

## New exhibition uncovers plastics' invention and history in east London



Images: Raw Materials: Plastics installation, photos Rob Harris, courtesy Nunnery Gallery

Raw Materials: Plastics Exhibition 17 May – 25 August 2019

[INSTALLATION SHOTS NOW AVAILABLE](#)

In Hackney Wick, 1865, Victorian inventor Alexander Parkes created Parkesine, a precursor to celluloid and one of the world's first man-made plastics. Raw Materials: Plastics traces this material's remarkable journey in east London, presenting early plastic objects and exploring the impact this invention has had on our lives and history since.

Bow Arts' on-going Raw Materials series traces the industrial history of east London's River Lea Valley one material at a time – supported by the National Lottery Heritage Fund and academic partner University College London (UCL). This year reveals the East End's central role in the invention and early development of plastics, beginning with the invention of Parkesine, designed to mimic rare and endangered natural materials such as ivory and tortoiseshell. These first plastics are surprisingly ornate, inlaid with mother of pearl and precious metals and coloured with patterns of brilliant blues and greens. An early billiard ball illustrates the game changer Parkes' invention provided in replacing ivory, which was previously used to make the game's balls. What Parkes began went on to form the originally East End-based British Xylonite Company, whose eponymous Halex brand at one time produced Europe's supply of ping-pong balls.

The story of plastic's evolution continues through the 1930s with Art Deco objects from the Halex brand, including an imitation shark-skin or 'shagreen' dressing table set and trinket boxes with iridescent surfaces mimicking semi-precious stones. Also on show will be photographs of the

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factory working environments, including the company's 'in-house' fire brigade – all too necessary due to the flammable nature of the materials involved. The exhibition continues with the later years of the British Xylonite Company activity in east London, including its contribution to the second world war and the 1960s celebrations of its Walthamstow base.

New commissions from resident artist makers **Peter Marigold** and **Frances Scott** accompany the historic displays. Marigold responds to the early mould-making techniques of inventor – and artist – Parkes, by making his own wooden moulds and using them to work with 'FormCard', Marigold's own brand of compostable bio-plastic. Scott exhibits a new film, 'PHX [X is for Xylonite]', which draws upon photogrammetry, as well as laser scanning techniques offered through project partner UCL, in order to develop and animate 3D images of early plastic objects. These are collaged with hand-processed 16mm film footage captured in the laboratories at UCL, and of a recent demolition on the site of the original Parkesine factory in Hackney Wick.

An extensive events programme accompanies the exhibition, including boat tours along the River Lea, plastic recycling workshops and discussions on the future and impact of plastics.

For more information and to follow the project see [rawmaterials.bowarts.org](http://rawmaterials.bowarts.org)

## Events

**Saturday 18 May Exhibition Tour** learn more with this guided tour 3-4pm FREE

**Saturday 25 May Family Workshop** with Colour of Water making masks from recycled plastics 11am-1pm FREE (open to all ages)

**Saturday 1 June Community Celebration Day** join us to celebrate our project volunteers with free food, drink & activities 12-3pm FREE

**Thursday 6 June First Thursday: Alexander Parkes & Parkesine** hear the story of east London's plastics inventor with Susan Mossman 7pm FREE

**Wednesday 12 June Sustainable Innovations in Plastics Today** with Sally Beken from the UK Circular Plastics Network 7-8pm (doors 6pm) £3/5

**Thursday 20 June Parkesine to Perspex** the history of plastics with Carolyn Clark, from the Plastics Historical Society 7-8pm (doors 6pm) £3/5

**Saturday 22 June MaterialDriven Bioplastics Workshop** learn to make bioplastics in this family-friendly workshop 11am-1.30pm £3/5

**Saturday 30 June River Lea Boat Cruise** explore the River Lea itself, hearing stories of industrial history along the way 12.30-3.30pm £5/10

**Thursday 4 July First Thursday: Artist Talks** hear from the project's resident artist makers Peter Marigold & Frances Scott 7-8.15pm FREE

**Sunday 7 July River Lea Boat Cruise** explore the River Lea itself, hearing stories of industrial history along the way 12.30-3.30pm £5/10

**Saturday 13 July Drawing on Film** a unique workshop exploring plastic and 16mm film with artist



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Bea Haut 11am-1pm £3/5 (all ages welcome)

**Thursday 18 July Perspectives on a better future for plastics** with UCL's Plastic Waste Innovation Hub 7-8.30pm (doors 6pm) £3/5

**Saturday 27 July MaterialDriven Plastics Recycling Workshop** family-friendly creative activities working with recycled plastic 11am-1.30pm, £3/5

**Saturday 3 August FORMcard Workshop** play with this malleable bioplastic with its inventor Peter Marigold 2-3pm, £3/5 (family friendly)

**Sunday 11 August River Lea Boat Cruise** explore the River Lea itself, hearing stories of industrial history along the way 12.30-3.30pm £5/10

**Saturday 17 August Visit from UCL's Mobile Heritage Lab** bring your own plastics in for analysis & meet UCL scientists 12-4pm FREE

**Sunday 25 August Exhibition Tour** learn more with this guided tour 3-4pm FREE

**For further information and images please contact:**

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[Download images here](#)

[www.bowarts.org](http://www.bowarts.org) | [www.twitter.com/BowArts](https://www.twitter.com/BowArts) | [www.facebook.com/bowarts](https://www.facebook.com/bowarts)

### **Notes to editors**

Raw Materials: Plastics follows Textiles (2018) and Wood (2017), both of which were previously awarded National Lottery Heritage funding. Raw Materials is a community driven project, whose research is largely carried out by a steering group made up of members of the local community. The project also worked with local schools, as well as inviting UCL students to take part. Thanks to National Lottery players, Bow Arts is proud to continue its flagship heritage project with plastics – a material whose innovation started in east London.

Together with UCL, Bow Arts would like to acknowledge contributing project partners MoDiP (Museum of Design in Plastic, Arts University Bournemouth), the Plastics Historical Society, V&A, the Science Museum, Vestry House Museum, and Barking & Dagenham, Hackney, Suffolk, Newham and Waltham Forest archives.

### **About Bow Arts**

Bow Arts is an arts education charity that provides affordable creative workspaces for over 500 emerging artists. Alongside this, Bow Arts manages one of the country's most exciting education programmes, which takes world-class artists into 90 schools to improve the lives and learning of children and young people. Bow Arts runs the Nunnery Gallery, a public gallery that supports a diverse range of high quality exhibitions and events as well as the delivery of a public arts programme. Established in 1995, Bow Arts holds an important place in east London which is fast becoming known as London's Artist Quarter. [www.bowarts.org](http://www.bowarts.org)

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### About The National Lottery Heritage Fund

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[www.heritagefund.org.uk](http://www.heritagefund.org.uk).

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