

CLAUDIA MÄRZENDORFER

A Blazing World

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In her work the artist Claudia Märzendorfer unites different means of artistic expression and combines different philosophical approaches and (art) historical traditions out of no lesser a need than to explore what the world actually means.

My vision is essentially one of deviation or displacement from what constitutes the 'normal situation', to create a world alongside or running in parallel with our world as most of the time I feel constrained by social requirements and conventions and struggle to cope with them. [...] I often deplore the lack of courage to change or improve situations or outline conditions, out of a sense of personal responsibility. [...] From that perspective, sustainability is ultimately a question of emancipation and a critical approach to consumerism and capitalism by a tolerant and socially responsible society.

Claudia Märzendorfer¹

With her installation entitled *A Blazing World*, created specially for KUNST HAUS WIEN, the artist opens up unusual perspectives on a highly explosive reality: the polluting of the world's oceans with plastic waste, a consequence of the West's rampant capitalist consumerism. With her installation comprised of sculptural and textual works, she now draws our attention to the complexity of the situation.

The planet is submerged in plastics, which pose a waste problem the world over. Wherever we look, we see plastic, even in places we least expect it. Not only does plastic now pack our landfill sites, it's also found in Arctic ice and the deepest jungles; it collects in the stomachs of marine animals and gradually petrifies into a type of rock. Many plastics are very slow to bio-degrade, if at all, which means that micro-plastic particles remain in the metabolism of aquatic and marine ecosystems for the longest time, causing untold damage over many years, most visibly so in the animal kingdom. It is estimated that around 150 million tonnes of plastic waste floats about our oceans, with up to 12 million tonnes added every year.²

The dramatic consequences of unchecked plastics production and plas-



Hendrick Goltzius, *stranded whale*, 1598, Kunstmuseum Basel

tic waste are not always as spectacular as the beached whales from whose stomachs kilos of plastic waste are removed, as was the case recently in April 2019. A pregnant mother whale had died a slow and agonising death off the coast of Sardinia, due most probably to starvation as her stomach was filled with plastic products. It was a tragedy that afforded environmental protection a rare moment of public interest as these shocking and alarming images spread around the globe via the internet, thrusting an otherwise somewhat intangible problem into the headlines. A whale dying of plastic waste came to symbolise the environmental catastrophe wreaked by mankind.

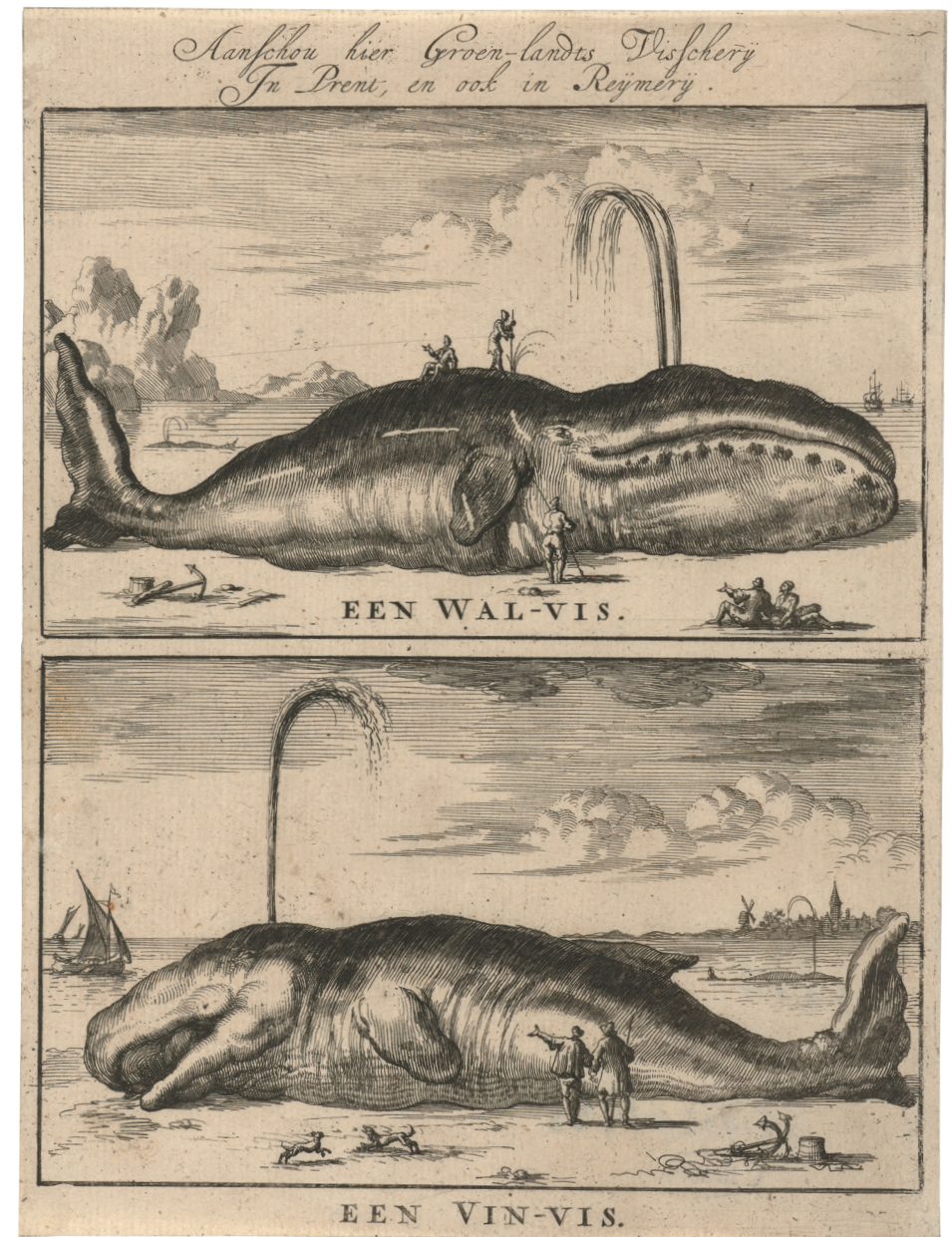
In fact, from the 16th to the 18th century, the depiction of a stranded whale was a popular motif and a moral symbol that was generally well understood throughout Europe. In Zedler's 18th century Universal Encyclopaedia the whale is associated with self-inflicted misfortune: 'The whale, as it ventures too close to the shore out of sheer curiosity or chases all too

eagerly after little fishes, does find itself run aground, a symbol of one who brings misfortune upon himself by his own undoing.’³ We way we interpret the motif has therefore changed completely: from self-inflicted suffering to death caused by the negligence of others or through the reckless behaviour of human beings – negligent homicide.

Claudia Märzendorfer has chosen to depict this tragedy in two different ways: as a small, pitch-black sculpture – a whale with an open flank and hollow body (large enough to accommodate not just Jonah, but Geppetto and Pinocchio as well) – and as a literary work. Both works are featured inside a vast display case, alongside facsimiles of engravings from the 16th to the 18th century that represent stranded whales.

In the literary work entitled *Frankreich* [France] Claudia Märzendorfer uses a witty, fantastical and bizarre form to describe the scenes of an operation conducted on a whale. The sea mammal has swallowed a chunk of ‘France’ and may die as a result. ‘France’ alludes to one of the largest accumulations of plastic waste in the ocean; indeed, the total surface area of the Great Pacific Garbage Patch was recently likened to that of this western European country.⁴ In attendance around the operating table are Dr Boeing, Dr Starbucks and Dr Microsoft. Listed in the protocol of the surgical intervention are the items found inside the whale, including computers, notebooks, iPads and iPhones, garden chairs, and an entire set of suitcases studded with rhinestones. The latter was unable to prevent the ‘Brexit by May’ of the right kidney...⁵ Märzendorfer’s text is packed full of allusions to capitalism and consumerism. She articulates the absurdity of the moment as we witness tremendous concern over the impact of environmental destruction colliding with our unbridled and unabated consumerism. The arrangement of text, image and object composed by the artist is captured and rendered in the artist’s characteristic black-and-white, to be studied and scrutinised inside the display case.

Märzendorfer has also placed a number of sculptures at various points throughout the exhibition space. Made of ceramic plaster and cast in moulds made from everyday plastic waste, plastic bottles conglomerate in dazzling white and all kinds of packaging material. The impression made by the objects varies depending on the shape and colour, from ice floes to heaps of rubbish. Märzendorfer’s sculptures confront us both tangibly and by association with the littering of nature and the melting of the polar ice caps. Facts we are only too happy to suppress in our everyday



Jan Luyken, *Walvis en vinvis*, 1684, Rijksmuseum Amsterdam

lives so we can go about our consumerist activities all the more easily. There is something fascinatingly alluring about these sculptures, with their strikingly smooth and silky sleek white surfaces, so much so we just want to touch them. Their extraordinary appeal lies in the disconcerting realisation that they are attractive and repulsive in equal measure. Another duality resides in the plastic material itself, which is both problematic and ingeniously brilliant. Plastic has been manufactured industrially since 1907, and if it has managed to establish itself as an essential material in so many areas it is because of its technical properties: malleability, elasticity, toughness, resistance to breaking, chemical stability, and temperature resistance. Plastic is both brilliant and disastrous.

What's important in this discourse is to differentiate between scientific and moral considerations. From a scientific viewpoint, simulation models and forecasts in general and those pertaining to the future impact of plastics on the ecosystem in particular are subject to all sorts of uncertainties due to complex interdependencies and materials cycles. So the question that arises is about mankind's responsibility for its actions within the world as a systemic entity, encompassing all that exists, be it organic or inorganic. It is also about the immediate impact on the living conditions and quality of life of mankind itself, not to mention the anthropocentric issue; for Planet Earth will outlast both plastic and mankind.

Residues from the plastics age may well end up being traceable in stratified rock in millions of years' time, providing a marker for the Anthropocene, i.e. the geological epoch now being shaped by man. Plastiglomerate⁶ for instance is a new type of rock formed out of plastic, volcanic rock, sand, shells and corals under the effect of heat, as evidenced along the coast of Hawaii. Märzendorfer is interested in plastiglomerate as a new type of material, for substantive and material reasons, as she has set out in an essay entitled *Plastiglomerat. Reservoir der Moderne, gleich einer Fotografie* [Plastiglomerate. Reservoir of the Modern Age, Much Like a Photograph], published here for the first time.

Although Märzendorfer trained as a sculptor, she has never committed to one particular medium. In her works she is continually sounding out the possibilities afforded by different materials and means of artistic expression, whether they are haptic or immaterial and conceptual. She has worked for instance with acoustics and ice, disassembled a piano, knitted a huge engine block, and blended text and photography into sculptural

stagings and performances. Märzendorfer frequently references literary works in her artistic oeuvre. The title for this exhibition for instance references Margaret Cavendish's book *The Description of a New World, Called the Blazing World*, also known as *The Blazing World*. This prose tale published in 1666 is ascribed to the utopian literary genre and regarded as one of the earliest examples of science fiction.

A Blazing World by Claudia Märzendorfer provides food for thought on many levels. Her texts and sculptures should prompt us to think about how, both as individuals and as a society, we use plastic and about alternatives to the capitalist reality of life and our colonisation of nature. As the artist explained in an interview, she wishes she could 'take the world apart' and 'reassemble it anew', at least conceptually.⁷ Time and again in her works Märzendorfer has excelled at integrating multiple outlooks on political and sociological topics, opening up and shifting contexts in a rather subversive way. With an array of means of artistic expression she combines different ways of thinking and seeing, in a bid to grasp human beings, and culture, and the current state of this blazing and dazzling world.

Verena Kaspar-Eisert

- 1 Claudia Märzendorfer in an interview, talking about sustainability, Sustainability Report of the Bundesimmobiliengesellschaft [quasi-governmental agency appointed to manage publicly owned real estate], 2013, p. 32-33.
- 2 Global 2000, 'Plastik im Meer – Das Meer ist eine Plastiksuppe', <https://www.global2000.at/plastik-im-meer> (23.05.2019).
- 3 The lemma 'Balaena, Balena, Cere, Cerus', in: Johann Heinrich Zedler (ed.), *Grosses vollständiges Universal Lexicon Aller Wissenschaften und Künste*, Vol. 3, Halle and Leipzig 1735, p. 171-175, here p. 175, available online at: <https://www.zedler-lexikon.de/index.html?c=blaettern&seitenzahl=103&bandnummer=03&view=100&l=de> (22.05.2019).
- 4 Cf. 'Pazifik: 'Müllstrudel größer als gedacht'', *scinexx online knowledge magazine*, 23 March 2018, <https://www.scinexx.de/news/geowissen/pazifik-muellstrudel-groesser-als-gedacht/>
- 5 Claudia Märzendorfer, France, 2018.
- 6 Angus Chen, 'Rocks Made of Plastic Found on Hawaiian Beach', *Science*, 4 June 2014, <https://www.sciencemag.org/news/2014/06/rocks-made-plastic-found-hawaiian-beach> (21.05.2019).
- 7 Claudia Märzendorfer in conversation with Paula Watzl, Parnass 2/2018, p. 27.



Claudia Märzendorfer, *A Blazing World*, ceramic plaster, 140 x 30 x 40 cm, 28 parts
photo: Christoph Glatz © Claudia Märzendorfer

Plastiglomerate

Equal to a photograph, Modernity's reservoir

As a sculptor, when it comes to creating a sculpture, you're always on the lookout for an interesting stone, new stone. The pattern of plastiglomerate, the stone marker of the Anthropocene, is similar to that of Carrara marble from the Jura: when you carefully cut the dark rock in half, it presents a smooth surface with a marbled change of colour. Depending on the diverse composition of mainly lava rock onshore and plastic conglomerates offshore, this new type of material now ranks among the recognised types of rock. In some cases, holes in the compact material form air inclusions, similar to those in porous stone. As with fossils, you can also find traces in this rock: the time from the onset of industrialisation and the products of this economic system are consolidated in this new type of rock material.

As a reminiscence of the time-bound origins of Modernity, a series of sculptures could be created using plastiglomerate. Inscribed and hewn into the reservoir of memory like a photograph from a journey, an account of how this material can be mined and quarried. It may well be that the time for this has not yet come, that the resources are still too small, that mining along shorelines is fruitless, that the global collapse caused by the system implemented by a *risk society* has not yet progressed far enough. Demand for this new rock is very much a double-edged sword. Forty years after the Club of Rome published its first report, on *The Limits to Growth*, the whole of the globalised world is working on establishing it. The more information a society has at its disposal, the higher its carbon emissions.

Images of a world that will soon no longer exist as it is now could be engraved into this stone, this hard and resistant material. The rock is formed under high pressure: the pressure of greenhouse gases, Kyoto targets, environmental pollution, food production. There's a good chance that the work can begin soon, that images can soon be engraved into plastiglomerate: images of an impressed and *blazing world*, a world that carefully packages its actions; packaged so that continents can be crossed on large tankers; continents that will soon be expanded and replaced with what is given back to nature: continents in the form of plastic material, still loose and not yet as firmly structured as the new plastiglomerate. Like carbon in relation to black coal, like coal in relation to a diamond. Coal gets us everything Cash buys us everything. Just as photographs act as a reservoir, the images in the new rock remain there as the memory of a bygone nature.

The new stone may still have to mature somewhat. Patience will be required if sculptures are to be hewn out of it, perhaps as much patience and time as it took before the Industrial Revolution to transport the precious stone from Carrara. Back then, the motto was not: Time is money, but: Good things come to those who wait.

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Claudia Märzendorfer, *A Blazing World*, ceramic plaster, 140 x 30 x 40 cm, 28 parts
photo: Christoph Glatz © Claudia Märzendorfer



Claudia Märzendorfer, *A Blazing World*, ceramic plaster, 100 x 60 x 40 cm, 13 parts
photo: Christoph Glatz © Claudia Märzendorfer

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