

Containers matter

An exhibition by Baldwin & Guggisberg moves Dougald Hine



In 1972, while travelling in East Africa, Philip Baldwin falls in with a German couple, Walter and Katrin Hufnagel. They share a love of climbing that will form the basis of a lasting friendship, but also an interest in the making of bottles.

Walter Hufnagel is a brilliant chemical engineer. The year they meet, he has just made the great breakthrough of his career. The material known as the fabric polyester – or, when used in packaging, PET – has been around for decades, but attempts to use it for the bottling of carbonated drinks have foundered on its permeability: the bottles may be lighter and less breakable than glass, but the drink inside goes flat! What Walter figures out is a low-cost process for heating and stretching the plastic into a strong, thin bottle that will hold its fizz. Thanks to his work, the drinks industry is about to abandon glass.

Walter's PET bottles are blown in moulds on fast-running machines. It's a technique whose lineage goes back, however distantly, to Syrian glass workshops, 2,000 years earlier, where the craft of glassblowing was first developed. Meanwhile, since the raw materials for the plastic are a product of crude oil, these bottles are made from the fossilised remains of tiny creatures who swam in ancient seas.

And so in the middle of Ebeltoft Glass Museum we find ourselves on a beach, among the wreckage of abandoned vessels, the remains of empty containers gathered on a Welsh shoreline, watched

over by a whole congregation of still intact bottles, some made and some bought. A too-familiar image comes to mind: Chris Jordan's photograph from the wildlife refuge at Midway Atoll, half an ocean from anywhere – the decaying body of an albatross, its stomach filled with plastic debris, bottle tops, a lighter, strands of fishing net. The birds fish in the Pacific Gyre, the almost mythic mass of floating garbage that gathers within a circle of ocean currents. Such stories haunt the conscience, but the beach scene here brings something further into view. It's not just the general wastefulness of our way of living, but the particular materials that bring death and break down into ugliness, so different from the coloured pebbles the sea makes of our broken glass.

The containers matter. The ways we choose to carry our presence through the world. R

This is an edited extract from 'THE ASTEROID: An Anthropocene Whodunnit!', an essay published in the book written by Dougald Hine to accompany the exhibition *Walking in the Void*, which runs at Ebeltoft Glassmuseet, Denmark until 30 May.

tinyurl.com/walking-in-the-void-ebeltoft

The book *Walking in the Void* is available in the Resurgence bookshop.

Dougald Hine is co-founder of the Dark Mountain Project. He is now developing a school called HOME in collaboration with his partner, Anna Björkman.



The Law of Unintended Consequences by Baldwin Guggisberg. Photographs by Christoph Lehmann