

–03/01

Crude Oil as a Substance for Artistic Experimentation

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workshop
experiments
crude oil
art-based research methods
laboratory
interdisciplinarity

*“forms of things were regarded as indicators
marking the historical evolution of cultures,
but substances were never in the focus of interest”¹*

Crude oil, the leading substance of our petromodernity, is primarily perceived and discussed as an abstract concept. Extracted from the geological depths of the Earth and often characterized as “buried sunshine,” this resource has remained invisible throughout the course of its cultural transformation, while tangible opportunities to truly fathom it or its many liquid derivatives are rare. The complex chemical-physical properties of crude oil are one reason behind its obscurity—it is a substance that comes most clearly to light in the wake of an oil tanker disaster or the contamination of ecosystems such as the Niger Delta. To fully comprehend crude oil, sensory perception represents a useful technique and an important departure point for knowledge production in the transformation towards a post-fossil society.

In the framework of the *Reflecting Oil Colloquium*, the *Arts-Based Research Methods* working group adopted this approach in their examinations of crude oil in the chemistry laboratory of the Institute of Conservation and Restoration at the the University of Applied Arts Vienna. The chemistry lab was specifically adapted for this purpose with the necessary equipment and materials to provide the participants with hands-on starting points for creative work with crude oil as well as its diverse effects and meanings. The working group consisting of six participants from different disciplines came together in advance during the *Reflecting Oil* online workshops.



Working group 1, chemistry laboratory, Institute of Conservation and Restoration
University of Applied Arts Vienna, 2022

The Participants

Brazilian artist **Mari Fraga** explores analogies of the human body in relation to fossil fuels in her arts-based research project *Fossil Time: oil, art and the body in the cosmopolitics of the Anthropocene*. In her work *63 Perforations*, the outlines of a map of the world were transferred onto Fraga's body through several days of exposure to targeted sunlight. In a performative setting, the map was then perforated with 63 acupuncture needles marking key oil extraction sites around the globe.

Iraqi petroleum scientist and master's student **Karez Abdulhameed** is specializing in drilling technology at the University of Leoben. She is currently developing the research project *Hydrogen Transportation—Compressor Station Modelling and Market Cost Analysis* to evaluate and enhance the economic feasibility of hydrogen distribution networks in Europe.

Crude oil is a central component in the artistic practice of the Russian-born, France-based conceptual artist **Andrei Molodkin**. In his hollow Plexiglas sculptures shaped as letters, words, and symbols and flooded with oil, the artist tackles the political and economic implications of crude oil in a precise, critical, and often radical manner. Molodkin's current focus on the war in Ukraine and the role of autocratic ruler Vladimir Putin led to the work *Putin Filled with Ukrainian Blood*.

Austrian artist **Herwig Steiner** is active in the fields of film and music and currently works with the medium of sculpture in a site-specific context. Situated at the interfaces of diverse genres and disciplines, his experimental and playful multimedia projects investigate phenomena in which the virtual permeates the real world.

PhD student **Patrick Jasek** works at Department Petroleum Engineering at the University of Leoben with a focus on reservoir technology. In his research, Jasek investigates microfluid processes in geological formations in their relation to energy recovery and energy storage.

Austrian artist **Herwig Turk** explores the connections between art, technology, and science. In many of his works, Turk interweaves the material culture of the laboratory with his reflections on the concept of landscape. He currently investigates notions of landscape in the context of river basins.

The six workshop participants had two full days to experiment with crude oil and explore different dimensions of the substance through creative processes in interdisciplinary groups and joint collaborations.

The works created during the workshop address the topic of crude oil from different perspectives and with various media. The artistic approaches spanned from an investigation of the substance's origins as primordial elements in prehistoric landscapes or an aesthetic analysis of crude oil on a microscopic level from the perspective of the researchers' cultural background to tackling the political impacts of oil in the context of wars and struggles for resources or the ubiquity and (in)visibility of crude oil as the foundation of our everyday lives.

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Oil Dialogue

Karez Abdulhameed and Mari Fraga

In their joint experiment, Mari Fraga and Karez Abdulhameed examined crude oil in its interaction with salt and water. This symbolic set-up was inspired by Fraga's preoccupation with Brazilian oil extraction (artistic work *Fossil Pit*, 2016),² the political circumstances, and the geological formations on the coastline. Their work dealt with the interplay of substances on a microscopic scale. In a joint dialogue between the participants, the visual material was interpreted from the perspective of different disciplines and cultural contexts.

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Primordial Soup: Dance of Exchange Systems and Variables

Patrick Jasek and Herwig Turk

The departure point for the collaboration between Patrick Jasek and Herwig Turk was the primordial elements of prehistoric planet Earth. In the experiment, they attempted to physically and figuratively reproduce the ancient dynamics of primordial landscapes, which led to the formation of oil as they slowly sank below the Earth's surface. A video work documents these fluid dynamics as part of the experiment.

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Hello my name is Peter Lumo

Herwig Steiner

In *Hello my name is Peter Lumo*, Herwig Steiner worked on printing techniques with crude oil in combination with bitumen. He used the medium of screen printing to explore the technical potentials of this hard-to-handle substance. The artist approached the topic on a linguistic level, taking humorous angles to address the omnipresence and simultaneous invisibility of oil. By translating this concept to the format of a T-shirt printed with ink containing crude oil, Steiner transfers the work into the public sphere, where the ubiquitous substance becomes readily visible, albeit in an encrypted manner.

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PUTIN – TO THE NEW LIGHT – WAR

Andrei Molodkin

In the workshop, Andrei Molodkin continued his ongoing work about Vladimir Putin and the war in Ukraine, which has been raging on since February 24, 2022. In the work entitled *Putin Filled with Ukrainian Blood*, he literally floods a portrait of Putin with the blood of Ukrainians. It was on display as an installation and—given its iconographic aesthetics—altarpiece at once in a church in central London in May 2022. As Molodkin commented in an interview: “In every barrel of Russian oil, there is Ukrainian blood. Money for gas and oil is continuing this war.”³

In Vienna, Molodkin worked with mixtures of (animal) blood and crude oil in his experiments with silkscreen printing. The artist also further developed his augmented reality work, a part of the *Putin Filled with Ukrainian Blood* project: he visited the Russian embassy in Vienna's third district, produced video footage of the embassy building, and drastically combined it with the blood-streaked image of Putin.

1 Hans Peter Hahn and Jens Soentgen, “Acknowledging Substances: Looking at the Hidden Side of the Material World,” in *Philosophy and Technology* 24, no. 1 (2011), 19–33.

2 Mari Fraga, “Fossil Time: oil, art and the body in the cosmopolitics of the Anthropocene,” *Revista Brasileira de Estudos da Presença / Brazilian Journal on Presence Studies* 8, no. 1 (Jan./Mar. 2018), 31–62.

3 James Cox, “Artist attempting to display portrait of Putin filled with Ukrainian blood in Moscow,” *The Irish Times*, May 8, 2022, <https://www.breakingnews.ie/ukraine/artist-attempting-to-display-portrait-of-putin-filled-with-ukrainian-blood-in-moscow-1300751.html>.