Collecting the Other Way Round: Collecting and Being Collected

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On the Double Meaning of Plastic and What It Has to Do With Collecting

This article argues that the triad of art, nature, and collecting gains new perspectives through the ambiguous semantics of plastic. In our present, 'plastic' is primarily a mass product made of polyethylene, polyester or PVC. Created by engineers in chemical laboratories and no longer by craftsmen and artisans in their workshops, synthetic things are produced, used, and thrown away in gigantic quantities. Between 1950 and 2017, 6.3 billion tons of plastic waste are said to have accumulated worldwide without being biodegradable.[1] The vast majority of this plastic waste ends up in the oceans, where it now circulates in gigantic currents, especially in the northern Pacific. In the past, 'plastic' had completely different connotations. For centuries, the term *vis plastica* had described the almost inexhaustible drive of nature to take different forms, or its transfer to the *technē* of humans, who imitated this intrinsic transformative power.

And collecting is quite close to plastic in both senses of the word. As pictorial sources show us, in the Renaissance and Baroque eras, human beings put themselves at the center of the scene as collectors. Surrounded by curious, unusual objects, the human being often slipped into the heroic role of Prometheus, who unlocked the secrets of nature.[2] Nowadays, however, it is the ocean that can be described as a curator of artifacts. As a matter of fact, as a result of a circulating oceanic gyre, acheiropoeitic accumulations of man-made things come into view on huge surfaces.[3] In early modern times, on the other hand, collectors were ambitious to assemble and condense the world inside four walls by gathering and exhibiting exotic objects from distant regions.[4] Today, anthropogenic mass-produced goods have become nature's plaything, often in places where no human being has ever been before. Under the influence of the Anthropocene, facts that are taken for granted are dissolving.[5] The *vis plastica* of nature has become the natural force of plastic, and collector and collection have exchanged places!

The First and Second 'Plastic Age'

Against this backdrop, it seems worth considering talking about a first and a second 'Plastic Age'. In the first 'Plastic Age', between 1550 and 1650, man's artistry competed with the plastic power of nature in a previously and subsequently unattainable inventiveness and elaborate combinatorics. The inventories and items collected in the Cabinets of Curiosities bear eloquent witness to this. The joy of the unusual, the mysterious, and the enigmatic influenced the choices of the collector. Ostrich eggs, corals and nautilus shells were regarded as wonderful relics of a strange, enchanting nature; masterful craftsmanship increased their effect even further.

The second 'Plastic Age' began around 1950 and will probably continue for several decades, perhaps until around 2050 – a century in which plastic should become an artificial and industrially produced throw-away product.[6] Plastic has become the substrate of advanced capitalism. Indeed, in the much-quoted words of Victor Lebow: "We need things consumed, burned up, worn out, replaced and discarded at an ever-increasing rate".[7] With its smooth surfaces and bright colours, plastic represents the promises of modernity: the promise of a sealed, perfect, clean, smooth abundance. It embodies the fantasy of freeing oneself from the dirt of the world, from decay and death.[8] Roland Barthes speaks of plastic as an "alchemical substance".[9] And who does not remember the words of Andy Warhol, who loved Los Angeles and Hollywood for a very specific reason? "Everybody's plastic, but I love plastic. I want to be plastic".[10] Today, the dream of the ultimate passivity of matter and nature, which only exists to yield to

the will and whims of the modern subject, seems to have faded away. While on the one hand, engineers have created plastic materials that have imposed their forms on society over decades, without thinking about their consequences and safe disposal, on the other hand, a 'mega-matter' of plastic floating in the oceans is now making itself visible on a global scale, and in a way that mankind cannot ignore. The sea has become an active collector and has started to communicate with people through its wandering objects.

Different Types of Hybrid Objects

There would be no history of collecting without collecting objects. This essay deals with artefacts in the sea and naturalia from the sea, i.e., on the one hand, gigantic accumulations of macro and micro plastics in the oceans, which nevertheless take on certain shapes, and, on the other hand, marine exhibits in the cabinets of rarities from the late Renaissance and Baroque eras. Anyone who has even a fleeting interest in Kunst- und Wunderkammern knows that naturalia from the sea are an indispensable part of their collection. Sea and water and its ingredients were part of cosmological ideas and, as such, quickly found their way into the Wunderkammern. The frontispieces of publications on famous collections of the time such as those of Ferrante Imperato, Francesco Calzolari, and Ole Worm describe this phenomenon.[11] Everywhere one discovers a part of the room with exhibits that can be attributed to the sea – from mollusc shells and crustaceans to large fish skeletons. Many of them were considered wonders of nature and represented the then widely unknown and also feared marine world.[12]

Fig. 1. Thomas de Critz (1607-1653), attributed to, *John Tradescant the Younger with Roger Friend*. Oil on canvas, 107x132 cm. Oxford, The Ashmolean Museum of Art and Archaeology.

Among the maritime exhibits in the Kunstkammer, shells were particularly popular. Shells are the ideal items for a collector. There are many species, both rare and common, they are small in size and often beautiful.[13] It is striking how often one encounters shells in paintings when collectors immortalize themselves, as documented by John Tradescant Senior and Junior (fig. 1). Without their passion for collecting, the Ashmolean Musuem in Oxford would not exist. In this painting, the younger Tradescant appears in the background with his colleague, while an opulent wealth of shells and corals stands in the foreground. Such *conchylia* were surrounded by stories oscillating between miracles, allegories, and natural history.[14] Shells were so much sought after by collectors because at first glance they illustrated the 'sculptural power', namely the 'vis plastica', the artistic activity of nature. When this portrait was painted, shells were still considered by many to be spontaneous creations ('creatio ex nihilo') of nature. This theory, which originated with Aristotle, was based on the assumption that shells could be created by solar radiation, i.e., by heating sand or mud. The creative power of the sun is thus expressed in shells, and art had the task of imitating this creative principle.

Fig. 2. Goblet made from a shell with a gilded triton as mounting, end of the 16th century. Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum (Kunstkammer). *Die Entdeckung der Natur. Naturalien in den Kunstkammern des 16. und 17. Jahrhunderts*, ed. W. Seipel (Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum, 2006), p. 263.

What this painting also reveals is the main features of the age when the world was explored. Expeditions to previously unknown parts of the world not only brought profitable goods but also exotic curiosities and rarities to Europe. The older Tradescant testifies to the rising interest in the commercial exchanges in this new form of trade. In an appeal to commercial travellers dating back to 1625, he expressed his keen interest in buying everything that was huge and strange, from the head of an elephant to the largest shellfish.[15] The more peculiar the items from afar were, the greater was his willingness to purchase them.

Between artefacts in the sea and naturalia from the sea, despite all their differences, there are commonalities which give rise to a third genre, that of hybrid objects. Hybrid objects were particularly popular in cabinets of curiosities. And such objects are also becoming increasingly widespread in the vastness of the ocean. As Giuseppe Olmi has noted, this pronounced tendency towards syncretism, which is ultimately based on a predilection for the bizarre and the grotesque, culminated in the Kunstkammer of the second half of the 16th century.[16] The shell, for instance, or the nautilus, "which is to be counted among the outstanding wonders, because it moved by expelling water, and in addition sets its own sail",[17] as Giovanni Battista Olivi wrote in his 1584 description of the Musaeum Calceolarium in Verona, was an object in which nature's richness of form and intricate human artistry met.[18] In the following photo, a shell is carried by a golden triton whose

arms are looped into the mounting (fig. 2). Finely crafted, this hybrid object oscillated between the spheres of art and nature. The exotic quality of the material, even though it already has some kind of magical aura, is further enhanced by a fine artistic design.

Similar objects, yet under reversed signs, can be found in the trash vortex of the Pacific, such as transparent, smooth plastic bottles whose outer surface has been occupied by shells (fig. 3).[19] The single elements of these hybrid objects really complement each other: in the decorated shell goblet, the organic part is present at a fixed point, while the elements made of precious metal are added as moving parts. In the plastic bottle covered by shells, the artefact is the static part, while nature brings about dynamism and change. By the way: with the help of this plastic vehicle, shells reach regions of the world where they do not belong at all. Hybrid objects in the sea and from the sea show how questionable the distinction between culture and nature has become today.

Artefacts in the Seas as Patterns of the Sublime

This expansion of the perspective towards hybrid and grotesque natural objects and artefacts in Mannerism put the classically measured ideal beauty of the Renaissance to the test.[20] Such strange things had a special effect, and not only because they oscillate between inclusion and exclusion and are able to create a zone of flowing transition beyond the common patterns of order.

Fig. 3. New hybrid objects between nature and artificiality, fished in the middle of the Pacific Ocean. © National Geographic.

The effort to order and classify nature according to the existing species – *natura naturata* – was paired with an approach aimed at grasping it in the mode of its creation and ever-changing nature – *natura naturans*. In the Anthropocene, on the other hand, we are often confronted with representations that radiate horror and beauty, that stun us but can also shake us up. The very fact that, in the Anthropocene, the processes take place over long periods of time, which can far exceed human life, and thus often occur in secret, forces their visualisation, which must make use of specific visual languages.[21] Indeed, we often deal with visual constructs or with sections of a larger whole.

Perceptions of greatness that far exceed the imagination of the individual human being often dominate the aesthetics of the anthropocenic discourse. The bird's-eye view photos of Edward Burtynsky or J. Henry Fair show the relentless plundering of earthly resources. Huge octopus-like dredging monsters are visible stripping the earth of its mineral resources. As if they were a force of nature crushing all natural forces, they embody the human influence in the Anthropocene.[22]

What is irritatingly fascinating about these visual examples is not just the fact that the bad and reprehensible can also radiate beauty. Under water, everything looks more beautiful simply because everything floats and is in motion, in bright colours, even if it is rubbish (fig. 3). Sublimity, "das Erhabene",[23] can perhaps occur when one realizes that, in this image, the tiny and the giant come together: a plastic bag in the immeasurable vastness of the sea. The following question is raised: do images that create a controversial beauty trigger a process of rethinking or does this kind of aesthetics lead to anaesthesia?[24] There are also temporal structures inherent in the materiality of this plastic bag, which the viewer could become aware of: it is made of crude oil which took millions of years to form in the underground rock layers. For the next centuries to millennia, the bag will fall to the bottom of the ocean and fragment into smaller pieces without dissolving completely. Between these two longer periods, there is the short time span of a few weeks in which the materials composing the object were extracted, and then the object produced, filled, sold, and discarded.

It would be worth trying to transfer the feelings of sublimity, of both horror and fascination, which until now have been triggered by the sight

of a stormy sea or a mountain covered in mist to constellations of objects associated with the collective, planetary power of humanity.[25] Or should we agree with Bruno Latour, who believes that the sublime in nature belongs to past ages? "How can you feel the sublime while guilt gnaws at your guts?".[26]

Some Conclusions and a Brief Outlook

The Greek word πλαστικός means 'suitable for forming, skilful for shaping' and etymologically forms the root of the word 'plastic' used in western languages today to refer to a synthetic material as well as the artistic-formative capacity of nature and the human being in the early modern period. The picturesqueness of the museum staging in the cabinets of curiosities should not obscure the fact that every marine exhibit conceals a radical decontextualisation that is contrary to nature. Shells, corals, and fish skeletons are removed from their natural cycle, they are no longer in their element when they become showpieces for human cognizance and aesthetics. They are dead, made permanent – often with the help of preservatives – they cannot even decompose. On the other hand, the artefacts that cavort in the sea consist of substances that are hostile to nature and attract pollutants. Plastic is a recalcitrant material. This material is so impenetrable, so isolating from its surroundings that – as we all know – a person quickly suffocates as soon as a plastic bag is placed over his or her head for a few minutes. Both the artefacts in the sea and the naturalia from the sea are the result of practices that basically document man's disturbed relationship with nature.

The approach of the ultimate passivity of matter and nature has proved to be erroneous. Nature, or what we call nature, has become active as a collector and communicates with humans through material signs. The ocean has become obsolete as an inexhaustible no-man's land. Based on this assumption, Hugo Grotius argued for freedom of fishing in the high seas in his *Mare Liberum*, published in 1609. And indeed, when the book was written, the seas were teeming

Fig. 4. Plastic bag in shallow sea water. (Photo: picture alliance/dpa/Mike Nelson).

with life: "For it is certain that if many hunt on the land or fish in the river, the forest is easily robbed of its animals and the river of its fish, which is not the case in the sea".[27] As late as 1937, Rachel Carson could write from "the surface of waters of the ocean" as "boundless pastures", overflowing with "the stuff of life".[28] Barely eighty years later, we are living in a time in which, if effective countermeasures are not taken, there will be more plastic particles than fish in the sea in the foreseeable future.

The previous remarks dealt with two plastic ages. They do not address the third 'Plastic Age' that is currently emerging. Nowadays, material chemists and engineers are increasingly taking nature as their role model. With its exquisite plasticity, nature offers a toolbox for inventive designers of advanced materials. Maybe it will not be long before plastic is synthesised by bacteria, without waste disposal and without further pollution or contamination of the environment. Despite their admiration for nature's achievements, biomimetic chemists are unwilling to revive the theology of nature and the celebration of the 'wonders of creation', as many collectors did in the late Renaissance and Baroque eras. Rather, biomimicry is based on a technological perspective on nature. There is reason to fear, since no scientist and engineer will be able to resist the temptation not only to imitate nature, but to surpass it.

Notes

[1] H. Davis, "Plastic. Accumulation without Metabolism", in H. Dehlia, S. Krajewski, eds., *Placing the Golden Spike. Landscapes of the Anthropocene* (Portland: Jank, 2015), pp. 66-73.

[2] H. Bredekamp, *Antikensehnsucht und Maschinenglauben. Die Geschichte der Kunstkammer und die Zukunft der Kunstgeschichte* (Berlin: Wagenbach, 2002), pp. 19-21.

[3] Scientists and the media are talking about a "Great Pacific Garbage Patch". C. Phillips, "Discerning ocean plastics. Activist, scientific, and artistic practices", *Environment and Planning A. Economy and Space* 49 (2017): pp. 1146-1162.

[4] A. Lugli, *Naturalia et Mirabilia. Il collezionismo enciclopedico nelle Wunderkammern d'Europa* (Milano: Mazzotta, 1983).

[5] C. Hamilton, F. Gemenne, C. Bonneuil, "Thinking the Anthropocene", in C. Hamilton, F. Gemenne C. Bonneuil, eds., *The Anthropocene and the Global Environmental Crisis. Rethinking Modernity in a New Epoch* (London: Routledge, 2015), pp. 1-13.

[6] The organic precursors of plastic were already produced in the 19th century and the first fully synthetic plastic, called Bakelite, found commercial success through the chemist Leo Baekeland since 1907. However, plastic has only been mass produced since the end of the Second World War, when petrochemical processes were decisively developed.

[7] V. Lebow, "Price Competition in 1955", *Journal of Retailing* (Spring 1955) [without pagination].

[8] B. Bensaude Vincent, "Plastics, materials and dreams of dematerialization", in J. Gabrys, G. Hawkins, M. Michaels, eds., *Accumulation. The material politics of plastic* (Abingdon/New York: Routledge, 2013), pp. 17-30.

[9] R. Barthes, *Mythen des Alltags.* Vollständige Ausgabe (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2010), p. 223.

[10] C. MacCabe, ed., *Who is Andy Warhol?* (London: British Film Institute, 1997), p. 4.

[11] R. Felfe, "Collections and the Surface of the Image: Pictorial Strategies in Early-Modern *Wunderkammern*", in H. Schramm, L. Schwarte, J. Lazardzig, eds., *Collection – Laboratory – Theater: Scenes of Knowledge in the 17th Century* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2005), pp. 228-265.

[12] L. Daston, K. Park, *Wonders and the Order of Nature 1150-1750* (New York: Zone Books, 2001).

[13] H.E. Coomans, "Conchology before Linnaeus", in O. Impey, A. MacGregor, eds., *The Origins of Museums. The Cabinet of Curiosities in Sixteenth and Seventeenth Century Europe* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985), pp. 188-192.

[14] U.-B. Kuechen, "Wechselbeziehungen zwischen allegorischer Naturdeutung und der naturkundlichen Kenntnis von Muschel, Schnecke und Nautilus. Ein Beitrag aus literarischer, naturwissenschaftlicher und kunsthistorischer Sicht", *Formen und Funktionen der Allegorie.* Symposion Wolfenbüttel 1978 (Stuttgart: Metzler, 1979), pp. 478-514.

[15] A. MacGregor, "Tradescants as Collectors of Rarities", in Id., ed., *Tradescant's Rarities: Essays on the Foundation of the Ashmolean Museum 1683* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983), pp. 17-23.

[16] G. Olmi, *Ulisse Aldrovandi. Scienza e natura nel secondo Cinquecento* (Trento: Unicoop, 1976); S. Laube, "Hybridität", in U. Pfisterer, ed., *Metzler. Lexikon Kunstwissenschaft* (Stuttgart: Metzler, 2011), pp. 183-186.

[17] Giovanni Battista Olivi, *De reconditis et praecipius collectaneis* (Verona 1584).

[18] H.-U. Mette, *Der Nautiluspokal. Wie Kunst und Natur miteinander spielen* (München: Klinkhardt & Biermann, 1995).

[19] Another example: A buoy made of plastic covered in shell colonies, fished in the middle of the Pacific Ocean, from: Plastik: Der Fluch der Meere, Film von Max Mönch, Friedeman Hottenbacher, ZDF/arte 2012 [film still (36:23)].

[20] G.R. Hocke, *Die Welt als Labyrinth* (Reinbeck: Rowohlt, 1957).

[21] For Nicholas Mirzoeff, the longue durée of the Anthropocene goes hand in hand with an invisibility that virtually forces visual constructions; N. Mirzoeff, "Visualizing the Anthropocene", *Public Culture* 26 (2014): pp. 213-232.

[22] S. Boettger, "The Mirror of Our Nature. Edward Burtynsky's Images of the Anthropocene", in E. Burtynsky, J. Bauchwal, N. de Pencier, eds., *Anthropocene* (Göttingen: Steidl, 2018), pp. 9-16.

[23] J. Grave, "Das Erhabene", in U. Pfisterer, ed., *Metzler. Lexikon Kunstwissenschaft* (Stuttgart: Metzler, 2011), pp. 113-117; E. Treptow, *Die erhabene Natur. Entwurf einer ökologischen Ästhetik* (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2001).

[24] Such ambivalences seem to be firmly anchored in the western modern tradition. They already appeared in the smog in Claude Monet's *Sunrise*; see N. Mirzoeff, "Visualizing the Anthropocene", cit.; M. Wagner, "Regen und Rauch. Landschaftsmalerei als Index klimatischer Veränderungen", *Zeitschrift für Kulturwissenschaften* 1 (2016): pp. 21-37.

[25] A comparison between Caspar David Friedrich's painting *Das Eismeer* (Kunsthalle Hamburg, 1823) and a photograph of a melting iceberg by Camille Seaman (Newport Beach, CAL, 2008) would be particularly fruitful.

[26] B. Latour, "Warten auf Gaia. Komposition der gemeinsamen Welt durch Kunst und Politik", in M. Hagner, ed., *Wissenschaft und Demokratie* (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2012), pp. 164-189: 168 (tr. by the author).

[27] Hugo Grotius, *Mare Liberum* (Leiden: Elzevir, 1609), ch. 7.

[28] R. Carson, "Undersea", aus: *Atlantic Monthly* 78 (1937): pp. 55-67: 59.

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