

FIRe

The most mysterious of the natural elements – fire, to which the third section of the exhibition is dedicated – is normally associated with the properties of plasma: a cloud of protons, neutrons and electrons in which the electrons are isolated from their respective molecules or atoms, thus giving the element the ability to act as a single complex rather than as a mass of individual atoms. Plasma thus resembles a gas but may flow as a liquid.

While on Earth the presence of plasma is relatively rare (lightning and aurora borealis can be considered plasma), in the Universe it concerns more than 99% of known matter, which in turn is only a small part – about 5% – of the entire content of matter and energy of the Universe (the famous “dark matter,” that which is devoid of electromagnetic emissions).

In actual fact, fire cannot be considered a genuine form of plasma. Strictly speaking, it is the product of a chemical reaction triggered in the presence of a fuel, a source of heat, and oxygen. Created in a variety of forms, fire has been used by human beings for millennia to promote the passage of state and thus transform matter. The heat produced by fire acts on molecular agitation and the bonds that hold molecules together.

1. Michel Blazy, *Fleurs de bain moussant*, 2000

According to Michel Blazy (Monaco, 1966), art is living matter, forever active and in perpetual mutation. The artist is famous for his installations made with plants and other organic materials, constantly subject to change triggered by internal and external agents. An ode to the vital cycles that, in the case of the work on display, one of the very first made by the artist, opens up to reflection on the boundary between the natural and the artificial, between organic and inert matter. Using the action of fire, the artist intervened on plastic bottles, which, having expanded in the heat, take on the appearance of colored bulbs.

2. Yves Klein, *Peinture de Feu sans titre*, F 71, 1962

The videos documenting the production process of the fire paintings by Yves Klein (Nice, 1928 – Paris, 1962) show the artist with a flamethrower, provided by the Gas France company, engaged in burning the cardboard surface of the painting while a fireman, equipped with a fire hose, immediately halts the combustion. The gesture embodies the dimension of the creative act par excellence, that which is unleashed by the generating force of fire: an essential instrument of the “Great Alchemical Work” to which Klein also seems to aspire. Creation and destruction thus become part the production cycle of the work of art.

3. Rebecca Horn, *Brennender Busch*, 2001

The biblical image of the burning bush, through which God made himself visible to Moses in the form of flaming nature, is evoked by Rebecca Horn (Michelstadt, 1944) in this kinetic sculpture, characterized by the simultaneous presence of coal and copper on a steel base. Coal translates and evokes the idea of fire, while copper transmits the sense of energy conduction, vibrating in the branches of the bush. These are occult energies, linked to the alchemical concept of the transmutation of the world. Steel and copper, in fact, in alchemic treatises, refer to the planets Mars and Venus, male and female principles, united through the secret fire, of which coal here is a visible sign.

4. Otto Piene, *Japanese*, 1974–1975

Otto Piene (Bad Laasphe, 1928 – Berlin, 2014), one of the founders of the ZERO group, began working with fire around the end of the 1950s. As in this case, the artist employed candles and gas burners to ignite layers of solvent on pigmented papers and other surfaces. Midway between causality and chance, over the years, the traces of soot have given rise to highly suggestive pictorial compositions, in close visual affinity with the results of Abstract Expressionism and Informal Art. Like in alchemical practices, combustion therefore does not destroy but creates, freeing the reactions of matter and transforming it.

5. Isabelle Andriessen, *Tidal Spill*, 2018 – ongoing

The work of Isabelle Andriessen (Haarlem, 1986) aims to undermine the hierarchical distinctions with which we usually classify natural elements, toying with the categories of animate/inanimate, animal/mineral, living/inert. While scientific taxonomy sometimes becomes an instrument of power that aims to delegitimize any divergent thought, Andriessen’s works question conventional definitions. The work exhibited, subject to constant changes, internal growth and deformation, opens up the possibility of embracing the unusual, the undefined, the unclassified, honing powers of observation and nourishing the critical spirit.

6. Liliane Lijn, *Catastrophic Encounters*, 2019–2020

Long attracted to London’s little craft workshops, Liliane Lijn (New York, 1939) created this series of works in a small glassworks in the King’s Cross neighborhood. She poured incandescent glass over a mica compound, causing craters that give the metal a fossilized appearance. Direct experimentation with materials is what most engages the artist. Her creative approach does not exclude the scope for a loss of control over the transformative processes of the material, to the point of including the possibility of failure, as the term “catastrophe” in the title of the work suggests.

7–corridor. Gordon Matta-Clark, *Fire Child*, 1971

In this film by Matta-Clark (New York, 1943–1978), made on the occasion of the hundredth anniversary of the Brooklyn Bridge, two narratives are juxtaposed: on the one hand, an elderly man, perhaps homeless, gathers some materials near the bridge, lights a small fire and sits down to eat; a short distance away, the artist and a child light a second fire and build a little wall of scrap metal and mortar. The work reflects on the processes of growth, dissolution and discarding in relation to the building speculation of New York at the time. Fire is at the center of this reflection, as an element that creates and destroys, warms and consumes.

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1. Robert Smithson, *Glue Pour*, 1969

The viscous aspect of some liquids and the processes of the transformation of matter always attracted Robert Smithson (Passaic, 1938 – Amarillo, 1973), the creator of a series of “earthworks” linked to territories marked by human exploitation, guided by an ecological thought ante litteram. *Glue Pour* bears witness to the action carried out by the artist in Vancouver in 1969, when he poured 226 kg of industrial material from the top of a slope of debris.

2. Otobong Nkanga, *Steel to Rust –Corrosion*, 2016
Otobong Nkanga, *In a Place Yet Unknown*, 2017

Nigerian artist Otobong Nkanga (Kano, 1974) reflects on the exploitation of natural resources, particularly mineral deposits, from a post-colonialist perspective. *Steel to Rust – Corrosion* is a dark-hued tapestry with interwoven metal yarns, typical of West Africa, and magnetic plates showing the signs and rust color of corrosion. Linked to the rise of Trump, the corrosion of the title is that underlying the social and environmental policies of the American president. *In a Place Yet Unknown* is a handmade, liquid-soaked carpet that reflects on memory, the environment, and post-colonial history through a process of chromatographic contamination. The poetry it contains interweaves material and immaterial planes, the solid and the liquid state.

3. Lynda Benglis, *Baby Contraband*, 1969

Lynda Benglis (Lake Charles, USA, 1941) has always cultivated the practice of insubordination, placing the surpassing of the concepts of separation, definition and classification at the heart of her poetics, applied both to the material-formal sphere and to the socio-political and gender spheres. For this reason, Benglis’s works eschew the geometric precision of Minimalism to exalt the principles of precariousness, randomness and movement. *Baby Contraband* – in which Contraband is a childhood place where the artist saw oil slicks floating on the seawater – was created from a mixture of latex and fluorescent pigments poured onto a sheet of linoleum and then left to solidify.

4. Max Ernst, *Les hommes n'en sauront rien*, 1923

This painting is perhaps one of the most hermetic works of Max Ernst (Brühl, 1891 – Paris, 1976), inspired by an alchemical reinterpretation of Freud’s thought. The union and the dialectic between the male and female principles – sun and moon, light and shade – are associated with the revival of the theme of the eclipse and that of the reversed crescent moon, from which a whistle hangs: interpretable as a phallic symbol but also as an evocation of the volatile principle of Air. While higher up, the legs evoke a sexual relationship and the matrix of all creation, the presence of the hand as a protective covering of the Earth hovers over a primordial surface, alluding to that matter from which everything – and therefore also the Great Work itself – originates.

5. Lisa Dalfino & Sacha Kanah, *Quasi*, 2019

The installation by Lisa Dalfino and Sacha Kanah (Como, 1987; Milan, 1981) consists of a series of raw clay vases deformed by the action of fire. The explosion generated inside them caused their collapse, but at the same time initiated the process of stabilization, determined by the drying of the material. The regenerative cycle of the material, always conditioned by heat, finds its expression in this group of works, the result of a complex process of workmanship skillfully managed by the two artists.

6. Giulia Cenci, *Aprile 5007*, 2017

The works of Giulia Cenci (Cortona, 1988) often have the appearance of hybrid prostheses, limbs composed of materials that bear witness to a restless contamination between the natural and the artificial. At the base of her work, there is a conscious reflection on how the use of plastic materials corresponds to a diffusion, on land and especially in the sea, of microplastics destined to enter the life cycle of animals and humans. Tubes, pieces of branches, black bones and resin veins give shape to this sort of multilayered and deformed limb, placed as an unlikely handrail accompanying our steps and thoughts on the path towards dystopian futures.

7. Tania Pérez Córdova, *They say it takes a village*, 2021

“I like to treat sculptures as if they were events”: this statement by Tania Pérez Córdova (Ciudad de México, 1979) helps us to understand her poetics, oriented towards transferring to the artistic object a sense of a chronology, embodying an action performed in time. For the exhibition, the artist took the glass from a window in the museum and re-melted it, transforming it into a sculpture. The new window pane was coated with a blue film. Melted at 700 degrees, glass is one of the most easily recyclable materials, and one of the most suitable for transferring the idea of the continuous regeneration of matter.

8. Dora Budor, *Solo for 1939*, 2019

This brass plate – one of a group of four – was created by Dora Budor (Zagreb, 1984) on the occasion of her solo exhibition at the Kunsthalle Basel. The painting, produced by a painter specialized in theatrical and cinematographic sets (Christine Bechameil), depicts a story already processed by its visual representation, simulating the oxidation of the brass – something that, over time, really will affect the base of the painting, conditioning its formal aspect as much as the pigments themselves. The work was conceived in relation to the concert hall near the Swiss museum, which was undergoing restoration and therefore closed at the time of the exhibition. Brass here refers to the name of the group of metallic wind instruments in the symphony orchestra, while the title hints at the musical performance.