

On Sublimating the Artificial, and Other Expiration Dates

By Hili Perlson

*"We already live in the Anthropocene, so let us get used to this ugly word and the reality that it names. It is our epoch and our condition. The Anthropocene is the sign of our power, but also of our impotence. It is an Earth whose atmosphere has been damaged by the 1,500 billion tonnes of carbon dioxide we have spilled by burning coal and other fossil fuels. It is the impoverishment and artificializing of Earth's living tissue, permeated by a host of new synthetic chemical molecules that will even affect our descendants. It is a warmer world with a higher risk of catastrophes, a reduced ice cover, higher sea-levels and a climate out of control."*¹

The artificialization of our everyday environments—from the synthetically manufactured surfaces we come to contact with to the highly processed foods we consume—serves as a point of departure for Vera Kox's recent sculptural works. Classic art historical painterly motifs such as, say, a still life depicting lush fruit or an undulating, leafy landscape seem irrelevant as representatives of our day and age; they're thus replaced instead by the contents of a package of instant noodles or the patterns of mass produced anti-slip floor coverings.

As an artist, Kox casts herself in the role of an observer; her artworks elude any grand critical comments on the perils of climate change, and divert attention instead to the material actuality of our surroundings. Hers is the art of this Anthropocene age—a theoretical buzzword that simply denoted the fact that, as geologists have recently discovered, the Earth's crust is filled with synthetic sediments. Yet by pointing to the industrially produced materials that give shape to our interactions with the spaces we inhabit, Kox also highlights the ingenuity of their design: How much research goes into determining the shape of the patterns embossed onto a surface to maximize safety in public places? And why are there different standards in Asia, Europe, and the U.S.?

Her investigations extend to products widely used but rarely seen, such as insulation layers that line digs at construction sites, which recur as a knobby surface on some of her sculptures. Yet curiously, a tension between the organic and inorganic pervades Kox's works. In her sculpture series *Subtracted bleeds and additives* (2015), for instance, she amalgamates detailed casts of rubber bathmats into irregular shapes vaguely evocative of rocks or corals. These are painted a bright yellow that could be connoted with toxic chemicals, but also with a natural spice or dye, like turmeric powder. On closer inspection, one identifies the manufacturer's label on the rubber mats which was transported in the casting process as well. Inside small hollows on the sculpture's surface lie the condensed contents of an individual pack of instant noodles, as if fossilized for eternity; future relics of a highly-manufactured present. Fittingly, rather than list the materials and media used to create her sculptures and wall-works made with these food packs, Kox quotes the list of ingredients from the cheap, "just add-water" snack.

A similar oscillation between the naturally occurring and the entirely artificial also exists in a new series of works made of metal chains, and suspended from the ceiling. Locks attached to the chains allude to the increasingly popular phenomenon of leaving love locks on bridges or fences, which has become an urban nuisance around the world. As a preemptive measure, some cities now create purpose-built structures designated for lovers' padlocks, and it's these structures that Kox's pieces take their cue from. However, with their teardrop-shaped bulbous ends, these sculptures are also formally reminiscent of stalactites that have formed little by little, in caves, over millennia.

The notion of time, indeed, plays an important role in her practice. Kox's considerations go beyond merely shedding light on the visual peculiarities of artificial objects—her interest is also in exploring their durability and longevity, art world obsessions which have given rise to many careers in conservation.

In her *Perseverance series* (2016), packaging materials such as bubble wrap and styrofoam chips are integrated into white blocks of plaster cast. Pieces of glass panels are also inserted here and there, in the cracks between the box-shaped walls. These sculptures are displayed on the ground, like fragile obstructions in the viewer's path, challenging them not to stumble. Here, Kox playfully turns things on their head: Pearls of silica-gel used to absorb humidity in shipping boxes, and other synthetic packaging items whose materials are hardly degradable and will last for centuries thus become a part of the artworks. By slapping her authorship as an artist on these found materials, she raises them to the level of an object with an inherent value—be it critically, culturally, or in the ineluctable art market—and thus worthy of preservation.

Processes become exposed, and certain art world standards considered. While sculptures, mosaics, and engravings from antiquity fill museum wings today, and pre-historic cave paintings can still be admired in controlled environments, it is questionable whether a lot of the art produced today which uses cheaply manufactured materials such as shrink wrap or prefab canvases, will last even a single decade. It is not hard to imagine that the high-sodium soy sauce of those instant noodle packages will outlast much of it.