

Plastic Heart: Surface
All the Way Through
September 8–
November 20, 2021

Art
Museum

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 Willliams, Kelly Wood

Organized by the Synthetic Collective

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Plastic Heart: Surface All the Way Through

Cover: Tegan Moore,
Permeations of a Dataset,
2020-2021. Factory reject
"mystery foam" sheet with
anti-static agent, hail-
damaged polycarbonate
roofing, photodegraded
corrugated plastic, plastic
pellets, plastic fragments,
salvaged phone, starch
packing peanuts, mulberry
paper. Courtesy of Tegan
Moore.

Right: Pre-production plastic
pellets collected in foil for
persistent organic pollutant
(POP) analysis, 2018. Photo
by the Synthetic Collective.



Where do you begin to tally the environmental impact of an exhibition?

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.



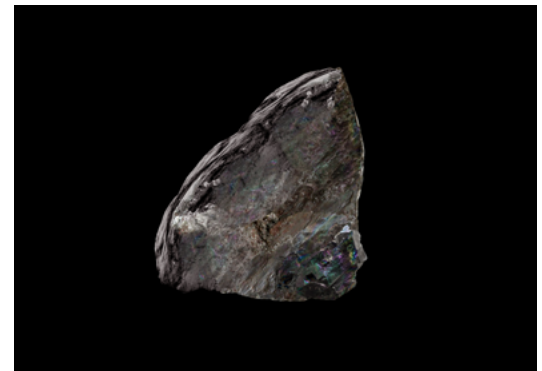
Left: General Idea, *Liquid Assets*, 1980. Plexiglas, glass test tube. Collection of the Art Museum at the University of Toronto. Image courtesy of Bywater Bros. Editions.

Middle: Naum Gabo, *Construction of Space 'Two Cones'*, 1936, replica 1968. Plastic. Courtesy of The Work of Naum Gabo © Nina & Graham Williams. Photo © Tate, 2020.

Top Right: Lan Tuazon, *False Fruits*, 2017. Found nested containers. Courtesy of Lan Tuazon.



Bottom Right: Mary Mattingly, *Core*, 2020. Polyacrylonitrile composite fabric (from the coal-based chemical product Acrylonitrile), Iron and carbon (hanging supplies), dispersed dyes (water; and chemicals including formaldehyde condensates of naphthalene sulphononic acid dispersants, polyacrylate thickeners, and sodium hydrosulphite alkali reducing agents). Courtesy of Robert Mann Gallery.



Plastic Heart: Surface All the Way Through

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

Aaronel deRoy Gruber,
Mini Cyclop-Lexis,
1969 (L). Vacuum-
formed Plexiglas and
acrylic laminated on
an acrylic core. Signed
Aaronel deRoy Gruber,
1969.

Aaronel deRoy Gruber,
*Component for a
sculpture*, 1969 (R).
Tinted Plexiglas,
acrylic.

Courtesy of the
Irving and Aaronel
deRoy Gruber
Foundation, Pittsburgh.
Photograph: Amy
Fisher, 2020.



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.



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