

Pam Longobardi

*(Portions excerpted from forthcoming chapter in "Framing the Ocean, 1700—present: The Sea as Social Space," Ashgate 2014)*

THE SPLASHDOWN LANDING ON THE BEACH happens in a furious rush lest a particularly vigorous wave grounds the *Jubatus*, our open-hulled metal-bodied landing boat. Jumping off in knee-deep water, we run through the small wavelets onto the pebble beach and immediately spot the heavy hand of human presence that has now permeated even our most remote and pristine places: dozens of water bottles, a large plastic float colored survival orange, and surprisingly, an unbroken full-length fluorescent light bulb.

The potential mercury that may leak from the bulb is troubling, but the real danger here is the myriad of plastic objects that dot the beach. A few steps further, after cresting the berm that serves as a breakwater from furious winter storms, we see a massive array of thousands upon thousands of colored plastic ocean voyagers, from as far away as Japan, Russia, and Costa Rica. This is what we are here for.

Traveling expanses of space and time, ocean plastic is a material that can unleash unpredictable dynamics. I am interested in plastic in particular, as opposed to all garbage, because of what it reveals about us as a global economy and what it reveals about the ocean as a type of cultural space and a giant dynamic engine of life and change. As a product of human consumer culture that exhibits visibly the attempts of nature to reabsorb and regurgitate it, ocean plastic has profound stories to tell us about the interconnectedness of the fate of the planet and our impact on it.

My initial contact with plastic—the archaeological marker of our time—happened in 2006 when I stumbled upon vast fields of plastic that the ocean vomited onto the far shores of Hawai'i. The enormity of this first sighting revealed itself to me in the form of a horrifying truth: we have filled the ocean with plastic, and, in the process of trying to clean itself, the ocean communicates with us through the plastic objects of our own making.

Pam Longobardi, BLACK TSUNAMI FLOAT  
2013  
found plastic debris from Gore Point, Alaska

# WILDERNESS AND INVASION

PLASTIC PLACE-MARKERS OF THE ANTHROPOCENE

FIG. 1  
Artist Pam Longobardi at Point Banks Bay, Alaska,  
during the Gyre project expedition, 2013  
Photograph by Kip Evans

Five thousand miles north of Hawai'i's arc of islands is the twin curve, the upper parenthetical bracket of Alaska's tail of islands that bend inward to its crenelated coastline where the research vessel *Norseman* now takes us. These parentheses frame the entire basin of the Pacific Ocean and its swirling Gyre, now home to a continental-sized miasma of parti-colored plastic. These two outstretched arms of the United States colonial empire contain the yin and yang of Romantic possibilities: Hawai'i is Paradise, and Alaska is Wilderness. However, the invading army of plastic now populates all physical spaces of the planet and, symbolically, the furthest reaches of the mind.

In the *Drifters Project*, I centralize the artist as cultureworker/activist/researcher, and I employ forensics as an aesthetic mode of inquiry. Before touching or moving anything, I photograph the sites as I find them. I examine and document the deposition as it is—as if already installed by an artist. I have a system of identifying the date and location of the collection as part of the study of its transport. Then I begin collecting, sometimes making constructions and installations on site, and other times carrying the debris away to recombine it in larger works later. I prefer to keep it in a transitive form as installation, so the work can be dismantled and reconfigured. The objects are presented as specimens on steel pins, recombined into large installations or constructions, or as highly detailed photographic portraits.

Plastic objects are the cultural archeology of our time, spun and exchanged on the global lubrication of currency to be transported on the conveyor belt of the ocean. These objects form a portrait of global late-capitalist consumer society, mirroring our desires, wishes, hubris and ingenuity. These are objects with unintended consequences that become transformed as they leave the quotidian world at the end of their useful life and collide with nature to be mutated, transported and regurgitated out of the shifting oceans.

The plastic elements initially seem attractive and innocuous, like toys, some with an eerie familiarity and some totally alien. We are largely ignorant of plastic's true impact, both to our own bodies, to the bodies of the creatures of the earth and sea, and to the very earth itself. From death by entanglement or ingestion, to life-altering endocrine disruption and estrogen mimicry, plastic is implicated in a host of damaging and destructive outcomes.





We have made the most versatile material substitute imaginable: plastic can go anywhere, and it can do or be anything. With the ocean as our accomplice, plastic is now everywhere on earth. The International Commission on Quaternary Stratigraphy<sup>1</sup>, a worldwide committee that decides the structure of the Geologic Time Scale, has set 2016 as a goal date for the addition of an entirely new epoch, the Anthropocene.<sup>2</sup> The Anthropocene Era marks the intensification of human-borne geo-engineering, from the trapping of nitrogen through advanced industrial farming techniques of fertilization for mass-scale food production,<sup>3</sup> to the present day externalization of the earth's oily core. Oil drilling goes further and deeper now in more extreme environments. It is also the raw ingredient of every component of the plastic army now laying siege. The orphan plastic object exists in a nether world, functionless, unwanted and in many ways invisible. But the plastic that has invaded our surroundings will never disappear. It is not of this earth in the same way that other materials are. It's a completely new substance with this chilling truth: every piece of plastic ever made on earth is still on earth. It will be all that will remain in a future fossil layer.

More so than any other substance, plastic absorbs and reflects the pure notion of Karl Marx's 'commodity fetishism.'<sup>4</sup> In my project, the process of re-absorption of plastic into commodity fetishism begins at the collection sites. I often find, keep and reuse objects in their original use-value function. I have found many usable items, including nearly always, a plastic bag or bucket to transport the collection. In this way, I re-enact a past and future hominid activity of hunter-gathering tools from my environment. These objects transcend their status as lost or rejected by returning to the social world in the same form they left it—as re-useful objects.

More often the things I collect follow an elaborate and circuitous route by transcending their original status as commodity to become pure fetish, being marked by the ocean's colonization. Ocean plastic is a new type of commodity, one that has illuminated nature's role in the creation of capital. The bryozoan-encrusted pair of superhero legs from Midway Island, the haunting and exquisitely cracked smiling clown mouth, now separated from the rest of the hapless face, or the shark-chewed Japanese bleach bottle on a beach in Resurrection Bay, all become

ARTIST PAM LONGOBARDI SORTS THROUGH OCEAN TRASH  
on the deck of Norseman off the coast of Wonder Bay, Alaska,  
during the Gyre project expedition, 2013  
Photograph by Kip Evans

Pam Longobardi, **GHOSTS OF CONSUMPTION/ARCHEOLOGY OF CULTURE (FOR PIET M.)**, 2012

110" x 75" x 8"

found ocean plastic from Hawai'i, Costa Rica, Alaska, steel pins, silicone



supreme fetish commodities as they sit in the social space of high culture. This transformation process from consumer commodity fetish (useful or desirable plastic object), to status-less lost object (ocean plastic) to recovered, re-fetishized commodity and portent-wielding toxic symbol (art capital) qualifies this material as a new type of commodity. It is a new supreme commodity because it expresses the 'amount of labor' that nature bestows, wrought by ocean forces, and it carries readable knowledge of nature's powers of material production, transport and transformation. It also carries with it messages of fragility and limitations.

I see the plastic of my collections also as a magic encyclopedia.<sup>5</sup> Going to extreme lengths and physical exertion to scour far-flung locations, deep inside of sea caves in Greece, along remote shorelines of Alaska, Hawai'i, Costa Rica, or Alabama, and free diving subsurface seas from Italy to Taiwan, I feel that I am not only a collector, but a divinator, culling out the magic encyclopedia that may tell us our fate.

I pause to bend down and pick up a small round cerulean blue dome. It is an unidentifiable piece of plastic that painfully reminds me of the beautiful Aleutian symbol of the blowhole, the blue eye in abstracted animal sculptures I saw at the Anchorage Museum. The blue blowhole, the breathing hole of our ocean-borne cousin the whale, symbolizes interconnection of the human world and the spirit world that animals also inhabit. Can this plastic surrogate reawaken this understanding that Native Alaskans have, but that we have forgotten? The latent futility of collection is not lost on me, but intervening in plastic's horrifying omnipresence is not unlike willfully turning to face the monster in a dream, to examine its features in close detail. It is an attempt to re-gather what has been lost, to understand the position of humans within the encompassing world, and to see the future in the prophetic objects of our recent past.

By staring into the face of plastic, we see that it can be both supreme commodity fetish and siren of grave consequences. It can be both waste material and future fossil storehouse of the raw material of oil. It can be the vehicle on which we sail into our own extinction, or the ringing alarm that wakes us into action to turn the ship of our fate.



1 Subcommission on Quaternary Stratigraphy, "Working Group on the Anthropocene," <http://www.quaternary.stratigraphy.org.uk/workinggroups/anthropocene/>  
2 "A Man-made world," May 26, 2011, *The Economist*, <http://www.economist.com/node/18741749>  
3 Zalasiewicz, Jan, Mark Williams, Will Steffen, and Paul Crutzen. 2010. "The New World of the Anthropocene," *Environmental Science and Technology*, 44:7: 2228-2231.  
4 Marx writes: "To what extent some economists are misled by the Fetishism inherent in commodities, or by the objective appearance of the social characteristics of labour, is shown . . . by the dull and tedious quarrel over the part played by Nature in the formation of exchange value. Since exchange value is a definite social manner of expressing the amount of labour bestowed upon an object, Nature has no more to do with it, than it has in fixing the course of exchange" (Marx, 1915, 93-94). Marx, Karl. 1915. *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, Vol.1. Translated by Samuel Moore and Edward Aveling. Edited by Frederick Engels. Chicago: Charles H. Kerr & Company.  
5 Taussig, Michael. 2012. "Fieldwork Notebooks" from *100 Notes - 100 Thoughts*, No. 001. Catalog of dOCUMENTA (13). Kassel: Hatje Cantz Verlag.

Pam Longobardi, **CYCLOPTIC VISION**  
2013  
Collaboration with Petra Matuskova, Czech Republic  
144" x 65" x 18"  
found ocean styrofoam collected from sea caves of Kefalonia, carved stone.  
Installation in ENDLESS, exhibition at ionian Center for Art and Culture, Kefalonia, Greece

DRIFTERS OBJECT PORTRAITS  
2006-2011

found ocean plastic collected from Hawaii  
L to R: mayanbead, dragoncastle, blueleg, plutohead, pinkblob, fossiljaw, flowerballs, clawtong, camelnub, textstrip, INRI, meltcolor, universalgun, armymanblue, smallbrain, starsofdavid.

