

**Anne Kay**  
***The Figure of Plastic***  
***What can be owned, borrowed or thrown away, 2008***



Photographic documentation—cleaning process

When I first read ‘Moby Duck’ by Donovan Hohn,<sup>1</sup> an essay which relates the story of the more than 20,000 plastic bath toys lost at sea from shipping containers in a 1992 storm, I was shocked to discover that much of the plastic I have consumed throughout my life, would outlive me. I was especially haunted by the fact that all the Styrofoam I have used momentarily and thrown away would continue to exist in the world in perpetuity. This thought horrified and baffled me; how could it be that we were producing compounds (and in such massive quantities), which could never breakdown, especially when they are so often used for things that will be thrown away after the briefest use? In my imagination Styrofoam figured like the zombie of horror films.

Hohn’s essay prompted me to enquire as to how this ‘zombie’, synthetic polymer material might fit into the society I’m part of. I decided to collect all the plastic waste I consume at home for a year (Feb 2007 to Jan 2008), and instead of discarding the food containers, plastic packaging products and bags I would normally have thrown away, I cleaned and kept them (with the generous assistance of my partner Jane). Firstly, to see how much of it there might be, and secondly, to attempt to use it as a resource material for making art.

Retaining all that abject material was sobering and unpleasant. I began trying to cut down on the amount of plastic products and packaging as best I could to avoid the mounting accumulation.<sup>2</sup> I longed to just throw it all away! We do get a strange pleasure and release in throwing things away. Gay Hawkins says we define our self by what we throw away.<sup>3</sup> It was remarkable to observe how fine the line was between the initially shiny, pristine surfaces of the plastic products and the worthless despoiled, used object; and a strange and unfamiliar experience to be caring for these debased objects.

I had been concerned for sometime that my art practice in the past five years has required the consumption of enormous resources in terms of computer and video equipment; equipment which quickly becomes defunct and poses problems in terms of toxic waste materials. In consideration of this, I came up with the idea of using what I already own and what I would normally throw away.<sup>4</sup> Within these parameters, my clothing and my plastic waste seemed a place to start. To begin with it was any plastics but later I focused on the containers and packaging for what goes into my body—the containers that hold my food and the clothing containers that hold my body (and at least in part, my identity).

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<sup>1</sup> Harper’s Magazine, Jan 2007.

<sup>2</sup> Like that addict, however, I realised that I probably couldn’t actually stop consuming it altogether.

<sup>3</sup> A culture and media theorist/writer at UNSW.

<sup>4</sup> For this exhibition, I borrowed furniture from home and equipment from friends

***The Figure of Plastic*—titles (clockwise around the gallery):**

*Plastic timepiece*, 2008 (this work will not be properly viewable at night)  
Paper, drawing, plastic object, shadows

*At arm's length*, 2008  
Animated still photographs, 13 secs, looped indefinitely, on DVD

*Breathe*, 2008  
Animated still photographs, 19 secs, looped indefinitely, on DVD

Reading nook—selection of reading materials

*Performance Plastic*, 2007  
Mini DV on DVD, 17 min 35secs

*Containers that contain my food and the containers, that contain me*, 2008  
Synthetic clothing, plastic

*Rubbish, all at sea*, 2008  
Altered plastic object



Photographic documentation—studio

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Previous works can be viewed at: [www.annekay.net](http://www.annekay.net)

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**May 30 – June 15, 2008**  
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