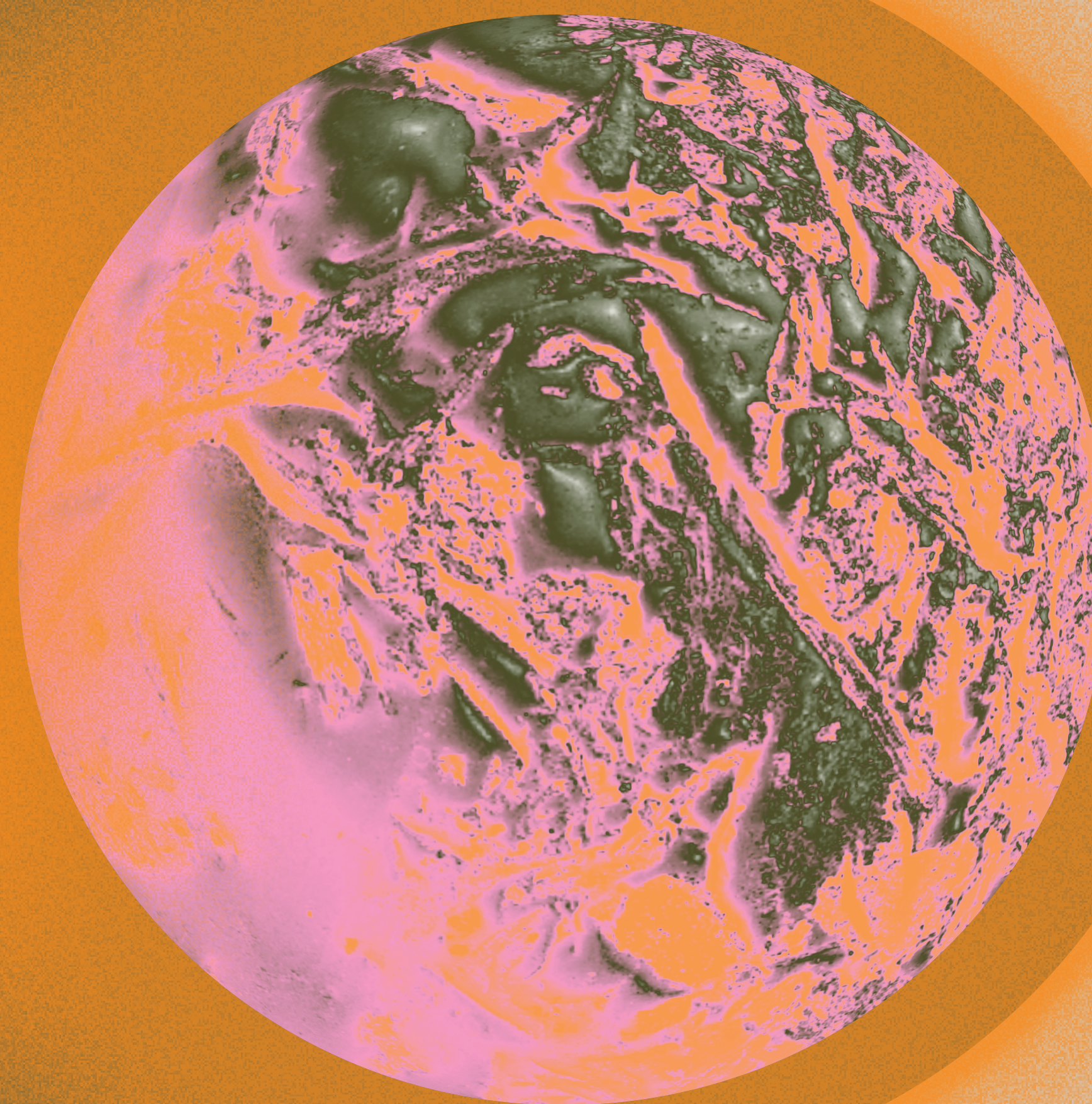
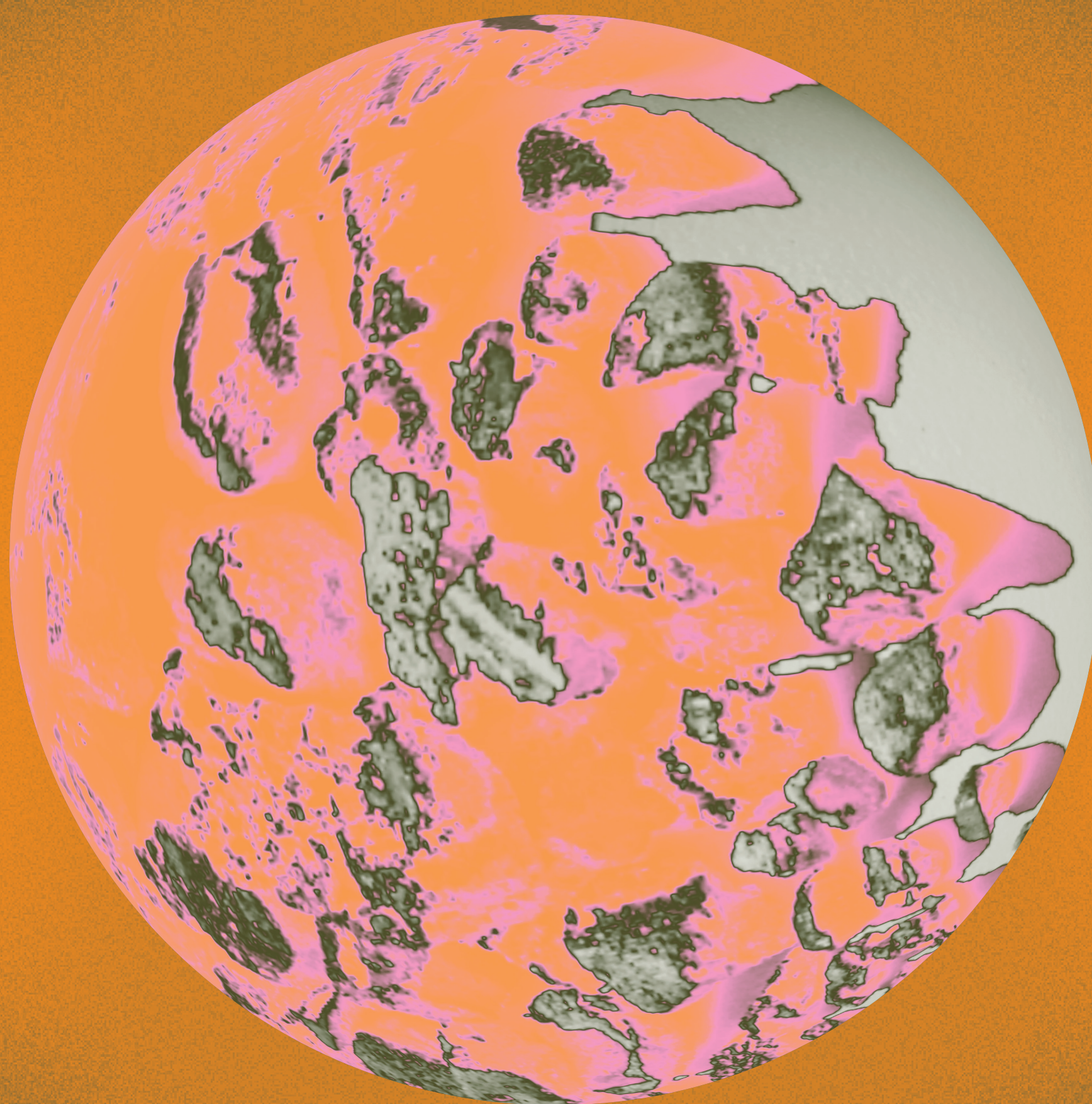
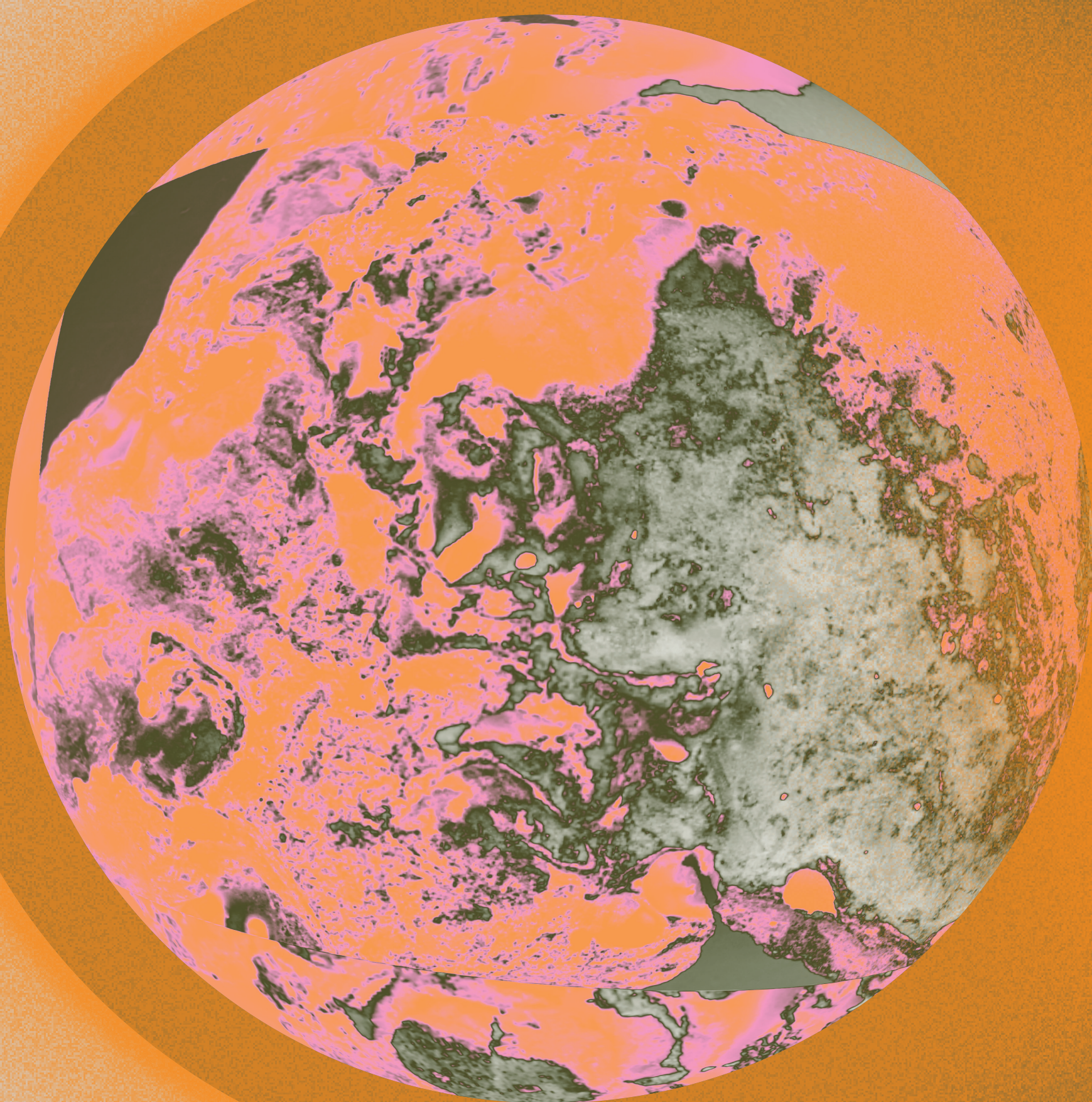


PLASTICENE

UNDERSTANDING PLASTIC PERVASIVENESS THROUGH ENVIRONMENTAL HUMANITIES

What role do plastics play in shaping our planet today? Could their impact be so profound as to challenge how we define the current geological epoch? This project, titled *Framing the Plasticene: An Environmental Perspective on the Pervasiveness of Plastics*, aims to develop a conceptual framework to understand the planetary implications of plastics. Plastics are indispensable to contemporary society and the global economy, but they also pose a major threat to ecosystems, biodiversity, and human health. Their defining feature is not only their massive production, but their pervasiveness: plastics are pres-

ent across environments, bodies, and temporal scales. Despite growing research, existing studies tend either to remain too general or to focus on isolated case studies. What is still missing is a coherent conceptual framework capable of integrating these insights. The concept of the Plasticene, if rigorously defined and carefully developed, offers such a framework. By foregrounding the material agency and persistence of plastics, it allows us to rethink planetary change beyond the more familiar framework of the Anthropocene. The project is organized in three interconnected axes of research.



AXIS 1

From the Anthropocene to the Plasticene

What role do plastics play in our planetary present?
Are they significant enough to challenge the Anthropocene framework? What would it mean to define the present as 'Plasticene' instead?

The concept of Anthropocene describes a geological epoch in which human activity has become a dominant force that can shape the Earth system. While highly influential, it has been widely criticized for attributing responsibility for the current ecological situation to a generalized 'humanity', thereby obscuring historical, political, and socio-economic differences. The notion of Plasticene shifts the focus from human activity in general to a specific material driver: plastics. Although the term is occasionally used in the natural sciences (particularly in geology and marine sciences) it remains undertheorized within the humanities. This project develops the Plasticene as a conceptual framework capable of accounting for the material agency of plastics, their persistence, and their capacity to enter the geological record as a potential marker horizon. Rather than competing with other alternatives to the Anthropocene, such as the Capitalocene or the Plantationocene, the Plasticene is conceived as a complementary perspective, grounded in the socio-material specificity of plastics and capable of integrating insights from different critical approaches.

METHODOLOGY

- Quantitative exploration of texts
- Qualitative and theory-driven conceptualization

RESULTS

- "Anthropocene or Plasticene? Material Agents of a Plasticized Planet", in *Athena* 20 (2025): 175-194. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.53631/Athena.2025.20.9>
- "Plastic Theory/Studies", in *The Year's Work in Critical and Cultural Theory*. [Forthcoming]

AXIS 2

The Extended Presence of Plastics

How can the Plasticene allow us to better understand the pervasiveness of plastics in space and time?
Which are its more relevant categories?

Plastics are characterized by an unprecedented form of spatial pervasiveness. They are everywhere: in oceans, soils, food and drinking water, as well as within living organisms, including human bodies. Moreover, their resistance to biodegradation means that they accumulate over time: coming from the deep past and headed towards the deep future, plastics are characterized by temporal pervasiveness too. In this axis of research, I theorize such a double "extended presence" of plastics, arguing that the Plasticene offers the most adequate conceptual framework to understand the proliferation of plastics in both time and space.

The extended presence of plastics across space can be conceptualized through the concept of "geobody". In his book *Nonhuman Subjects*, Federico Luisetti disentangles life, personhood, and subjectivity, claiming that geobodies (rocks, mountains, quarries) are political subjects in their own right. In the paper *Anthropocene or Plasticene?*, I draw on his work to further develop the concept of "geobody" into that of "plastic geobody", arguing for objects like plastiglomerates (hybrids of rock and plastic) to be onto-political nonhuman subjects.

The extended presence of plastics across time, instead, calls for a speculative perspective, joining forces with methods and discourses from the Future Studies. The project introduces the idea of "feral futures" to describe scenarios in which plastics have become inseparable from ecosystems. This perspective opens up new ways of thinking about responsibility, intervention, and environmental action.

METHODOLOGY

- Conceptual synthesis grounded in empirical data
- Scenario thinking and speculative analysis

RESULTS

- Guest lecture "Plastic Subjects (1960s–2010s). Euphoric Past – Ecocritical Present – Speculative Future" at the M.A. course *Ecology and Art* held by Dr. E. Guareldo, Università Ca' Foscari, Venezia, Venice, 02.05.2025
- Presentation "Feral Futures | Voices from the Past", at the international workshop *Hermeneutics of Extinction*, organized by MSCA project HERMEX6, Pompeu Fabra University of Barcelona, Horizon Europe, Barcelona, 26.06.2025
- Paper titled (tentatively) "Plastic Waste and the Temporalities of the Plasticene: Ecological Implications and Future Trajectories". [In preparation]

AXIS 3

Plastic Artworks and Design Objects as Conceptual Laboratories

Do art and design have a role in the Plasticene, and if so, which? What can art and design allow us to understand that stratigraphy alone cannot?

Art and design play a crucial role in mediating the perception of environmental issues. In the context of the Plasticene, they can make the pervasive presence of plastics tangible and perceptible, translating abstract processes into experiential forms. Focusing on case studies from design and public art, this axis of research observes multiple possible interactions between plastics and rocks, up to considering stones that have become fully synthetic. Some of these case studies also belong to HSG's Art Collection and are embedded in the everyday spaces of the campus. You may encounter them as you move through the university, if you feel like looking for them: at the entrance to the President's office and administration (*hint: these plastic stones are glossy*), or in the basement of SQUARE (*hint: this plastic rock is floating*).

These works offer small but telling encounters with the material paradoxes at the core of the Plasticene, and this axis of research approaches them as "conceptual laboratories". This close-up approach sheds light on some important facts: for instance, that plastics do not constitute a single, uniform material, but a diverse family of substances with distinct properties, uses, and environmental impacts.

METHODOLOGY

- Analysis of artistic and design objects
- Interviews with artists and designers
- Bottom-up conceptualization

RESULTS

- Presentation "Synthetic Becomings. Material Plasticity and the Polyurethane Plasticene", at the international workshop "Storyed [Art] Matter": *Methodological Approaches across Material Engagement and Aesthetics*, organized by the group Art | Material | Ecology. Lechner Museum, Ingolstadt, 25-27.03.2026
- With E. Guareldo, "Petroleum into Plastics: Polypropylene, Polyurethane, and the Petrochemical Substrate of Italian Design, 1954–1973", in *California Italian Studies* 14/2. [Forthcoming]
- "AlterPlastiglomerates. Piero Gilardi in the Polyurethane Plasticene", in A. Filipović, M. Jobst (eds.), *AlterPlastics. Histories, Aesthetics, Ontologies*, Bloomsbury. [In preparation]

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IMAGE CREDITS

Images based on Dennis Siering, From the archive: www.pyroplastics.org, 2023, Photo: Stefan Stark

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