AlterPlastics: Histories, Aesthetics, Ontologies

Deadline: Feb 1, 2026

Andrija Filipovic

“I, I wear a plastic suit / Plastic is my food / Perhaps, I’m plastic too,” sang the iconic Yugoslav New Wave band Idoli in their 1981 song “Plastika” (“Plastics”). These lyrics captured a 1980s moment in which Yugoslav production, import, and consumption of plastics reached their peak. Yet the groundwork for it had been laid in the preceding decades, since plastics production had begun shortly after the Second World War and rapidly permeated all aspects of everyday life (see Filipović 2023). Importantly, Yugoslavia’s trajectory differed from that of the Eastern Bloc. Having broken with the USSR in 1948, adopted a system of self-managing socialism by 1952, and become a founding member of the Non-Aligned Movement in 1961, Yugoslavia occupied a unique geopolitical position. This enabled it both to import technologies for plastic production and to export plastic products to the Western Bloc. Such dynamics also extended into the artistic sphere, shaping the use of plastics in both applied and fine arts.

By contrast, the countries of the Eastern Bloc, though diverse and shaped by distinct socio-cultural factors, shared the general characteristics of Soviet-style planned economies. In these contexts, plastics operated at the intersection of several socio-economic imperatives. In the German Democratic Republic, for example, plastics brought together “the needs of the political economy, the aesthetic ideology of modernist industrial designers, and the desires of the population for a modern yet efficient life” (Rubin 2008: 2).

While studies of plastics in the West are still rare and tend to focus largely on contemporary arts – see Gabrys, Hawkins and Michael (2013), Boetzkes (2019), Lambert (2020), Irr (2021), Davis (2022), and Konrad (2023) – they are even scarcer when it comes to the (former) Eastern Bloc, the Non-Aligned countries, or the contemporary Global South. With the title AlterPlastics, we seek to capture the entanglement of synthetic polymers with multiple non-capitalist and non-Western alternative modernities that emerged in the wake of the Second World War, modernities shaped by postcolonial and socialist cultural and socio-economic transformations. These processes have given rise to a multiplicity of postsocialist and postcolonial planetary contemporaneities across what is today called the Global South and the former East, all finding their common denominator in what is by now commonly described as the Plasticene epoch: an era defined by the intensifying extraction of fossil fuels and the overconsumption of synthetic polymers.

This volume seeks to address the overlooked histories, aesthetics, and ontologies of plastics, with a particular focus on the countries of the Eastern Bloc and those belonging to the Non-Aligned Movement, as well as the contemporary Global South. We aim to explore how various plastics were understood and used across Eastern and Central Europe, Africa, Asia, and Latin America during the Cold War, postcolonial and postsocialist periods, and to examine their long-

term cultural and environmental implications. With multiple postcolonial and postsocialist temporalities – and plastics themselves – becoming planetary, we also invite contributors to trace the entanglements of the postsocialist East and postcolonial Global South with the capitalist West and Global North, as refracted through plastics.

Material Histories of Synthetic Polymers after the Second World War

We invite chapters that examine the sources of plastics and the technologies used in their production. How did plastics participate in the establishment of oil cultures and the construction of petromodernity in the Eastern Bloc and the Non-Aligned countries? How did the technologies and everyday uses of plastics circulate across borders – within the Eastern Bloc, among the Non-Aligned countries, and between those and the West? Were there reciprocal influences, with ideas or practices moving from East to West? How did state institutions and party bodies respond to extractive technologies and plastics in general? How was plastic waste conceptualized and managed?

Plastics in Art, Design, and Architecture in the Eastern Bloc, Non-Aligned Countries and the Global South during and after the Cold War

We are interested in how plastics were used in fine and applied arts across different manifestations of socialism in the Eastern Bloc and among the Non-Aligned countries. How were plastics conceptualized in aesthetics, design, and architectural theory? How did artists and designers engage plastics as a material in their work? How did the Western Bloc's use of plastics shape practices in the Eastern Bloc and Non-Aligned countries – and vice versa? We are also interested in the consequences of situating art, design, and architecture within the context of socialist and postcolonial petrocultures. What happens to these practices when we follow the material trajectory of plastic – from its source in crude oil to its final destination in landfills?

Ontologies of Planetary Synthetics in the Plasticene

Plastics are ubiquitous today, yet don't seem to have given rise to corresponding reconceptualizations of spatial and temporal realms. We invite chapters that consider the ontologies of plastics in a moment when synthetics have become truly planetary. What kinds of spatiotemporalities emerge with the Plasticene calling into question earlier categories of thinking? Can we envision a postsocialist theory of plastics? What might ontologies of plastics look like from the Global South? What would decolonial or Indigenous ontologies of plastics entail? Moreover, how do the socio-economic systems producing and consuming plastics in the West and Global North appear when viewed from the former East or the contemporary Global South? And can a different ontopolitics of synthetics emerge from such perspectives?

Please send proposed chapter abstracts (300-500 words) together with short biographical notes (150-200 words) to andrija.filipovic@fmk.edu.rs and m.jobst@leedsbeckett.ac.uk by 1st February 2025. All authors will receive responses by 15th February, after which further details will be circulated to chapter authors whose proposals have been accepted. The book proposal will be placed with a highly established academic publisher.

Andrija Filipović is Associate Professor of Philosophy and Art & Media Theory at the Faculty of Media and Communications in Belgrade, Serbia. They are the author of (in Serbian) Ars ahumana:

Anthropocene ontographies in 21st century art and culture (2022), Conditio ahumana: Immanence and the ahuman in the Anthropocene (2019). Their articles appeared in Sexualities, European Journal of Cultural Studies, Journal of Homosexuality, Contemporary Social Science, and a number of edited volumes such as Plastics, Environment, Culture and the Politics of Waste (Edinburgh University Press, 2023), Sound Affects: A User's Guide (Bloomsbury, 2023), and The Routledge Companion to Gender and Affect (Routledge, 2022). Their research interests include environmental humanities, queer studies and philosophy.

Marko Jobst is Senior Lecturer at Leeds School of Architecture. He holds a Diploma in Architecture from Belgrade University and MArch, MSc and PhD in architectural history and theory from The Bartlett School of Architecture, UCL. He is the author of A Ficto-Historical Theory of the London Underground (2017) and co-editor of Architectural Affects After Deleuze and Guattari with Prof Hélène Frichot (2021), Queering Architecture: Methods, Practices, Spaces, Pedagogies with Prof Naomi Stead (2023), and Instituting Worlds: Architecture and Islands with Prof Catharina Gabrielsson (2024). His research interests include the philosophy of Gilles Deleuze, affect and queer theories, and performative modes of writing.

References

Boetzkes, Amanda. 2019. Plastic Capitalism: Contemporary Art and the Drive to Waste. Cambridge: MIT Press.

Davis, Heather. 2022. Plastic Matter. Durham: Duke University Press.

Filipović, Andrija. 2023. "Jugoplastika: Plastics and Postsocialist Realism." In Plastics, Environment, Culture and the Politics of Waste, edited by Tatiana Konrad, 125-142. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

Gabrys, Jennifer, Gay Hawkins and Mike Michael. eds. 2013. Accumulation: The Material Politics of Plastic. London and New York: Routledge.

Irr, Caren. ed. 2021. Life in Plastic: Artistic Responses to Petromodernity. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Konrad, Tatiana. ed. 2023. Plastics, Environment, Culture and the Politics of Waste. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

Lambert, Susan. ed. 2020. Provocative Plastics: Their Value in Design and Material Culture. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan.

Rubin, Eli. 2008. Synthetic Socialism: Plastics and Dictatorship in the German Democratic Republic. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press.

Reference:

CFP: AlterPlastics: Histories, Aesthetics, Ontologies. In: ArtHist.net, Nov 9, 2025 (accessed Nov 9, 2026), <https://arthist.net/archive/51100>.