

# w-RAP Libretto

written by Karen Wimhurst for the Museum of Design in Plastics  
[www.modip.ac.uk/projects/w-rap](http://www.modip.ac.uk/projects/w-rap)

## PROLOGUE

We are the makers  
We are the dreamers of dreams  
We are the makers of chains  
Heavier than forever maybe

Chains that can never be broken  
Chains, woven,  
As cathedrals,  
Over the earth

For each age is a dream that is dying  
And one that is coming to birth

## SYNTHETICA

*Arise Synthetica, our fourth Kingdom. On this broad continent of plastics, the countries march right out of the natural worlds – that wild area of firs and rubber plantations – into the illimitable world of the molecule. It's a world boxed only by the cardinal points of the chemical compass- carbon, hydrogen, oxygen, nitrogen. It floats upon the Sea of Glass, one of the oldest plastics known to man. New countries, like Melamine, constantly bulge from its coastline. The Alkyd country, a great swamp of bright impervious plastic paints, great chemical river systems like Acetylene, .. Rayon is a plastic island off the cellulose coast, with a glittering night life. The Crystal Mountains of Acrylic run down into the Crystal Hills of Styrene. Phenolic fed by the Formaldehyde River: Capital; Bakelite ruled by Union Carbide and Carbon Corporation. The state of Urea, more frivolous, colour loving*

*In this, our fourth Kingdom, we will walk the streets at night illuminated to the brightness of daylight, flooded with changing colours, to the accompaniment of symphonic music, synthetically produced by the blending of electronic waves. Arise Synthetica*

## **ONE (Utopian Dream of the Fourth Kingdom)**

'You the poor shall also consume  
Abundance beyond your wildest dreams'  
In our Fourth Kingdom all the colours of the rainbow  
Will be spread across the world.  
Light in the dark street,  
Democracy  
And music ever in the air

The Fourth Kingdom is a victory of synthesis over extraction  
A city of curves and streamlines  
Of sweep and rounded beauty  
A permanence uncorrupted by rot or corrosion  
Pressed, squeezed, rolled, drawn out, cast  
All things Bright and Beautiful

We will no longer pilfer the earth,  
We will no longer pillage  
No longer ransack the earth  
Grained ivory, turtle shell, amber, horn  
mother of pearl, coral, the lac beetle  
ebony, mahogany and oak,  
the whale, the elephant  
the leatherback turtle saved  
Nature's larder will be left untouched  
We will produce!

You the poor shall also consume  
Abundance.  
Beyond the vegetable, animal or mineral...  
From the great carbon river of life  
Democracy!

Arise, Synthetica, our fourth kingdom,  
Whose boundaries are unlimited.

## **TWO (Material of a Thousand Uses)**

*The war had many secrets. The nations of the earth were banging*

*away bravely on the front and pussyfooting around in the rear,  
trying to hide the new means of destruction which they had in  
pickle for the foe. Amongst these, 'the wireless telephone' which,  
when the shooting was over, changed its name to 'Radio'.  
Everything in radio apparatus – coils, mounting plates, variometer  
stators, and rotator balls, receiver caps, rheostats, tube sockets,  
knobs and dials – is made from Bakelite in one form or another.  
The finest Bakelite moulding and mould making ever done.  
Bakelite in every chapter*

Let Bakelite be, and all was plastic

Bbbbbbbb Bakelite  
Prepared in the morning of the world  
Lingered till the day of crying need  
In the silent laboratory of the earth  
Bbbbbbb Bakelite

Leo Hendrik  
Looking in the scrap heap of the vegetable Kingdom  
In wood smoke, in coal smoke, in the waste  
Leo Hendrik Baekeland took off his coat and went to work.  
Heat, heat, and yet more heat, frozen in heat  
Polymerisation...it was the heat that did it,  
Bakelite comes shining out of the mould  
Material of a thousand uses  
Prepared in the nick of time  
Bakelite till Kingdom come

### **THREE (The Lure of Translucency)**

Like paper but not paper  
Thin as tissue but hard to tear  
Transparent as glass but not glass  
Cinematic  
From Rue de la Chausee d'Autin  
La cellophane

A shimmering jewel in sheet form  
A shimmying shush

A lone spot of brilliance  
A dose of sex appeal  
A touch of disposable gloss  
(and pre-packed packaging units moving fast)  
La cellophane

A complex four part system featuring nitrocellulose, a wax moisture proof barrier, plasticiser, blending agent. Plant fibre is dissolved in alkali and carbon di-sulfide making viscose, which is then extruded through a slit into a bath of sulphuric acid and sodium sulphate to reconvert the viscose into cellulose. The film then passes through several more baths, removing sulfur, bleaching the film and adding softening materials such as glycerine to stop the film becoming brittle. A similar process using a hole (a spinneret) instead of a slit is used to make rayon... La Cellophane

Madame the consumer wants to see freshness  
She wants to see what she buys and she wants it clean.  
Two thieves in the night, Dampness and Dryness silently rob  
The crispy crunch, the tenderness of delicate dainties for lunch...  
Cellophane stands guard

Let strange hands grab and paw,  
Cellophane stands guard  
Inquisitive hands that grab and paw,  
Cellophane stands guard  
Let strange hands touch and feel and grab  
Cellophane stands guard  
Peek a boo, peek a boo, It's looking after you  
and it's keeping foreign odours out too  
Shimmering jewel, shimmying shush, cellophane, peek-a-boo.

#### **FOUR (A New Pitch of Mass Production)**

Dentures, doorknobs, gears, goggles. Juke-boxes, crystal chairs, transparent shoes and ladies rise up from the plastic sea. Only surrealisms derangements can capture the limitless horizons, strange juxtapositions, endless products of this new world in the process of becoming. Tough cellulose plastic door knobs are readily translatable into gun stocks. Nylon hosiery – a plastic too – can turn into parachutes. The transparent lady, plexiglass, call her

'a Dream of Venus' she can also serve as the non-shatterable wind-shield on bombing planes.'

War makes a gimcrack industry into a Sober Producer of Prime Materials

Invisibly running through the innards of tanks, battle ship, bombers, gas masks, gunstocks

Du Pont Monsanto, Union Carbide  
A new pitch of mass production

A bugle.....two pounds of copper consumed for every bugle.

Major Hobson appeals to Elmer Mills to heed the call of his country  
'No problem'

Two weeks later, 'We've got your bugle, the only plastic bugle on earth.'

The solo cornettist of the Army Band bends stiffly at the waist, grimacing....bantam weight, plastic toy

Reveille. Boots and Saddles

Heard ½ a mile away, he hurls it at a brick wall.....

4.30 pm Mills and Chicago Musical instrument company were given an order for two hundred thousand plastic bugles.

Wars are won and lost on the smallest of things

Plexiglass

Airplane Hydraulic fluid fuel kept functional at minus 150 degrees

Vinyl electric wire coding,

Teflon separates the fissionable isotope 235 from uranium 238

When man returns to his plough it will have plastic handles.

### **FIVE (A Fermentation of Stuff)**

Doubling, tripling, expanding, that's Plastics

A fermentation of stuff

Come peacetime, how many plastic ploughshares can the public be persuaded to buy without gagging?

Ninette, new curtains

Fe Fi Fo Fum on the floor linoleum  
Shirts and slacks in Garnalene  
Extra wear without a care  
Formica for me - new at the whisk of a damp cloth

Nylon the gay deceiver  
Pristine freshness with damp cloth cleaning  
Lipstick on the wall? This is Varlor - damp cloth treatment  
Upholstered in Dacran, stains need not be calamities  
The damp cloth in action, swished away

Plastics are here to free you from drudgery  
From dirt, grime, stains, scratches and shabbiness  
Housewife slavery  
Swished away  
We dream of freezers, hoovers, mixers,  
We dream of washing machines, disposable nappies, dishwashers  
We dream of TVs and wipe off counters  
Oh household drudgery, oh household slavery  
We dream of non-stick, whiskers, spatulas  
We dream of tupperware, cling film, food processors, bin bags,  
juicers  
Non-iron fabrics, bibs, spray cleaners, double glazing  
Oh household drudgery, oh household slavery swished away

You will have a greater chance to be yourselves  
Than any people in the history of civilisation.  
You will have a greater chance to be yourselves  
than any girl, mother, grandmother, aunty or woman  
in the history of civilisation.  
Damp Cloth Cleaning.

Who wants to be at the mercy of a fading flower?  
Some roses never fade  
No rust, no rot, no tarnish  
A new kink everyday  
A new permanence, uncorrupted everyday  
For ever and ever  
Even in a nest of bleached white bones lies colour  
Who wants to be at the mercy of a fading flower

Some roses never fade

### **SIX (Vinyl Enchantment)**

In the dark valleys  
A sanctuary of sounds  
Rotating, rotating, rotating  
Between grooves spiral, spiral, spiral  
Spiral to centre  
Lock, lead out, lock in, lead out

When a man loves a woman  
Hello, I love you won't you tell me your name  
When a man loves a woman  
Can't buy me love, everybody tells me  
Stop in the name of love, before you break my heart  
Cos I can't help falling in  
Love me do you love me baby do you love me do  
Will you still love me tomorrow.

Record  
To get by heart  
To go over in one's mind  
Quietly  
Or silently

### **SEVEN (In Every Pore)**

'One of the greatest shortcomings of the human race is our inability to understand the exponential function'

Plastic was sighted in human tissue in 1950

In every pore  
Behind feather, behind the fin, inside shell.  
In every pore  
Within the nail, beside the bone, within blood between beak  
In every pore

The skeleton, the connective tissue, the slippery skin of modern life

In every pore  
In every day, in every way,  
We become a little more plastic

### **EIGHT (Secret City)**

Have you ever seen a polypropylene molecule? It's one of the most beautiful things you'll ever see. A cathedral that goes on for miles

In a city, In a city of surface and secrets  
Strong as steel and softer than candle wax  
Ring of six, carbon quartets, trios, duo bonds  
Perform, perform miracles

Water barriers, membranes, glues, resins  
Coatings, foam cores, glass fibre,  
Sheeting, ducts, domes, drainage,  
Insulation, panelling, pipes, sockets,  
Seals, slabs, casements, downpipes,  
Coated concrete, weather boarding,  
Gravel agglomeration  
Traps and troughs, bollards and lighting,  
Speed, motion  
Design, desires  
Needs dreams.  
This is quick change artistry  
The essence of alchemy  
Buckets and jewels  
Noble in humility  
Consents to be prosaic  
Material democracy

Space saving  
Energy saving  
Weight saving  
Money saving  
Life saving  
World changing

Take plastics out of our lives and what do you get?  
Complete breakdown.

### **NINE (the Screen)**

We are now abandoned to our own devices. Everything we create  
– landscapes, buildings, political and social structures, personality  
itself – it is of our own devising'

When we were replete  
Satiated  
Oh we were longing and we found lightness  
Lighter than bone  
Lighter than breath  
Flying through a thousand screens  
Flying, freewheeling into a blue light dream  
The alchemical dream of me  
P P P P P P P P  
People of a thousand faces  
P P P P P P P P  
People of a thousand graces

We are the plastic people  
Freewheeling past nature

A natural evolution of a culture with choice  
We will have a greater chance to be our many selves  
Than any people in the history of civilisation.  
What kind of a hero are you?  
What kind of a heroine are you?  
If you can dream it you can do it

### **TEN (Beetle)**

Do you see this beetle?  
So light in my hand.  
It uses one polymer, chitin,  
To make it  
Waterproof, strong, resilient, breathable,  
Creating colour through structure

Take a peek  
Peek-a-boo, peek-a-boo

In Nature's kingdom  
All the colours of the rainbow  
They are spread across the world.  
Light in the dark street  
Light in the dark

In every pore  
PPPPPPPP  
In every pore  
Nature uses five biodegradable polymers  
Cellulose, keratin, chitin, lignin, pectin  
To create all that we see

Abundance  
Quick change artistry  
Essence of alchemy  
Abundance  
Materials of a trillion uses  
Rotating, spiral,  
Regenerative, generous  
Circular by design  
Spiral to the centre  
Lock in, lead out

## **EPILOGUE**

We are the makers  
What are the dreams we can dream  
For our earth?  
Each age is a dream that is dying  
And one that is coming to birth