

The plastic mafia



An accompanying text for Giulio Laura and Fabio Meliffi's show Mining: 21st Century Raw Material. At the request of the artists, I have been asked to withhold my personal views on the environmental implications of plastic waste.

Pictured: Giulio Laura producing an artwork in the studio, photographed on my 1986 Canon Sure Shot using Superia 400 film. This text was researched and produced by Sarah Mohawk for RM gallery and project space.

On August 27th, 2020 Interpol released a new document entitled “INTERPOL’s strategic analysis on emerging criminal trends in the global plastic waste market since January 2018”. Prior to January 2018, companies in China ran a secondary business of taking around 45% of all plastic waste back from the world to recycle. Most low-cost Chinese made goods arrive in shipping containers which would otherwise return empty. The recycling scheme presented a useful opportunity to extract the useful waste (clean PP, HDPE & PET plastics) from their trading partners.

Then, China had enough. They devalued their economy to enable them to become the world’s key trading partner. The wealth of economic productivity has given many China’s growing middle class the opportunity to access the same low cost luxuries that the world imports. Finally, the country gets to say “actually, we have enough of our own plastic waste now, thank you very much”.

This realization from China dropped a globalization bomb on the world. Like a water leak that flows to the path of least resistance, the plastics find new waste importers in vulnerable countries. As those countries move to patch and restrict the flow of plastics through policy and people, the leak of plastic waste shipments finds new pathways throughout the globe.

The market forces of plastic waste shipments create a new type of crime - the plastic waste mafia. In Italy, the Carabinieri (police) arrested mafia ringleader Claudio Carbonaro who was "responsible for atrocious crimes in the 1980-90s, including over 60 murders". The crime was running a plastic recycling ring that sent contaminated recycling waste from the south of Sicily into China. They manufactured and returned to Italy shoes made with toxic plastics lining their soles. In Poland, the ‘garbage maffia’ make millions of zloty lighting prohibited dump fires. Instead of taking out a hit on the human body, they enact a hit on a body of waste - and instead of private payment; illegal waste activity exploits government incentives.

In Malaysia, 295 shipping containers appear at the Port of Penang in a single month. The accumulation of unidentifiable plastic-filled shipments triggered a major repatriation effort from their government to return 150 containers to 13 countries of origin.

In contrast, the globalised plastic material also represents optimism and upward mobility. Media theorist Ethan Zuckerman declared the monobloc chair to be the first 'context-free object'. In modern society, millions of inexpensive plastic chairs are produced and sold throughout the world. It is so ubiquitous, that when seen in a photo, the chair provides no context about where or when the image was taken. In the developing world, the monobloc can be seen as a way for citizens in poor and developing nations to access luxury.

Some believe the first representation of a monobloc chair was in 1946 by Canadian designer Douglas C. Simpson, while other sources credit Italian designer Vico Magistretti for the first production model. The original monobloc chair never had any patents filed against it and as such it has no fixed ownership. It does not belong to any giant corporation; the monobloc's production is accessible enough to exist in many countries.

The idea that mass production destroys our ability to love an object is a first world one - where handmade, bespoke goods represent a status symbol. Western society treats the monobloc chair with disdain, to the point that the city of Basel, Switzerland created a ban on the objects to "preserve the beauty of the cityscape". This is not the monobloc's fault; but in fact western society's convenience cost. The burden of owning or relocating a low-cost object becomes higher than the object itself; and thus it ends up attending berms and streetsides everywhere. The artists, OpenCo, are finding ways to profit from society's convenience costs, like the plastic mafias of Interpol.

Ingrained in the familiar material, plastic, are the bodies of dinosaurs, of our ancestors slain upon battlefields, of plants and trees we will never see in our lifetime. American philosopher Jane Bennett is most well-known for her theory of 'Thing power'. She speaks of it as an indescribable force that objects exert over us. In a 2011 lecture at the New School, "Artistry and Agency in a World of Vibrant Matter", Bennett describes this as empathy at an atomic level. Humans are moving towards their own deaths; into our own state of inorganic matter. Our own essences have a connection to inorganic materials through an inescapable relationship with our finite existence. Bennett suggests that things that do not have an economic value, still exert their power on humanity.

To understand Bennett's concept of thing power, she presents the example that hoarders are more resonant to the effects of thing power. In contrast, minimalists lead an existence where they are aware of the risks of succumbing to thing power and seek to avoid it. I see the mining of plastic resources as an urban equivalent to being affected by the beauty and value of nature. Trees, rocks and water all affect humanity as objects of great admiration; but economic forces suggest that where there is value to be taken it will, inevitably be extracted. The artists are struck by the plentiful resource of plastics, seen piled at every street corner. They perform a type of urban homesteading, gathering small batches of resources as a backcountry recluse might do.

OpenCo's concept of the 21st Century Raw Material, an item that provides social mobility for artists' and a democratization of technological practices reserved for industry, presents an optimistic view of contemporary globalist object production. They speak to the love of wastage - in modern society, waste does not have object permanence. It goes into bins and skips, and it disappears. The artists ask if we can regain our love for waste as a resource.

“What we mine is what we value” - OpenCo

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