Sculpture Journal, Special issue on plastics in art

Deadline: Nov 10, 2023

Charlotte Matter, Kunsthistorisches Seminar der Universität Basel

As the umbrella term for a whole range of products derived from hydrocarbons, plastics are a fairly recent addition to the history of art. They became widespread in the 1950s and have since then profoundly expanded the material culture of our modern world. Indeed, they appear synonymous with everything deemed "modern"– along with all the desirable and problematic associations of the term. While in recent years scholars have been engaging with plastics from the perspectives of cultural studies, environmental sciences, or conservation and restoration, much remains to be discussed from the point of view of art history. In this special issue of Sculpture Journal, we want to explore the significance and the ambivalent implications that plastics have come to occupy in artistic practices after WWII. Their ubiquity in everyday life and break with visual arts' traditions made them relevant to artists, curators and new audiences; so much so that their use became something of a phenomenon, which in turn was parodied, as for example in the exhibition titled "The Last Plastics Show" (1972). Despite growing awareness of their harmfulness for humans and the environment, plastics continue to endure. As such, their use in artistic practices presents an opportunity to think about the broader cultural reach and the fraught legacy of these materials.

The special issue seeks to understand the elastic and sometimes contradictory meanings of plastics in art from the twentieth century to the present day. It also aims to reflect on the different temporalities and implications of their production and use as it has unfolded in diverse geographic contexts. How can we make sense of plastics in relation to the politics of gender, health and well-being, the interests of big industry and cold-war politics – that is, to topics that extend beyond the material itself? What has changed, but also, what continues to make plastics so prevalent? These are some of the questions we hope to tackle in this special issue.

We invite abstracts for articles of approximately 6'000 words that address these issues from the perspective of art history, visual and material culture, and related fields. We are specifically interested in contributions that approach the topic from the perspective of race, class, gender, health and environmental justice.

If accepted, articles will be due for review in early March 2024, for publication in December 2024. Please submit your proposal (350-500 words) and short biography (250 words) by November 10, 2023, to Teresa Kittler (teresa.kittler@york.ac.uk) and Charlotte Matter (charlotte.matter@uzh.ch).

Reference:

CFP: Sculpture Journal, Special issue on plastics in art. In: ArtHist.net, Oct 1, 2023 (accessed Nov 14, 2026), <https://arthist.net/archive/40240>.