

A Critical View from the Perspective of Art and Science

Interdisciplinary Workshops

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Reflecting Oil Colloquium
interdisciplinarity
art
science workshops
crude oil
collaboration
energy transition

It takes millions of years for crude oil to form, but its consumption—almost exclusively through combustion—occurs in the shortest of times. It is a process that unites prehistoric nature with state-of-the-art technologies. As the key resource of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, oil has been at the heart of conflicts and a vital source of prosperity, too. A material full of contradictions that spans the entire globe and yet is barely visible.

The research project is centered around the substance crude oil. The team and invited guests investigated the role of this material on a geopolitical level, as a cause of environmental pollution and disasters, and as a socio-cultural asset between power and conflict. A constituent part of the project were 34 online workshops¹ organized between 2020 and 2023, which explored different approaches and models for a transition to sustainable energy and a future life without oil. In the framework of these digital meetings and interdisciplinary dialogues, scientists, artists, curators, and activists presented their work and reflections on the topic of crude oil. Scientific analyses, artistic forms of expression, and practical strategies were juxtaposed and combined to prospect creative horizons and find innovative solutions to the challenges associated with the substance.

The workshops were conceived to cover a broad spectrum of topics and perspectives. For example, **Holger Ott**, head of the Department Geoenergy (formerly Department Petroleum Engineering) at the University of Leoben, reported on the environmental aspects of oil production and the associated technical and scientific

Keynote speech by Cleo Reece
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University of Applied Arts Vienna



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challenges. Brazilian artist **Mari Fraga** presented her works, which deal with human interventions in nature, the dichotomy between the natural and the artificial, the Anthropocene, climate change, fossil fuels, mining, and industrial land use. In her workshop, she introduced her artistic approach to the world's key oil and gas production sites and the connection between oil and the advancement of Western civilization and culture. Inspired by ecofeminism and her Latin American perspective, she developed analogies between the human body and the Earth. Italian architectural researcher **Arianna Mondin** drew parallels between oil and architecture on the basis of the unfinished book *Petrolio* by Italian author and filmmaker Pier Paolo Pasolini. She researches the history of power and oil, taking the Italian energy company Eni as an example. An important contractor for the construction of highways, petrol stations, and large residential complexes for employees in the oil industry, the company continues to leave its mark on the Italian landscape to this day. The Austrian artist **Herwig Turk** discussed his interdisciplinary work about routines and gestures in the laboratory setting: Turk asked scientists to perform scientific procedures, but without the familiar instruments—their hand gestures are so precise that fellow scientists can easily read and interpret them. **Imre Szeman**, director of the Institute for Environment, Conservation and Sustainability and professor of Human Geography at the University of Toronto Scarborough, examines the history of energy transitioning. His workshop framed the COVID-19 pandemic as a window of opportunity for a shift to a green, solar-powered future. **Cleo Reece**, an environmental activist and filmmaker who actively campaigns for the rights of Indigenous peoples—in particular, the Fort McMurray 468 First Nation community in Canada—spoke about the “healing walks” organized by the local community to raise awareness about the effects of environmental pollution from the tar sands industry and its impacts on the population.

A central and recurring theme in the workshops was the question of the long-term effects of crude oil use, and if and how the substance can be more sustainable or even substituted altogether.

One workshop in this domain was hosted by **Peter Troxler**, an independent researcher at the interface between business administration, society, and technology, who presented the techniques he uses to encourage people to imagine a future without oil. His research focuses on the circular economy, the recycling of plastic waste, and how to close this loop of plastics and create clean materials from waste. In his contribution, **David Misch**, deputy scientific head of the Chair of Petroleum Geology at the University of Leoben, asked if fossil fuels can actually be replaced. He anticipates that global players in the energy sector will increasingly switch to renewable energies. However, the sustainability of these new energy sources is still largely unclear and a highly political issue.

How can artistic and scientific strategies address and reimagine the challenges of our petromodernity? Curator and art historian **Elena Sorokina** spoke about her exhibition *Petroliana* (2007), which explored the entanglements of politics and ideologies. She examined the relationship between humankind and the environment against the backdrop of modernist notions of the domination of nature. Her work, too, envisions an end of oil from an artistic and curatorial perspective.



Top: *Spinning Melancholy*, performance by Mia Lietke, choreography by Kat Válastur
 Bottom: Panel discussion, moderated by Alejandra Rodríguez-Remedi, *Reflecting Oil Colloquium*, 2022



Working group 1, preparation of the final workshop presentation, *Reflecting Oil Colloquium*, 2022

In an atmosphere of open dialogue and collaboration, the participants shared ideas, formulated critical questions, and identified new perspectives and innovative ways of dealing with oil and its impacts on contemporary society and the environment. The workshops not only fostered a deeper understanding of crude oil as a substance: the interdisciplinary exchanges and collaborations exemplified how a synthesis of art and science can tackle complex problems and overcome conventional ways of thinking. The result is a host of findings, creative works, technological innovations, policy recommendations, and—most importantly—a strong network of stakeholders who are committed to working towards a sustainable future.

The content and reflections from the 34 online workshops paved the way for the *Reflecting Oil Colloquium*, which took place at the University of Applied Arts Vienna from June 9 to 12, 2022. Three working groups explored the substance of crude oil using different methods. On one hand, crude oil was examined through the lens of arts-based research methods in a working group led by **Ernst Logar**. Working on a more theoretical trajectory, another group dealt with the implications of the visibility and invisibility of crude oil and prepared texts about its cultural representation and social perception. This group was moderated by **Alejandra Rodríguez-Remedi**. A third, experimental working group supervised by **Ulrike Payerhofer**—with the support of artist **Olaf Osten**—developed narratives for a graphic novel about possible transitionings out of the oil age and imagined a future after oil.