

PEDRO WIRZ:
Substance Shifts
Jun 10 – Jul 20

For his 4th solo exhibition with the gallery, 'Substance Shifts', the Swiss-Brazilian artist Pedro Wirz engages with cutting-edge science that has the potential to shift the ground of material production and societal valuation of everyday materials. Wirz proposes a paradigm shift that goes beyond just starting anew; with the exhibition, he suggests a fundamental change in society based on everyday materiality and reimagining material cycles, offering a different perspective on addressing seemingly stuck ideas related to our current environmental problems and climate crisis.

The dialogue with material scientist Christoph Weder, over the last year, at the Adolphe Merkle Institute for Nanoscience of the University of Fribourg presents the turning point for Wirz to develop this line of thought. This mutual challenge of a contemporary artist and a scientist working on polymers – plastics – opens a space charged with possibilities. For decades, environmental artists have investigated environmental sciences, which provide them with key information about their subject. Jointly addressing one of the core issues of environmental pollution that is inextricably linked with resource consumption, a "throwaway culture", and the societal faith in economic efficiency through a collaborative effort is breaking with this tradition.

Weder's research into adaptive plastics whose shape can be changed at will, without re-processing, seeded the idea of ultimately reusable plastics. Make a spoon, convert it into a knife, then a fork, repeat the circle, or turn it into something else. But what if one could go beyond such shape changes and apply such metamorphoses to the material such that its fundamental properties are transformed? Rather than relying on a plethora of different plastics, one material could do it all, over and over again, without ending up in landfills or the oceans, ever. But is it that simple?

Wirz likes to play with mythologies. Though mostly drawing from Brazilian mythologies, he decided to start from a mythology deeply engrained in Western tradition this time: the metamorphosis of Daphne to elude the attempted rape by the Greek god Apollo. Is nature attempting metamorphosis with the human body to escape human abuse? Drawing from iconic images in art, he captures the process of Daphne's transformation into a laurel tree and translates it into two groups of works on show here: a series of close-ups of plants growing from body parts, and a series of seemingly attrited gardeners' hands in cradles of recycled plastic caps caught in the state of transformation into objects of their attention, beautiful blossoms.

As it is with Daphne, and Wirz's ironic ways of working, you must look twice. What you see at first sight as a beautiful story of escape, is not yet a story of agency and less a story of the one solution. The metamorphosis of Daphne is only possible as her father transforms her into a laurel tree. Becoming a tree does not remove her completely from Apollo's approaches – his touches and even her body parts are cut, and branches of laurel, even become a symbol of Apollo that are brought to his temples to honor him. Most importantly, this transformation renders her immobile and reduces her agency by becoming a tree. So, the material transformation itself is not enough, cultural value systems and societal patterns need to adjust.

Getting back to plastic, in 1956, as Max Liboiron reports in their book "Pollution is Colonialism", Lloyd Stauffer discusses with the attendees of the Society of the Plastics Industry in New York: "The future of plastics is in the trash can... It [is] time for the plastics industry to stop thinking about 'reuse' packages and concentrate on single use." The intention behind this is to create a "throwaway culture" that allows industry to grow and promises high turnovers for a wealthy economy.

So, the beautiful transformational materials and the glimmer of hope using recycling methods by the artists and designers group Baer+Knell (who produced the Cradels for the artist after his design and color choice, as an example of material recycling), the high-tech material by Eternit (as an example of refinement and redefinition of material production) or the collaboration with the Swiss artist jeweler Bernhard Schobinger (as

PHILIPPZOLLINGER

an example of revaluation of end-of-life materials) are also to be taken with a grain of salt, as we also see when we meet Daphne in this exhibition. Maybe this installation has to be read as a monument for a much-needed substance shift in society: enabling a shift in the value attributed to plastic as material by society, and thus pushing for new ways of circularity in the established systems of a consumer-driven economy. Text by Claudia Schnugg

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Pedro Wirz was born in 1981 in Pindamonhangaba and lives in Zurich. Recent solo shows include at Galerie Nagel Draxler (Cologne, 2023); MASI Museo d'arte della Svizzera italiana (Lugano, 2023), Kai Matsumiya (New York, 2022); Kunsthalle Basel (2022); Marc Selwyn (Los Angeles, 2020); PHILIPPZOLLINGER (Zurich, 2020); Galerie Nagel Draxler (Berlin, 2019); Centre Culturel Suisse (Paris, 2019); Kunsthaus Langenthal (2019); LongTang (Zurich, 2019); Instituto Tomie Ohtake (São Paulo, 2017) and Kai Matsumiya (New York, 2016). In addition, Wirz has been included in numerous group exhibitions, such as at Centre d'Art Contemporain Genève (2023); Aargauer Kunsthaus (2019); Centre Pasquart (2018); Blank Projects (Cape Town, 2018); Tinguely Museum (Basel, 2016); CCS Bard Hessel Museum of Art (New York, 2015); Künstlerhaus Stuttgart (2013); Dortmunder Kunstverein (2013); Palais de Tokyo (Paris, 2013) and Kunsthalle Basel (2011). This year, during Art Basel on June 11th (from 6 to 8 pm), at Kunsthalle Basel, will be the launch of his first monograph "Forever Was Today", published by Hatje Cantz and Kunsthalle Basel.

The production of this exhibition could not have been achieved without the significant support from the NanoARTS program - A joint initiative of the Swiss Arts Council Pro Helvetia and the Adolphe Merkle Institute (AMI), as well as the assistance of Anna Bolte-Suliman, Julius Henkel, Luiz Carlos Pereira, Naiwen Chou, and Tristan Höffer Bosch - to whom the artist would like to say thank you!