HYPERALLERGIC

BOOK REVIEW

Where Would Contemporary Art Be Without Plastic?

A new anthology on plastics in art reveals the philosophical conundrums and contradictions at the heart of a material the world relies on.

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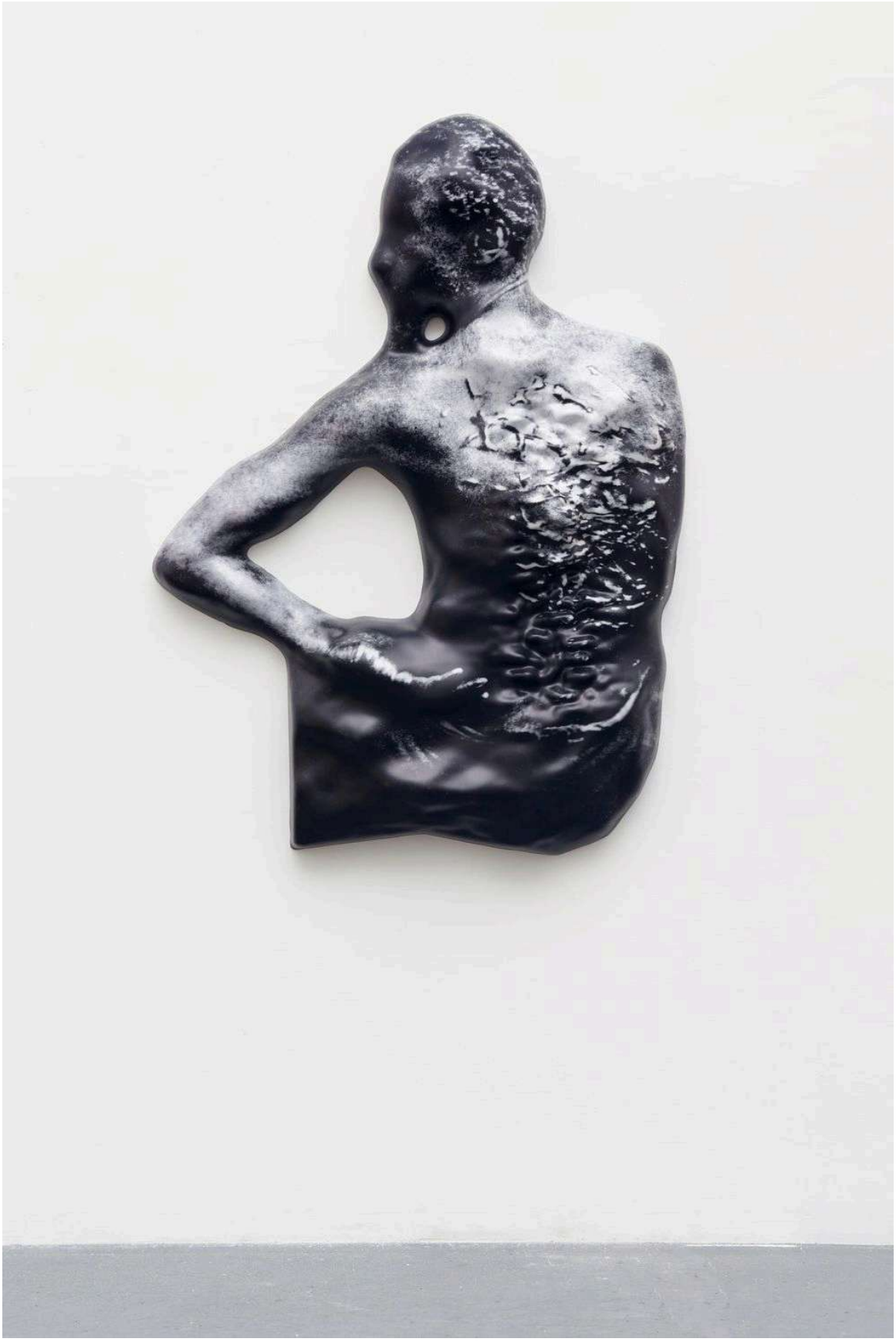

Arthur Jafa, “Ex-Slave Gordon” (2017), vacuum-formed plastic (© Arthur Jafa; image courtesy the artist)

The motivating query behind *Plastics*, an art conservation anthology by Anne Gunnison and David Joselit, is simple: "What do we learn about plastics when seen through the lens of art?" The answers to that question, posed by co-editor Caroline Fowler in her introduction, prove complex, given that its artistic uses are as malleable as plastic itself. The book considers plastic through a variety of academic case studies, which cumulatively suggest that humans remain largely oblivious to our uncomfortable intimacy with the material.

In the longest and sharpest chapter, art historian Joselit argues that plastic doesn't conform to a "medium-based account" of aesthetic progress. Instead, he draws on theorists such as Catherine Malabou and Zakiyyah Iman Jackson, as well as artists including Marcel Broodthaers and Arthur Jafa, to define its character by its capacity for "giving, receiving, and destroying form." Later in the chapter, Joselit cites ecological theorist Thomas Princen's concept of "distancing," which refers to the geographical and psychological gaps between resource extraction and downstream cultural uses of that resource; this minor point unwittingly illuminates how the anthology functions as a whole — *Plastics*'s case study structure seeks to lessen those distances by highlighting the material's pervasiveness in art and beyond.

Eva Hesse, "Repetition Nineteen III" (1968), fiberglass and polyester resin, nineteen units; Museum of Modern Art, New York (photo Danielle Scott via Flickr)

The conservation chapters adopt a forensic tone, as when Elena Torok describes using a nondestructive "X-ray fluorescence spectrometer" to learn more about the plastic in a delicate Naum Gabo sculpture, "Constructed Head No.2" (1923–24), which, the Princeton University Art Museum conservator explains, "exhibits some yellowing and discoloration," "along with some warping and planar deformation." Design studies scholar Bess Williamson's chapter on a child's orthotic ankle brace housed in the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History examines the "outsized relationship to plastic" in the lives of many people with disabilities through "devices worn daily, on, in, or close to their bodies."

Numerous other contributors echo Williamson's point that plastic can be a double-edged sword: Even as its overproduction harms the environment, it has

the capacity to help humans in vital ways. Susan Heald and Kelly McHugh, both conservators at the National Museum of the American Indian, note "the tension between caring for a material whose production causes harm to the communities we serve." Sociologist Jennifer Gabrys identifies plastic's sustainability paradox: "numerous researchers argue that a transition to more sustainable environmental practices is not possible without plastics." Joselit puts it more directly: "plastic mitigates the very risk that its toxicity exacerbates."

Naum Gabo, “Linear Construction No 2” (1970–71), plastic and nylon threads; Tate Modern, London (image public domain via Flickr)

Perhaps because of its pliancy, plastic creates the kind of philosophical conundrums that academic theorists relish, similar to the pleasure that extreme sports enthusiasts find in challenging themselves with improbable athletic maneuvers. Indeed, you could map an art-inflected plastic studies canon from the repeat citations found throughout the book, from Roland Barthes's essay on the material in his classic 1957 collection *Mythologies* to the work of present-day scholars such as Heather Davis, Max Liboiron, and Amanda Boetzkes. Gabrys's chapter on "particle ecologies" does a particularly effective job synthesizing recent scholarship, as when she paraphrases geologist Jan Zalasiewicz's fascinating 2016 insight that plastics "do not create a legible material signature" in the geological record, due to the fact that microplastics can travel deep into the earth, making them difficult to detect in sediment samples.

Yet theory tends toward abstraction, even when based on concrete evidence, so it was a smart move to conclude *Plastics* with a chapter by artist Kevin Beasley, whose trademark sculptures cast found textiles into colorful resin assemblages. His essay not only recounts the many types of plastic he utilizes, but also includes one of the anthology's more pleasantly surprising passages: "There are [plastic] buckets everywhere in my studio. I use and reuse them a lot … they are some of the most important items in my studio." The sentiment stands out for its willingness to be prosaic, for its simple observation about the use-value of an overlooked tool. It's a nice reminder of how artists put theory into practice as they explore all that plastics do, for better or worse.

Plastics *by Anne Gunnison and David Joselit (2025) is published by Princeton University Press and is available online and in bookstores.*