance would come later, often coupled with or as a response to developing concerns around the potential toxicity and consequent health impacts of using plastics in art. The contemporary artists featured here exhibit a more ambiguous, or directly critical, relationship to plastic, calling attention to its ubiquity and how it permeates our everyday lives. Leticia Bernaus, Amy Brener, Catherine Telford-Keogh, Meagan Musseau, J Blackwell, and Lan Tauzon explore the complicated relationship between the synthetic and the natural, showing how these two terms depend upon each other but are ultimately enfolded into one another.

But it wasn't enough for us to show the ongoing relationship of art and plastic; we wanted to do more to activate the links between changing perceptions of plastic and its waste outcomes—and “business-as-usual” exhibition-making standards. Mobilizing practices of institutional critique,

*Plastic Heart* proposes alternative methods of exhibition development and presentation that address ecology and sustainability in content and form. The guiding question of the Synthetic Collective in developing this exhibition was: Is it possible to curate a zero-carbon exhibition? This question is deceptively simple because the layers of exhibition making mean that behind what the viewer sees are the many steps that go into building the exhibition itself. Where does one begin to tally the environmental impact of an exhibition? Is it in the space itself as the artworks and artefacts are assembled? Or is it in the very first steps of the process, which might involve mining for heavy metals and pigments, manufacturing chemicals and products, laying the fiber optic cables that underlie the systems of communication that are key components of exhibition making. If we ask: Is it possible to curate a zero-carbon exhibition that takes into account the millions of small actions resulting in the final product, then the answer is no, unless the exhibition exists only in a moment of imagination so brief that it need not draw on caloric intake. But if one reframes the question to ask how small a footprint an exhibition might have while still maintaining its legibility as an exhibition, then there is vast potential. To accomplish this goal we made all kinds of decisions, from limiting the travel of artworks, to re-using existing museum furniture, to sourcing Manitoulin natural inks as an alternative to traditional wall vinyl. All of these decisions are captured in more detail in the *DIY Fieldguide* that accompanies the exhibition. We hope that this model, and the artworks that reflect on plastics and their circulation, provide a useful provocation for more sustainable and ethical relations to materials.

## About the Organizers

The Synthetic Collective is an interdisciplinary collaboration between visual artists, cultural workers, and scientists. We work together to sample, map, understand, and visualize the complexities of plastics and microplastics pollution in the Great Lakes Region. We locate our inquiry at the intersection of plastics pollution, geologic processes, and artistic production. Our intent is to follow plastics from production and consumption to disposal and disaggregation. Crucial to our interdisciplinarity research methodology is the driving principle that artists and scientists conduct research together, from the outset of the inquiry. As such, we hope to better connect scientific knowledge with arts-based research and enrich artistic production with informed science. The Synthetic Collective is Kelly Jazvac, Tegan Moore, Kirsty Robertson, Kelly Wood, Patricia Corcoran, Heather Davis, Sara Belontz, Lorena Rios Mendoza, Kathleen Hill, and Ian Arturo. In 2020, the team published *A Comprehensive Investigation of Industrial Plastic Pellets on Beaches across the Laurentian Great Lakes and the Factors Governing their Distribution* in the journal *Science of the Total Environment*, and in 2021, we self-published *DIY Fieldguide for Reducing the Environmental Impact of Art Exhibitions*. ([syntheticcollective.org](http://syntheticcollective.org))

# Public Programming

## **Dialogue # 1: Plastic Pollution, Toxicity, and Policy Change**

Wednesday, September 15, 6pm–7:30pm EDT

With Vanessa Gray, Christopher Hilkene, Michelle Murphy,  
Chelsea Rochman

Moderated by Heather Davis

## **Dialogue # 2: Plastic Pollution in the Laurentian Great Lakes: Industry and Invisibility**

Wednesday, October 6, 6pm–7:30pm EDT

With Ian Arturo, Sara Belontz, Mary Mattingly, Tegan Moore,  
Alice (Xia) Zhu

Moderated by Kelly Jazvac

## **Dialogue # 3: The Plastic Conservation Conundrum: Preserving Plastics in Museum Collections and Plastics' Durability in the Environment**

Wednesday, October 13, 6pm–7:30pm EDT

With Courtney Asztalos, Roger Griffith, Sherry Phillips,  
Lorena Rios Mendoza

Moderated by Kelly Jazvac

## **Dialogue # 4: Sustainable Museums**

Wednesday, October 27, 2pm–3:30pm EDT

With Suzanne Carte, Maya Ishizawa, Sarah Sutton

Moderated by Kirsty Robertson

All programs will be online. For full details and to register,  
visit [artmuseum.utoronto.ca](http://artmuseum.utoronto.ca)

## **Virtual Spotlights**

Commissioned essays, interviews, and video content  
offering a deep dive into the themes explored in the exhibition.  
New content published monthly on [artmuseum.utoronto.ca](http://artmuseum.utoronto.ca)



# Visiting the Art Museum

## **Justina M. Barnicke Gallery**

7 Hart House Circle  
Toronto, Ontario M5S 3H3  
416-978-8398

## **University of Toronto Art Centre**

15 King's College Circle  
Toronto, Ontario M5S 3H7  
416-978-1838

### **Hours**

Tuesday	Noon–5pm
Wednesday	Noon–8pm
Thursday	Noon–5pm
Friday	Noon–5pm
Saturday	Noon–5pm
Sunday	Closed
Monday	Closed

Closed on statutory holidays. For information about class tours and group bookings, contact [artmuseum@utoronto.ca](mailto:artmuseum@utoronto.ca)

Admission is FREE.

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