

Between the city and the deep sea: on the plastic nature of the Helsinki shoreline

Tuula Närhinen

For over 20 years, the artist Tuula Närhinen has had the opportunity to observe the Baltic Sea at sea level from her studio located on Harakka Island in Helsinki. Having a studio on an island, which requires a short sea crossing every day, has provided her with an understanding of the intertwined nature of marine life and urban culture. On her way to the studio, the artist can touch the sea, which is one of the reasons her visual art practise is deeply rooted in fieldwork. Water is both the subject matter and the medium of her projects. Engaging and interacting with natural phenomena such as water or wind, enables her to unfurl the aesthetic and material agencies inherent in the forces of nature. Moreover, an intimate connection with the sea allows her to explore environmental threats, such as plastic pollution, from an artist's perspective. In the following text, Närhinen focuses on a series of projects dealing with plastic waste washed up on shore, and reflects on the complexity and controversial nature of marine plastic pollution.

It all started in the winter of 2006 when I came across an article about tiny plastic crumbs, or so-called nurdles, also known as microplastics or 'mermaid's tears'. I learned that among seaweed and flotsam washed up on the shore it is common to find small plastic pellets, which resemble fish eggs and pollute the seas of the world. My first thought was that the problem manifested itself only in the oceans. Walking on the seashores in the vicinity of my island studio, I had not noticed any small plastic pellets. Perhaps the mermaid's tears would not be found in the Baltic Sea?

But at the onset of the following spring, I decided to check it out. I was shocked to find several square meters of shoreline awash with agglomerations of small plastic pellets. I must have passed the same spot hundreds of times without noticing anything out of the ordinary. But to perceive it,

you need to look for it, and to look for it, you have to know that it exists. To actually see the plastic pellets and to tell them apart from similar grains of sand, such as the translucent crumbs of quartz, one has to be familiar with the concept of mermaid's tears. I developed a sieving method for separating microplastics from the rest of the flotsam. The installation I devised shows the sieves along with the final result, a necklace made of tiny pieces of plastic. The mermaid's necklace looks beautiful but the story behind it is sad. My work develops out of the contingencies of the seashore, mediated through a visual logic governed by my subjective sense of pragmatic aesthetics. In the form of colourful plastic fragments derived from objects made of oil, a fossilised black sun resurfaces from the bottom of the ocean and casts its prismatic rays all over the world.

Nurdles are the raw material that new plastic objects are made of. In natural waters, the nurdles were first found in the Bristol Channel in the 1970s. There had been a freighter spill and several containers of the pellets had been dispersed off the English coast. More recently, people have become aware of the problem due to the improper handling of nurdles during transport. For decades no one paid attention to spills and shrinkage from pallets and containers during shipment. Like dandelion seeds on the wind, nurdles blew into river estuaries polluting marine environments. For years to come, mermaids all over of the world will continue to shed tears.

In *Frutti di Mare*, I continued working with bigger items of plastic waste. I collected a pile of trash from the shores of Helsinki and put odd pieces together to make floating sculptures. This installation shows thirty-six sculptures in plastic boxes partly filled with water. All the sculptures were photographed as well. The boxes containing the sculptures are placed on metal shelves and they are illuminated with fluorescent tubes. The colour prints representing the sculptures hang in long rows in the vicinity.

The word 'plastic' is derived from the Greek πλαστικός (*plastikos*) meaning capable of being shaped or moulded. It refers to the malleability or plasticity of the material. Plastics can be cast or shaped into almost any form. The floating sculptures represent a new kind of marine species originating from a previously unknown sea called the *Plastic Ocean*. While working on the *Frutti di Mare* creatures, I observed how plastic materials behaved in an aquarium. Some of the plastic floated, while the heavier parts sank towards the bottom. I started to wonder what would happen if they were released to swim in natural waters?

The installation *Baltic Sea Plastique* shows how the plastic creatures interacted with waves and sea life. The work consists of nine creatures put on exhibit in tall and narrow cylindrical glass containers filled with water. Short video clips depict the sculptures floating in the Baltic Sea. A plastic bag jellyfish contracts its transparent swimming bell, a pink seahorse dances to the rhythm of the waves, and a plastic tube ray fish lazily flaps its blue fins. The synthetic organisms swim in the shallow brackish water meeting algae, fry and murky flows. While watching the videos one begins to understand the strain on marine organisms. The water's movement makes the plastic waste seem surprisingly alive. The synthetic material adjusts to its surroundings with appalling ease. The plastic creatures take to the water like ducks.

The work contains analytical drawings that present a kind of closed-loop recycling of the creative design process. New plastic objects start as dreams on a designer's drawing table. Your mobile phone (used for one year), your shampoo bottle (used for one month) or your grocery bag (used for one hour) – are all produced in factories where the raw material, that is the nurdles, gets extruded or moulded into design items that maintain their polymeric chains and structural properties for hundreds of years. After being consumed, the products are discarded as trash and – sooner or later – they might end up in the ocean. When the plastic debris floats to shore, it is picked up by an artist who puts together the bits and pieces. Within this work, the plasticity of the plastic has run full circle. The analytical drawings return the plastic designs to the drawing table – the place where it all started.

The latest 'additions' to my projects on plastics are the *Impressions Plastiques*. Two plastic rugs (*Soleil levant* and *Soleil couchant*) represent romantic seascapes: a sunrise and a sunset. Discarded plastic bags and odd pieces of rope drifted ashore serve as warp and weft of the rugs. On the floor, between the two textiles hanging on opposite walls, lies a pile of plastic filaments arranged in a rainbow constellation to form a sun path. The colourful filaments are pieces of shock tube detonator wires used to blast bedrock. When a city expands, exploded rock material gets dumped into the sea, together with the plastic wires. The installation is the epitome of the complex fabric of the urban seashore; it is a midden of shipwrecked dreams, vanished islands and marine debris.

A sun path reflected on the water creates a bridge between the observing subject and the sun. Optically, the path seems to move as the viewer moves; it usurps the observer's position in relation to the setting sun and creates a visi-

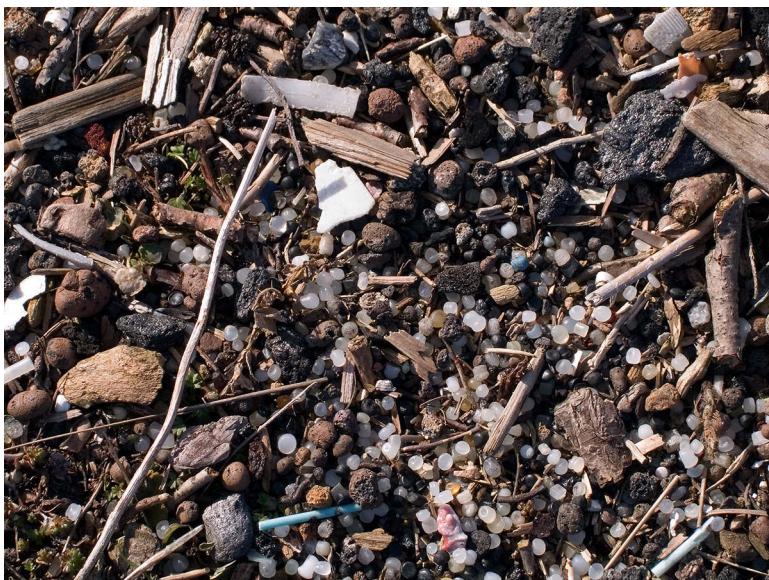
ble link between the seer and the seen. The disruptive beauty of the sunrise (or sunset) strives to unravel the complexity of the challenge that marine plastic pollution presents to the resilience and ecological sustainability of the oceans.

The sea and its wonders keep capturing people's imagination. The astonishing plastic beauty of marine creatures – this time all synthetic and made of plastic trash – evokes the formative process of nature. For better or for worse, plasticity is a testament to life's metamorphic capability – this applies to all beings, animate and inanimate. The plasticity of plastics and its effects on the ecosystem are now definitely out of human control. As a visual artist, I am possessed by the desire to take the pulse of the seashore. The fascination resides in the process itself, in the oscillation between romanticism and rationalism, or *natura naturans* and *naturata*. Time after time, I return to the seashore and find myself lured by the enchanted voices of the sirens. I want to dive into the brackish water of inspiration – while trying to stay resilient and keep my feet dry.

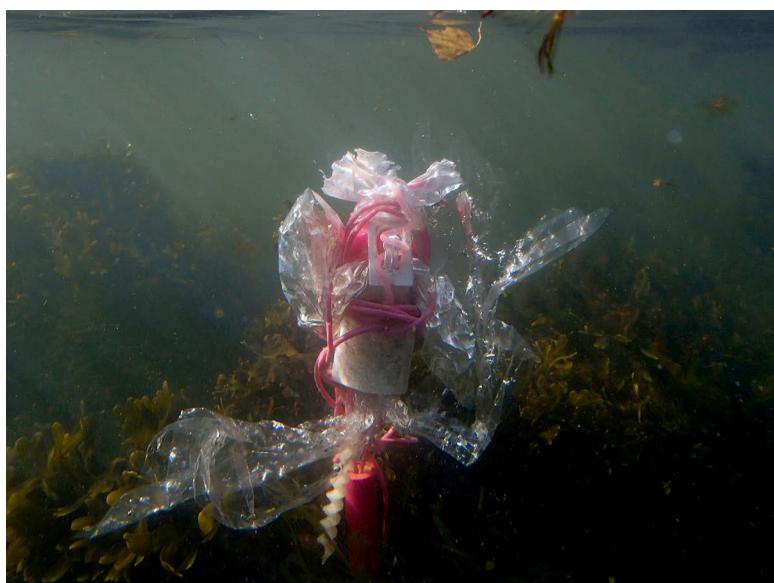
Fig. 1: Tuula Närhinen, detail from the installation Mermaid's Tears (2007), necklace made of the 'mermaid's tears', small plastic pellets that resemble fish eggs. Acrylic display case for the necklace (40,5x35,5x7,5)



Fig. 2: Tuula Närhinen, detail from the installation Mermaid's Tears (2007), C-print on aluminium (25x40 cm)



*Fig. 3: Tuula Närhinen, detail from the installation *Baltic Sea Plastique* (2014), screenshot from video*



*Fig. 4: Tuula Närhinen, details from the installation *Frutti di Mare* (2008). C-prints on aluminium (70x50 cm each). The installation consists of 36 wall-mounted C-prints and 36 floating sculptures in plastic boxes partly filled with water (49x25x29 cm each), placed on metal shelves, and illuminated with fluorescent tubes*



Fig. 5: Tuula Närhinen, Impressions Plastiques (2019). The installation consists of two tapestries (110x90 cm each) entitled Soleil levant and Soleil couchant, both woven out of plastic bags drifted ashore. Under the two rugs hanging from the ceiling lies a 'sunpath' (700x80 cm) put together from bits and pieces of rope, plastic filament and other debris from the Harakka Island in Helsinki

