



# POLY

## OLOF JARLBRO

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TEXTS (English version)

**DUNKERS**KULTURHUS

# POLY

An estimated 400 million tonnes of plastic are produced every year. Poly, an abbreviation of Polyethylene (PE), is the most common form of plastic. Far from all of it is recycled with plastics transforming and poisoning nature. Figures vary, but at least 8 million tonnes of plastic end up in the oceans every year. The production of plastic is expected to increase, as is the pollution of oceans and nature.

Olof Jarlbro was born in 1978 in Helsingborg, where he grew up. He was educated in Prague and New York and now lives in Sofia, Bulgaria. Today, Jarlbro is an internationally established photojournalist and journalist with the world as his field of work. He has photographed drug wars and cockfighting in the Philippines and depicted the wars in Ukraine and Syria. His images have been published internationally in several newspapers, magazines, and books around the world.

The Poly photo series has grown from previous projects in countries such as Indonesia, Vietnam, the Philippines and India. Jarlbro observed that the use of plastic was similar in these countries. Although a large part of the population in these countries has improved economically, society's increased resources still need to be invested in an infrastructure to recycle plastics or to benefit everyone. Instead, plastic ends up on the outskirts of cities and in areas where people struggle to survive daily. Not least, they become major consumers of single-use packaging themselves. At the same time, plastic represents a small opportunity for survival by collecting, sorting and reselling.

In the Poly series, Jarlbro uses his ability to gain access to individuals' personal stories about life on the margins and the consequences of the global economy. Based on the individuals' stories, which become small micro-histories, Jarlbro ultimately generates a larger perspective at the macro level on what the world looks like today, how we use the earth's resources and means of production, and how the global cycle is connected between continents and shifting social classes.

The texts in the exhibition are shorted versions of Olof Jarlbros texts from the book *Poly*. All photographs are without titles. The moving images in the exhibition are filmed in Hanoi, Vietnam.

The exhibition is produced by Dunkers Kulturhus, Helsingborg, Sweden.

Exhibition producers: Alexandra Lige Berglund och Martin Schibli

For more information on the exhibition, exhibition program etc, please visit:

<https://dunkerskulturhus.se/utställning/poly/>

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## FREDRIC BAUER – NOTES ON PLASTIC

Since the 1950s, when plastics became common materials in various products, their use has exploded. Initially, plastics were seen as modern, advanced and valuable materials, but over time they have increasingly come to symbolise the disposable products of throwaway society. In 2019, 460 million tonnes of plastic were produced worldwide - equivalent to the mass of 45,000 Eiffel Towers or more than all the world's people - and production continues to increase. In Sweden, we consume just over 150 kg of plastic per person and year, almost three times the global average. Although packaging is the largest area of use, our everyday lives are now shaped by plastic in many more ways: the buses and cars we travel in, the clothes and shoes we wear, the phones we communicate with, and the floors and furniture in our homes are largely made of plastic.

Some plastic products, such as water pipes and house insulation, are used for many years, but most plastic becomes waste after a short time. Food packaging is used for only a few days, and other products are used for a few months or a year. The same properties that make plastics such exceptional material - that they last incredibly long without breaking down - also make plastic waste a serious concern. In most parts of the world, plastic waste is still disposed in large landfills or rubbish dumps, if it is collected at all. Much waste is dumped and eventually ends up in forests, rivers and seas. Landfills are dangerous for both the people and the environment around them. Yet they are the home and workplace for many people whose best chance of daily income is to search for recyclable materials in the waste heaps.

Despite many - but not all - plastics being recyclable, only a very small portion of all plastic is recycled after use. Globally, barely 10% of plastic waste is recycled. In Sweden and other Western European countries, recycling is slightly higher, at almost 15%. In Sweden today, most plastic waste is incinerated, which has a significant climate impact as plastics are made from fossil fuels. The reasons for the low recycling rate are many, not least that products are not designed to be recyclable and that new plastic is cheaper and easier to use than recycled plastic. Recycling is expensive because the plastic must be collected, sorted and handled in several stages before it can become new products. Wealthy countries in Europe and North America have long exported much of their plastic waste for recycling abroad. There has also been large-scale smuggling to countries where the waste has ultimately been dumped, with negative effects on people and the environment. Even in Sweden, illegal waste management is a problem, as shown by scandals involving dangerous rubbish dumps and waste fires in recent years.

Plastic has unique properties that can truly be beneficial in many cases. However, for our production and consumption of plastic to become sustainable in the future, many things must change. The use of fossil fuels to produce plastic must decrease and be replaced with recycled and renewable materials. Production and consumption must decrease from the levels we are accustomed to today by consuming fewer products and using the products we have for longer. Certain types of plastics should be phased out along with the use of toxic and hazardous chemicals. Many types of products must begin to be designed and manufactured so that the materials can be efficiently recycled after use. This requires changes in habits of individual consumers, company routines, as well as national and international law.

Fredric Bauer, associate senior lecturer, Lunds University

## OLOF JARLBRO: VIETNAM

The rapid economic growth in Vietnam coupled with urbanisation and changing lifestyles has led to a nationwide plastic pollution crisis. For some years now, Vietnam has been number five in the world as one of the biggest plastic polluters in the oceans.

About 20 kilometers outside of Hanoi lies the small village of Minh Khai, which for almost three decades has recycled plastic and the village has managed to become rich from the bargain. But the price the villagers have had to pay is that Minh Khai is considered one of the most polluted places in all of Vietnam. As a traveling photographer, I often find myself looking for places that are not always known to the public, and this can be a frustrating and time-consuming job. But finding the village of Minh Khai was easy, just following the smell of burning plastic rubbish, a scent that stretches several kilometers from the village. For most people who come to the village, it's like visiting a dump. But for the residents of the village, the plastic garbage is "business" and the businesses are really flourishing.

At a stately house, with some shiny cars parked outside, I meet Toan, 53 years old, the owner of Minh Khoi, a company that recycles and manufactures plastic bags. His factory is next to the house, which has resulted in the street being full of plastic garbage, but inside Toan's gates it is exemplary clean, the only thing that reminds us that we are in the garbage village are the smells that penetrate wherever you are.

The whole family looks at me with curious eyes. Toan's son Khoi, who is 19 years old, helps translate. My father has seen you all week walking around with your cameras taking pictures. Why? I explain that I am a photographer and am working on an exhibition and a book project on plastic pollution where I travel around the world to places where plastic pollution is a problem. Toan nods in understanding and pours a cup of tea. Toan is "self-made" and has that aura around him that you find in people who made a fortune from nowhere except an idea and their own hard work.

However, the largest part of plastic in Minh Khai does not come from Vietnam, but is imported from the West, often with Chinese intermediaries, which are then recycled into plastic pellets and sent on to China for various types of manufacturing. When the plastic products - whatever they may be - are ready, they are sent back to the West. This can be called a "recycling cycle" but hardly environmentally friendly, considering the amount of carbon dioxide emissions required to ship consumed plastic for recycling, then for manufacturing and finally shipped back to the West as finished products.

The work of sorting the plastic rubbish is both hard and dirty. Often the workers develop large sore rashes that rarely heal and get worse all the time with work. The temperature in the shade is around 34 degrees, but it is not unusual for the temperature to go up to 40 during the really hot months and then the work is immediately unbearable.

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## OLOF JARLBRO: PHILLIPPINES

Road 10 runs along the coastline next to shantytowns in the underdeveloped Tondo district of Manila. Everything from trucks, vans, to box bikes pass on the heavily trafficked road. The big SUVs that pass this part drive with the windows down and the doors locked, because of all the small criminals' long arms lurking at the stoplights.

The polluting Manila Bay contributes an extremely bad smell, and it is burnt garbage, rotting food, diesel exhaust and a malfunctioning sewage system that make the stench almost unbearable. Most people in Tondo live well below the level considered poverty by the Philippine government and many of the residents make a living sorting the garbage from Metro Manila, so called scavengers.

Right now there are thousands of scavengers in Metro Manila and the garbage turns over millions of US dollars. It is a complex system where those who purchase the waste specialise in selected products such as plastic bottles, cardboard boxes, copper wire, aluminium, glass, broken toys and machinery. Scavengers earn an average of 100 pesos to 300 pesos (2-6 Euro) per day, which is below the minimum wage. Based on data from the Metro Manila Development Authority, 33,000 cubic meters of waste is collected daily from Metro Manila.

The Philippines is the third largest contributor of plastic waste to the ocean after China and Indonesia. Much of this is due to the enormous amount of small single-use plastic packaging that the poorer part of the population chooses over the large recyclable packaging. The biggest problem with these disposable packaging is that they cannot be recycled, as well as the lack of infrastructure to handle them after use. Instead, they end up among food waste, which in turn ends up in the sea.

A large part of garbage consisting of plastic dumped around Tondo reaches the so-called fishing capital Navotas in Metro Manila and on the entire coastline and its beaches, the colourful plastic is like a patchwork over water and sand. For the fishermen who live on a functioning ecosystem, the plastic has devastating consequences on their livelihood. Kuja Efren, who has worked in Manila Bay for over 20 years, shakes his head when he thinks about how his work has become more difficult and how he has to work longer and longer hours for the same amount of fish. "Plastic gets stuck in the propeller when I go out with my boat, plastic gets stuck in the nets I lay and it only gets worse, says Kuja Efren resignedly.

Several politicians in the Philippines have proposed a nationwide ban on non-degradable packaging as well as banning the importation and use of single-use plastics. Such a ban would have quickly put an end to the problem, but it would have also made life difficult for millions of Filipinos who cannot afford to buy the large packages. For the thousands of Scavengers who live on the garbage, tomorrow's global problems are not directly on their agenda. On the individual agenda, it is more about getting enough money for food. At the same time, the plastic garbage is growing, avalanche like, along with increased economic growth in the Philippines.

## OLOF JARLBRO: INDIA

Plastic pollution in the so-called "New India" was supposed to disappear when India's strongman Prime Minister Narendra Modi launched the "Clean India" campaign in 2014. But during the Prime Minister's time in power, India's plastic waste has more than quadrupled, and that is in the last five years. There is no indication that this figure will decrease, but on the contrary it will increase drastically. At present, India produces over 26 thousand tons of plastic waste per day. The Indian government believes that 60% is recycled, but according to CSE (Centre for Science and Environment) statistics based on CPCB (Central Pollution Control Board) data, India only manages to recycle about: 12%.

With plastic pollution, small communities have sprung up on the outskirts of the megacities, and new professions have been created, so-called "scrap pickers" or "scavengers". Often it is the most economically disadvantaged who do this type of work that no one else wants. Their homes are temporary sheds that are connected to a larger dump or road that is part of the large recycling chain of garbage.

In Kolkata, the largest area for plastic pickers is the industrial area of Dhapa. The infamous Dhapa dump, the oldest and largest in Kolkata, receives approx. 2500 tonnes of garbage per day. It is rumoured that most of the workers there die at an early age from all the chemicals they are exposed to, or from the toxic gases from all the fires on the dumpsite. But the Dhapa landfill's bad reputation probably comes mostly from what workers say they have found there over the years, such as body parts, corpses, or unwanted babies.

Truck driver Nilrey, 25, shows off his Tata truck, which he bought in installments. Plastic waste has made this possible, he says as he straps large sacks of polyplastic onto the truck bed. Each kilo yields 15 rupees (Approx. 2 SEK) at a plastic drop-in station. When Nilrey's flatbed is full, he drives and dumps the plastic at a private dealer in Dhapa and then returns and fills up with more.

It is impossible to write about India's plastic problem without mentioning Mumbai, the city known for its film industry Bollywood, but also the less flattering things like the world's largest slum "Dharavi" with over a million inhabitants, or the "Deonar dumping ground" which is one of the largest in the world. Ismael, 52 years old, who lives next to the river that stretches along the Deonar, has made himself a raft which he uses to collect plastic floating downstream. "In the past, it could take several hours to fill the raft, but now I do it in under an hour and it never ends", he says with relief.

In the capital Delhi, new bans have been enacted on single-use plastic bags, but traders around the city continue to sell them for lack of cheap alternatives, while the city deals with 689.8 tonnes of plastic daily.

**POLY**

**BOOK**

**Phillippines, India, Indonesia and Vietnam**

**Photography 2017- 2023**

The book *Poly* describes how people are exposed to the consequences of plastic, their own use of plastic products and how some get plastic as a livelihood. Jarlbro documents how people's living conditions in shadow communities in different places around the world are united through plastic.

Photographs and text by Olof Jarlbro

Foreword Martin Schibli.

Rough dog Press, 2024. 231pp,

24x28cm. Hardcover, Language Swedish English. ISBN 978-91-981210-5-6.

The book *Poly* is available for sale at the desk at Dunkers Kulturhus