

A Crude Encounter

Learning with Art to Say Farewell to the Petro-Energy Regime

Raphaëlle Occhietti

— “We thought it was oil!”

— “but it was blood!”

Nnimmo Bassey¹

“The alarms are loud and clear: we must reclaim the means of our reproduction—our homes, the land we live on, the energies supporting our mutual dependency, and the capacity to decide the kinds of human beings we want to be.”

Rosemary Hennessy²

“Everybody knows, everybody knows

That’s how it goes

Everybody knows”

Leonard Cohen³

Crude Oil as Society’s the Artist’s Blood

The sudden roaring sound of a starting engine breaks the business-as-usual convenient silence surrounding crude oil, both metaphorically and physically, and draws visitors into Ernst Logar’s *Reflecting Oil* exhibition.⁴ The familiar noise of the air-fuel mixture of an engine’s ignition accompanies most people’s everyday routine exponentially since the start of the motorized transport through combustion motors. But this recording is more than a soundscape designed for visitors to conjure up images of the overwhelming transport reality that is still mostly sustained today through gasoline, one of the many products obtained by the refining of crude oil and undoubtedly one of the main symbols of “petromodernity.”⁵ Logar’s artwork goes a step further. As visitors seek and find the source of the recording, they are suddenly hit visually by what is occurring in a glass cube strategically positioned on a steel pedestal: in the artwork titled *Good Vibes*, as the soundtrack of a starting and running Harley Davidson motorcycle is transferred from the MP3 device to a speaker lying face up at the bottom of the cube, the speaker’s diaphragm vibrates energetically, causing brownish liquid to splash dirtily onto the glass walls of the

exhibition
Angewandte Interdisciplinary Lab
artworks
crude oil
blood
experiments
petromodernity
sensorial encounter
aesthetic experience
fossil-fueled capitalism
energy regime
oil relationships

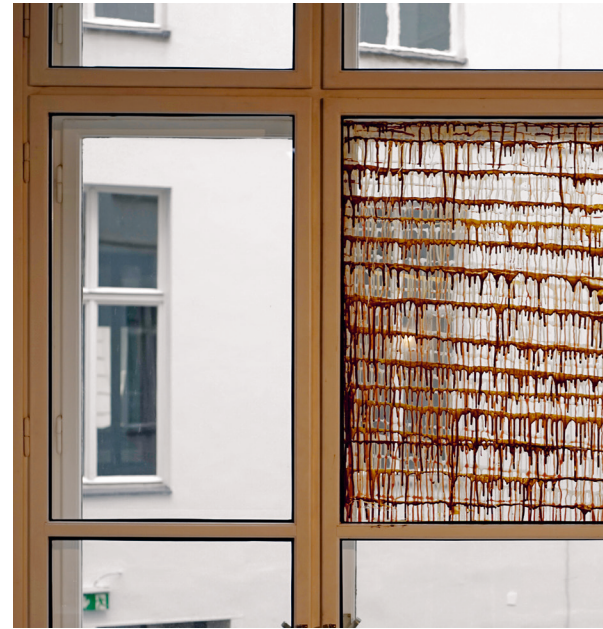
Ernst Logar*
Good Vibes, 2024
Loudspeaker, crude oil, amplifier,
mp3 player, steel tub on steel
pedestal, glass cover

*All artworks in this article
are by Ernst Logar,
exceptions are cited





Reflecting Oil—Petroculture in Transformation
exhibition view, Angewandte Interdisciplinary Lab (AIL), 2024



Oil and Blood, 2024
Glass sheet, crude oil, blood

cube. The combination of the paradigmatic sound of a motor ignition with the splattering of crude oil that comes to resemble splashes of blood is telling. The sculpture ingeniously uses a familiar sound to reverse and complicate its seemingly innocent or, at least, trivial meaning. Here, the banal mechanical technology that powers our everyday travels has the visual effect of a massacre. With *Good Vibes*, Logar points to the impossibility of ignoring how industrial exploitation of crude oil is inevitably riddled with lethal consequences.

Crude oil as the “blood” of society is one of the most recurrent metaphors used to convey the critical importance of this substance for almost every aspect of modern life as we know it, both at a physical and a symbolic level.⁶ In the *Reflecting Oil* exhibition, Ernst Logar takes this metaphor quite literally. Crude oil resembles or can even be briefly mistaken for blood, like in *Good Vibes*. But in other artworks the artist stages an actual encounter between blood and crude oil, thus moving towards the concretization of the metaphor. In *Oil and Blood*, a glass sheet displaying horizontal stripes of an almost regular pattern of slightly overlapping dark red and light orange-brown lines is installed in lieu of one of the exhibition space’s windows. The same gruesome aesthetic as *Good Vibes* is here transferred into a coagulated form, with crude oil and blood trickling down at a regular pace. It is a clever artwork that embeds the question of society’s overreliance on oil into the very fabric of the architectural setting, forcing visitors to look at “life” outside the window through crude oil and blood. And as the exhibition makes clear, it becomes pressing that one should use this combined oil and blood filter to look at pretty much every aspect of life, as unpleasant as the exercise may be. As crude oil and blood drip with a similar viscosity, what is there to be learned by their overlapping materialities?

One shouldn’t mistake these sensorially striking artworks for a simple gory equation between oil and death/violence/bad. Both sculptures must be considered as part of an exploration of crude oil as a substance in itself, with for once no direct application other than getting to know it for its own sake and in relation to sensorial human experiences. In fact, one of the major feelings that emerges through *Reflecting Oil* is that data on pollution, extraction sites, and corruption surrounding crude oil can empower some of us but will fail to mobilize at a large scale, whereas a sensorial encounter with oil could at least spark a profound inquiry,⁷ almost a schism: where does one stand in regard to this peculiar substance?



Abstract inhaling, 2024
Clay objects, different crude oils

Of course, we are not all equally affected by the risks posed by direct contact with crude oil. As Nigerian scholar Philip Aghoghovwia deplores, research about oil often “[...] elides a fundamental aspect of the oil encounter: the lived experience of local inhabitants at the sites of extraction,” as “[m]uch of the existing scholarship operates at a level of social scientific abstraction.”⁸ Communities that live close to extraction sites and workers in charge of the most heavy duties are routinely exposed to oil in unfair conditions that threaten their health and life, not to mention the devastation of the surrounding ecosystems and habitats. But considering that many people don’t live in the vicinity of extractive facilities, can a tangible encounter still take place? *Reflecting Oil* as an interdisciplinary exhibition precisely manages to bridge the irreducible unknowingness of the reality of crude oil extraction common to many of the visitors and citizens, with a controlled yet entirely creative encounter with oil anchored in the emulation of its physical presence.

In one of the many experiments that Logar and his colleagues conducted with the the University of Leoben team is the Fingerprints Experiments, where participants touched different crude oil samples and imprinted on paper their own fingers drenched with the otherwise forbidden toxic substance. Through various other scientific or artistic sensorial encounters with crude oil—with its colors, its textures, and its smells—the artist brings forth a potent message: to resist a total ignorance or indifference towards crude oil as well as to rebut an outright apology of industrial societies’ uses of oil, one avenue is to become acquainted with the materiality of the substance. In fact, crude oil is quite fascinating, not at all monotonous in appearance nor homogeneous in composition.⁹ In the effective *Abstract Inhaling* display, different crude oil samples are showcased in terracotta vessels that one can actually smell. Samples come from diverse places such as Austria, Scotland, Norway, Kazakhstan, or Egypt, and each of them has indeed a very distinctive aroma, pungent or almost pleasant, rich or invasive. At first sight the terracotta devices through which visitors encounter the samples’ scents look like melting bottles, but they are, as a matter of fact, a translation in clay of the shapes of plastic bags used for abusing inhalants (i.e. “huffing paint”). Hence, the artist tricks the visitors through their olfactory curiosity into a posture of addiction. The artist thus forces the visitors to acknowledge their dependence on oil and petroleum-based products by forcing an encounter into the very intimacy of their pulmonary cells, making the compounds of crude oils travel through the visitor’s bloodstream.



Ernst Logar's artworks create close proximity with oil, demanding a sensuous and consciously intimate encounter with oil's material qualities, highlighted by the rarity of such encounters even with other materials, let alone this potentially toxic substance. But this embrace seems to arrive precisely at a moment when we are saying our goodbyes to the petroleum industry. Most like what Amanda Boetzkes and Andrew Pendakis¹⁰ wrote about oil's hyper visibility coming right at the time of its foreseen shortage, this renewed sensorial encounter with oil seems, too, to come about exactly at the moment of its predicted demise. However, as the artist makes apparent, even if there is a transition towards sustainability we will still have to deal with the far-reaching consequences of fossil-fueled capitalism in the future. In *Refined* for example, round flasks attached to a glass column typically used in labs for distillation are filled with different liquids whose somber colors or turbid aspect do not bode well. Distillation is an important step in crude oil refining, hence the title of the artwork. Here, however, the artist deviates the purpose of the industrial process and instead explores the mixing of different fluids with oil. We find actual blood again, but also oil-contaminated water and even tailing pond liquid, the latter being a particularly meaningful addition to the artwork considering that "[t]ar sands mining operations have generated over 250 billion gallons of toxic tailings—a poisonous brew of water, sand, silt, heavy metals and other petrochemical waste products—which they store in toxic lakes that cover an area greater than Manhattan and Boston combined."¹¹ Urged to view these mixtures of liquids up close, visitors get a sense of a profound and totalizing heaviness. Lying at the bottom of these tiny and crystalline flasks like poisonous potions, and somehow disturbingly protected by the purity of the laboratory equipment compartmentalization, are these terrifying liquid mixtures that hint at the pervasive consequences of the oil industry.

Oil as the *blood of society*; oil as *the blood of the Earth*.¹² And is oil our blood too? Discreetly positioned on a lateral wall, right beneath the striking oil and blood window and thus easily missed, is an elegant glass vial with its cap. Titled *Human Blood—Crude Oil Distillate*, it is the only artwork in the exhibition actually featuring the artist's own blood. The composition is unassuming yet thoroughly effective in its poetic gesture. At the bottom of the vial lies a transparent liquid, while at the surface floats a slightly more distinguishable yellow-white colored liquid. Even though the artist mixed approximately 150 ml of his own blood with 300 ml of crude oil, and then made one single distillation, the result is two visibly distinct distillates that are immiscible. For visitors, it is not that easy to know which of the two liquids is the crude oil distillate or the blood distillate. Yet their transparent quality creates a seeming fusion. One might be surprised to learn that the yellower liquid is the oil distillate, as one can feel its life potential almost throbbing in comparison to the immaculate, inert transparency of the blood distillate. Particularly interesting is the artist's choice to thwart the critique of oil based on crude oil's sole aspect and color by underscoring the many guises in which oil can present itself. That the artist's blood comes in closer contact with petroleum derivatives' physical properties, and thus with crude oil's identity, is both slightly upsetting and strangely moving. It acts like an offering, materializing the now irreducible bond between petroleum substances and human blood. With this simple vial and its peculiar content, the artist signals his support to those who are forced to spill their blood so that others may continue to live in oil's bounty. As such, the artist asks anyone profiting from the oil economy to risk their own blood as well, for the sake of, well, everything that truly matters.



Human blood—crude oil distillate, 2024
Laboratory bottle, crude oil–blood distillate

Refined, 2024

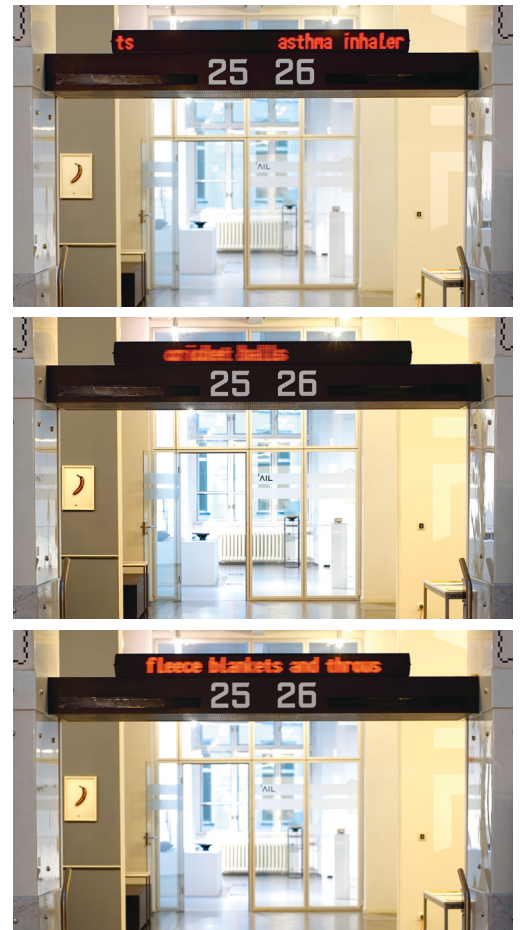
Glass column, round-bottomed flasks,
concrete, steel, crude oil, various types of fluids
(blood, honey, oil contaminated water, tar sands
tailings pond water, flood water sample)

Moving Deeper into “Crude Capitalism”¹³ Through Recursive Spectatorship

The exciting aspect of Ernst Logar’s exhibition is that the more visitors interact with the artworks, with the accounts of the experiments, and with the 2022 *Reflecting Oil Colloquium* outputs, the more the interrelation between the body of works becomes striking, and the more the nesting of crude oil in every corner of our minds and bodies becomes apparent. In a way, the exhibition invites spectators to adopt a form of scientific standpoint that emulates the protocols of the scientific experiments that have formed the core of the artistic research project *Reflecting Oil* as a whole. One must lay foundations for the procedures, test different combinations of variables, observe the results, and...start over. So, let’s start again. Before the visitor is aware that the exhibition has even begun, an LED panel subliminally displays what at first sight appears to be random words. Placed in the liminal zone between the former cashier hall of the Austrian Postal Savings Bank (the Postspar-kasse designed by Viennese Secession architect Otto Wagner) and the actual entrance of the exhibition space in the Angewandte Interdisciplinary Lab, the LED panel displaying red-lettered words scrolling unhurriedly from right to left acts like the pediment of a temple. The words are a list of 1200 objects used in everyday life that are made of petroleum-derived materials. There is everything, from dialysis machines to hair curlers, and binder clips to face masks. The LED display marks the place where visitors will enter a form of initiation to crude oil, and where they must commit to the content of the exhibition. The quantity of the objects listed also means that it is mostly improbable for any visitor to be able to witness each and every word appear on the LED display, thus alerting the spectator to the immensity of what crude oil is and means, and to the fact that one can never completely fathom its extent, though it is still worth a try.

Another easily overlooked artwork placed at the onset of the exhibition is an inkjet print of a banana covered with oil. The effect is stunning. The profanation of the substance and essence of the banana by the brownish-reddish-darkish glaze is oddly mesmerizing as the sleek surface becomes enticing in a twisted alluring way. The unnatural overlapping of materialities seems to convey the idea that petroleum is everywhere, and we might as well just pour it on our food. The banana is one of the materialities confronted and coalesced with crude oil during the exhibition, like wood in the tree slice covered in bitumen, or honey that we find contaminated with crude oil in a hula hoop hung on the wall.¹⁴ But first the artist gives another word of caution. In the photograph *The Beauty of Oil*, green tree branches are reflected in a puddle. The water looks as though contaminated by gasoline, as shown by the characteristic iridescent halo, but in fact it is the artist himself who poured crude oil in order to replicate the phenomenon of daily small-scale pollution. As visitors are just about to enter the main space of the exhibition, it looks like this image is there to warn of the potentially hypnotic presence of oil. Oil can be sexy; oil can be desirable; we love oil because we cover ourselves with it. *The Beauty of Oil* is also a perfect compendium of what the *Reflecting Oil* exhibition is about: seeing everything reflected through the prism of oil because our world is built on the largely unacknowledged filter of petroleum.

When visitors enter the main exhibition space, they immediately face a stand where the experiment’s paraphernalia and visual outputs have been gathered, which gives a fascinating account of the many material explorations the Vienna team has developed in collaboration with the University of Leoben team. Furthermore, this stand of experiments presents a legend of sorts enabling visitors to decipher the rest of the exhibition and appreciate the amount of work involved in materializing the art objects directly involving substances as crude oil, bitumen, or naphtha. Visitors can thus move like butterflies between the experiments table and the artworks, and with each visit complement and nourish their understanding of the body of works. It is especially relevant that this stand should be placed in the middle because in a sense it represents the heart of the very original and brave process that has brought



Made Of, 2024
Dataset of consumer goods based on oil,
scrolling text display

Untitled, 2024
Inkjet print

Pages 130–131
The Beauty of Oil, 2024
Inkjet print









Reflecting Oil—Petroculture in Transformation exhibition view, AIL, 2024

science in close dialogue with art. In fact, one of the most revolutionary aspects of this exhibition might well be the amount of work invested by the petroleum engineers, the artists, the activists, and the humanities scholars to get to know and understand each other. Crude oil and the petro-energy regime have been created and enacted by human groups; as such, they are our creatures. The artist encapsulates this appropriative approach to fossil fuels in the *Oil Formation* composition featured in a smaller adjacent room. Comprising a tray displaying glasses for different types of beverages—cocktails and beer—the artwork departs from reality in the composition of the drinks. In fact, real plankton and algae have been placed inside the beverage glasses, in habitats meant to recall the environments where fossil fuels were generated after millions and millions of years. Visitors are given the opportunity to contemplate the origin of this story, with a zest of self-mockery or even outright sarcasm in the mundane presentation of past ecosystems as cocktails. It is precisely this sort of humor that can help deflate the tension between opposing views and relationships to oil. The artwork is ideally placed in dialogue with two of the visual outputs of the 2022 *Reflecting Oil Colloquium*, one video and one photograph, that both present stunning scientific imagery. Both *Primordial Soup: Dance of Exchange Systems and Variables*—the video created by reservoir engineer Patrick Jasek and artist Herwig Turk, and the text and photographs¹⁵ of *Oil Dialogue* between drilling engineer Karez Abdulhameed and artist Mari Fraga, feature scientific procedures magnifying the reactions of crude oil to other materialities like salt or iodine. These images are useful for the visitor because, with the experiments table in the middle of the main room, they bridge the gap of scientific illiteracy surrounding oil. The documents are also proof that the *Reflecting Oil* project provided a safe space for scientists and especially engineers to find a renewed sense of marvel about oil that deviates from its mere industrial exploitation.

Oil Formation, 2024
Glasses, stainless steel tray,
water, plankton, algae,
plants, clay





Reflecting Oil—Petroculture in Transformation exhibition view, AIL, 2024

The last element completing this room departs from the strictly speaking scientific side of the other accompanying contributions housed within. Yet this last artwork of the adjacent room presents a form of circularity in the process too, this time in Logar's journey with oil. In *Smashed*, pieces of a broken mirror lie pathetically on the ground. Instead of the traditionally used materials of glass and aluminum or silver, these pieces are actually made of bitumen—not simply covered with, but made of bitumen. The mirror theme is important of course in relation to the main title of the exhibition, but also has deeper roots. As part of an earlier project titled *Invisible Oil*—developed in and about the city of Aberdeen in Scotland to explore its links to the oil industry—Logar ended the 2008 exhibition of the same name held at the Peacock Visual Arts Centre in Aberdeen with one last artwork that consisted of a plexiglass box filled with oil. The artwork's title, *Reflecting Oil*, would eventually come to designate Logar's new research project developed from 2019 and culminating with the 2024 exhibition of the same name. In the 2008 artwork, despite the illusion of stillness of the mirroring surface, oil was continuously pumped and circulated through the box. It thus highlighted the importance of movement for the petroleum industry, as explained by specialist in film and visual culture Alejandra Rodríguez-Remedi:

"Millions of barrels are pumped through pipelines every day to make our lifestyles possible. Logar challenges us to discover how we see ourselves in a mirror which brings together the political, economic and social implications of this movement. [...] The notion of movement conveyed by 'Reflecting Oil' gives a distinctive dynamism to the entire exhibition, in the sense that all the processes Logar unveils depend upon it."¹⁶

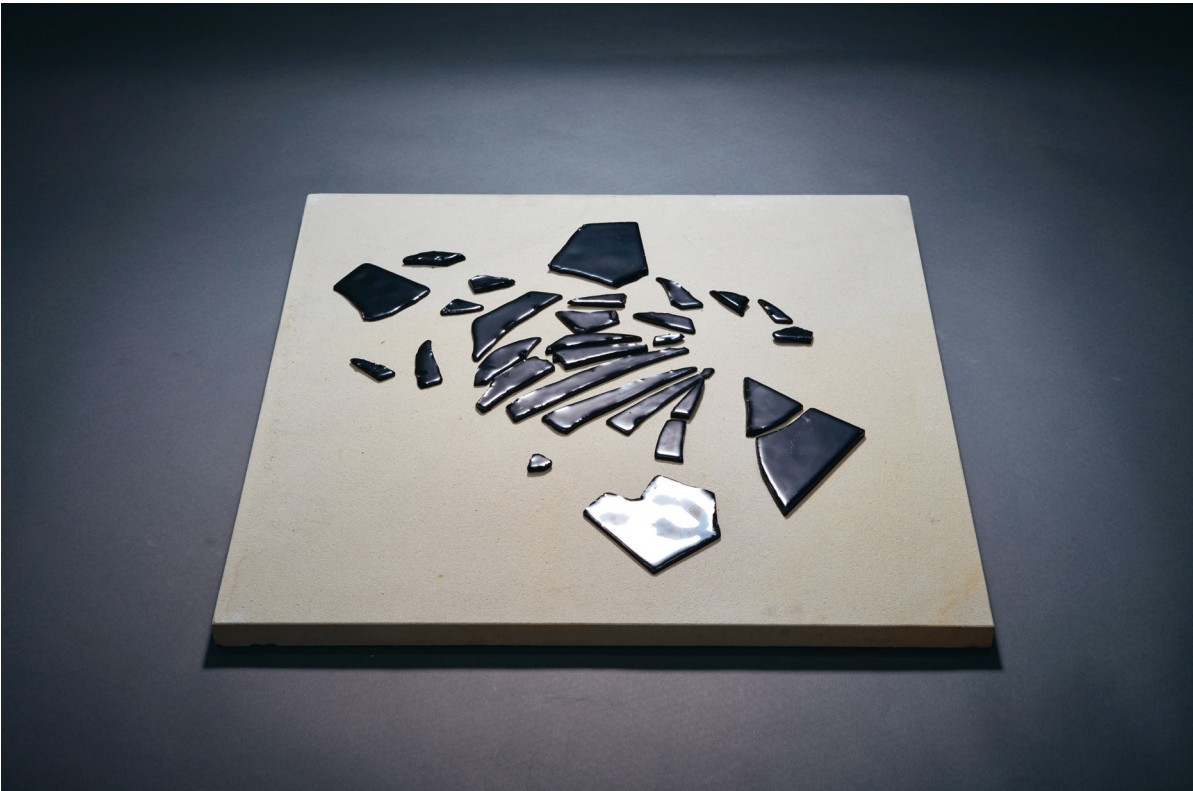
With the 2008 artwork, Logar magnificently complicated oil's reflective properties. Avoiding any grand gesture that would only distance oil into a sublime landscape, the artist displayed the oil for visitors to probe the depths of their own entanglement with it. In this new 2024 exhibition, the artist goes even a step further, literally

Pages 136–137
Reflecting Oil—Petroculture in Transformation
exhibition view, AIL, 2024

Left
Enjoy, 2024
QR code, crude oil on paper,
mp4 video (42 sec)

Center above
Oil Soaked—Dubai, 2021
Experimental photography,
crude oil on glass filter

Center below
Untitled, 2024
Wood, bitumen, steel tub



Smashed, 2024
Bitumen, sandstone

shattering the idea that we will know oil through a simple mirroring effect. The term “reflection” acquires a deeper, wider meaning that engages much more than just the visual sense. And so, with *Smashed*, the once-flowing oil is now congealed, like in millions of lives, commodities, infrastructures,¹⁷ and plastics.¹⁸ But strangely enough, presenting oil in this chemical state allows the artist to break the spell and finally crush the omnipotent substance.

Petromodernity, Which Way Out?

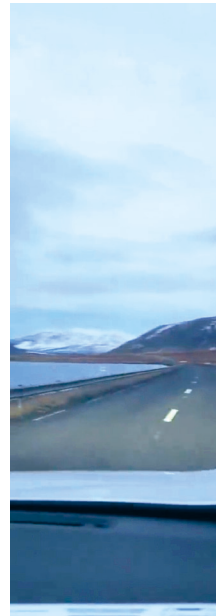
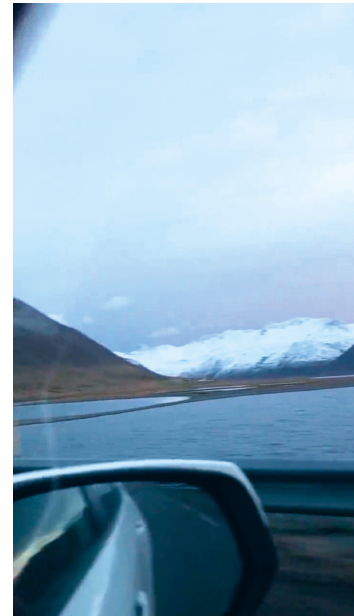
The truth however is that we can't get rid of oil that easily, not as long as the very essence of the principles orienting policies, the economy, politics, and everyday life continue to spring from oil's very own energetic and plastic properties.¹⁹ And since there is no easy solution to this predicament, tangled as we are into this “Oleoviathan,”²⁰ then one way to start a profound reprogramming of dominant societies' use and abuse of oil could in fact be to come into closer contact with this omnipresent and omnipotent substance. This is why Logar's *Reflecting Oil* exhibition is a real *tour de force* because it builds an array of aesthetic experiences that gradually come to signify the petroleum phenomena as a whole, while simultaneously placing the spectator in an active role where each encounter with an artwork is reinforced and expanded by the next. The exhibition first succeeds in disclosing the extent of oil's hold on cultural frameworks, which in itself is no mean feat. For example, in an evocative inkjet print titled *Six oils—Beryl oil, Draugen oil, GA-086 oil, OMV-Gas condensate, RAG oil, Tordis Vigdis oil*, the artist has arranged the different color palette of six crude oils from around the world in an imitation of a military camouflage pattern. The print highlights how the petro-system connects geographies and military complexes, often under abstract modalities. But the artist grounds the oil economy in precise territories too. In a photograph called *Oil Soaked—Dubai*, a cityscape of the star city of the United Arab Emirates is textured and almost parasitized by bacteria- and cell-shaped forms as though seen through a microscope. The analog photograph is not photoshopped, and the artist







Melting away—Bitumen Porsche, 2024
Bitumen on anodized aluminum plate



Enjoy, 2024
Videostills, *Iceland, 2024*, Margit Tesar
QR-code, Crude oil on paper, mp4 video (42 sec)

has used crude oil as an actual lens through which to look at this urban symbol of oil civilization.²¹ Hanging on the wall in perfect symmetry on the other side of the exhibition space is another photograph, titled *Northfield—Aberdeen*, showing what at first glance looks like a harmless sculpture made of found objects on the beach, but which turns out to be an amalgam of plastic refuse that compose the distinctive silhouette of the oil rigs used for offshore drilling constellating the North Sea around Aberdeen. In both photographs, the very substance extracted helps materialize the community space built around oil extraction. Instead of distancing visitors from these places, these photographs highlight that “[...] we can and should ask how community is affectively and culturally produced in sites of oil production. Doing so might also foreground the social reproductive activities of extractive capitalist accumulation.”²² Though these two locations may appear distant for the public, the artist makes sure that exhibition visitors will still be involved in crude oil geographies. In *Enjoy*, visitors are made to scan a large-scale hand-made QR code painted with crude oil that leads to an online video displaying a tourist’s recording of Iceland’s landscapes through a moving car window. Tourism, global mobility, and the imminent witnessing of the consequences of global warming due in part to CO2 emissions, shown in the receding glaciers, are bound together with the energy consumption of our electronic devices. By obliging visitors to participate via activating the QR code, the artwork highlights how each of us reifies daily the fuel-based economy, albeit unknowingly or unconsciously.

“Resources are embedded in habits of mind as much as in earthly habitats,”²³ and it is this important constant dialogue, from extraction to consumption, lifestyles, and expectations that the exhibition foregrounds and interweaves. And so, how are we to radically transform these dominant mind frames concerning resources and crude oil in particular? In *Melting Away—Bitumen Porsche*, Logar chooses an interesting path of simultaneous creation and destruction. Instead of a real car trapped in asphalt like in another European fellow artist’s practice,²⁴ Logar has first recreated a toy car in bitumen and subsequently melted it. The process is not so much a profanation of the substance as a playful experimentation with bitumen’s plastic properties when heated. By modeling a car out of the substance on which it runs—this convenient, cheap, toxic road surfacing that quite literally greases the wheels of modern mobility—the sculpture reveals the concatenation



Burning Bedrock Experiment, 2024
Cardboard, plastic, crude oil, steel tub on steel pedestal, glass cover

between consumer choices and worldwide pollution and global warming. And the diminutive luxury car rightly points at the necessary transformation in the use and distribution of resources. The artist is thus preemptively “melting away” the absurd standards of wealth. In another artwork titled *Burning Bedrock Experiment*, the artist ignites another set of modern life standards and the “way of life” built on oil consumption.²⁵ This time, a suburban neighborhood—a miniaturized emblem of modern life *par excellence*—is challenged through oil’s flammable properties. The neighborhood architectural model is set in a glass box with two lateral holes, and the cardboard houses lie on a pool of crude oil. The artist has applied his knowledge of flash point parameters of samples of oil that he previously tested with the University of Leoben team, by heating the oil base which catches fire at a certain temperature. The result is a truly grim scene, as the houses are disfigured, and the small-scale plastic fences have melted and now resemble deformed skeletons. The title is meaningful, “bedrock” being a solid geologic formation, and seems to beg the question of what the bedrock of industrial-modern-capitalist civilizations is. Are we really sure we want crude oil, this hazardous substance, to keep being the foundation of social relations? By setting fire to the pool of oil onto which the suburban architecture lies, the artist burns down the precarious dreams embedded in petromodernity. The glass box creates a contained atmosphere where before our very eyes unfold the results of a “Western”-made, human-accelerated global warming and the consequences on Earth’s future climate. It is frightful.

Oil fuels a socio-economic system. It allows for social reproduction and social differentiation (who gets to travel, buy new clothes, go to university, procreate, work in finance or art history or politics or accounting, etc.). The entangled presence of crude oil is wired through every cell of our bodies, every fiber of our clothing, every wall of our homes, and every dream of our future lives. This all-encompassing yet often unacknowledged stranglehold is ripped open in *The Revised Game of Life*, a variant of a famous board game first created in the United States in the nineteenth century.²⁶ A jest about the normative progression that measures a “successful” life, the revised board game smartly incorporates counterpart consequences, in terms of oil extraction or pollution, for every daily activity. When these activities reach an energetic tipping point, a pump serves to inject crude oil directly on the gameboard itself (protected by a sheet of glass), de facto covering in oil the once oblivious







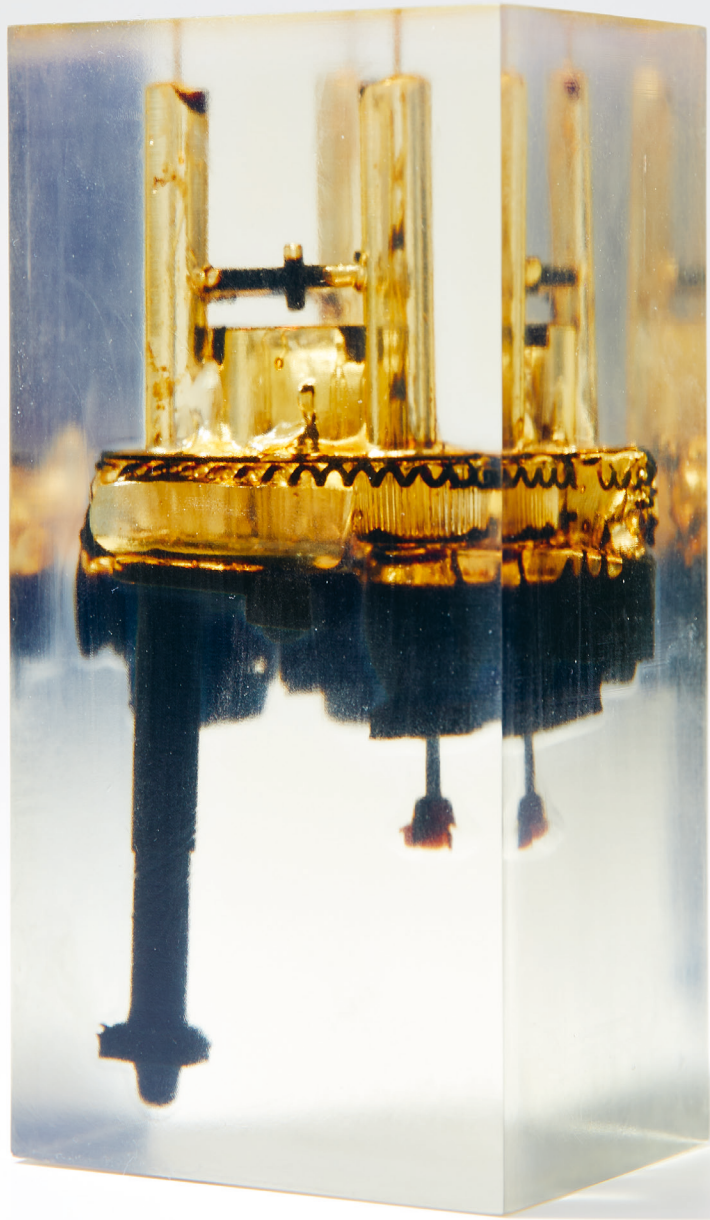
Ernst Logar and the *Reflecting Oil* team, *The Revised Game of Life*, 2024

Boardgame, steel pan, glass sheets, syringe pump, crude oil

Parasitic Pattern, 2024

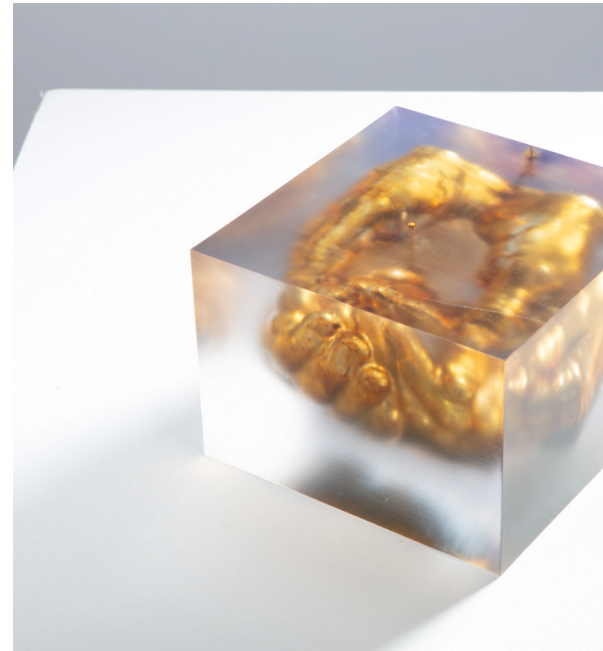
Silkscreen print on cotton, dummy

and joyful life routes. The artwork is a truly brilliant way of interweaving individual and subjective experiences of modern life with the broader meaning of living in a society in which every step of life, from birth to death, is wrapped in oil. Presiding over the board game is *Parasitic Pattern*, a mannequin dressed in a sweatshirt and sweatpants displaying a crude oil printed pattern echoing the *Oil and Blood* window. In fact, the mannequin is facing this precise window at some distance, and the symmetrical placement between the two artworks reinforces the uncanny presence of the faceless mannequin with its clothes ominously “bleeding” oil. Even the most alluring perspectives of a sustainable transition seem improbable in view of the Western, energy-intensive way of life that *The Revised Game of Life* so judiciously displays. Alluding to this desired pathway out of oil is *Solarity*, an LED display of photovoltaic cells showing the word “solarity,” more or less visible depending on the intensity of solar energy outside the exhibition space. A nod to the fragile promises of a sustainable transition out of the oil economy, the artwork sends but a flimsy image that questions what the alternative energy technology can actually achieve, echoing Andreas Malm’s skeptical question on what the capitalist system is prepared or not to lose: “Can capital survive if fettered to the places and hours where the sun happens to shine and the wind to blow?”²⁷ Furthermore, inconspicuously placing the feeble word “solarity” in the *Reflecting Oil* exhibition hints at the dependence not yet overcome of renewable energies on fossil fuels. Capitalism is characterized by the interlocking of energy regimes, and “[a]fter two centuries of ‘energy transitions’, humanity has never burned so much oil and gas, so much coal and so much wood.”²⁸ After all we have learned in the exhibition, one gets the clear picture that getting rid of oil won’t happen magically. And do we really want to transition from one regime to the other without fully acknowledging the extent of some countries’ and their industrial-financial groups’ culpability in the climate crisis? As scholar Carolina G. Gonzalez sums up in her book chapter titled “The Sacrifice Zones of



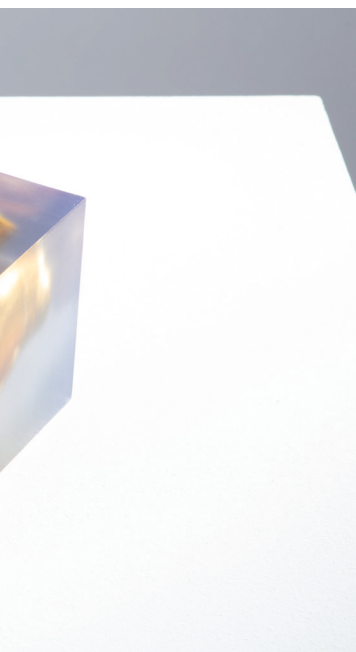


Holding Forming Structure, 2024
Acrylic resin, crude oil



Carbon Capitalism”:²⁹ “The North’s persistent evasion of its common but differentiated responsibility for loss and damage is breathtaking, but not surprising.”³⁰ The specter of nuclear power, which seems as though it will inevitably accompany solar energy, looms on the horizon, as reminded by scholar Amanda Boetzkes to the audience of the panel discussion “Oil, Petroculture and the Transition out of the Oil Age.”³¹ But as is heavily apparent in the *Reflecting Oil* exhibition, we don’t seem to be out of the petro-system just yet. So, how are we to frame the transition?

In a series of stunning acrylic resin sculptures, Ernst Logar ingeniously forges a compact rendition of petro-societies’ ethos. Molded into oil rig shapes, these sculptures present what the artist calls a “negative space” that is filled with crude oil. In *Crude Oil Sculptures* #1, #3, #4, #5, the overall shape of offshore platforms for the drilling of oil is easily recognizable. But upon closer inspection, these oil rigs are composed of discarded pieces of trivial small objects: a blister pack voided of its pill, a plastic leg from a dismembered toy, plastic fusible beads, barrels of ballpoint pens, etc. Like in *Melting Away–Bitumen Porsche*, the rendition of a diminutive infrastructure is a way of grasping and appropriating oneself of the material reality of the drilling industry that is otherwise elusive precisely because it is gigantic. The minutia with which the shape of offshore oil rigs has been assembled by the artist is impressive. The lower part of the sculptures, corresponding to the drill below the sea level, is replete with oil. Designed around a void, the sculptures, when shaken, allow for oil to travel through all the pieces composing the overall shape of the oil rigs. Thus, both the submerged and unsubmerged parts of the sculptures communicate through oil. The higher parts of the sculptures, designed to recall the hoisting system and cranes, retain some traces of the dark substance, but still present a stark contrast with the lower parts drenched in oil. These sculptures are brilliant because of the compact manner in which, through oil and petroleum products, they render visible the autofueling cycle upon which capitalism is predicated. The way the artist has devised these miniature oil rigs around an empty space filled by crude oil is highly penetrating and seems to raise the question of what kind of space—physical and mental—is left by the petro-energy regime. If we go back to the exhibition theme, is the question of the mental reflection in a global socio-economic system dominated by oil necessarily reduced to this “negative



Formed Structure of Feelings, 2024
Acrylic resin, crude oil

space,” a mental space that we just keep filling with oil without being able to extricate ourselves from it? What would dwelling in this “negative” space mean?

If the oil rig-shaped sculptures tapped into the essence of oil’s iterative and expansionary cycle of extraction, consumption, amplification, and again extraction, two other acrylic resin sculptures using the same conformation of a “negative space” filled with crude oil present a valuable alternative experience of petroleum. In *Formed Structure of Feelings* and *Holding Forming Structure*, the sculptures are made from casts of the artist’s head and the artist’s hands respectively. That the artist fills his head with oil is yet another testimony, like the mixing of crude oil with his own blood, of his intense involvement with the substance over the last years. Close in visual aspect to a mortuary mask, the sculpture nonetheless conveys a lively and serene presence as the artist’s features appear through the warm, coppery, and golden colors of the liquid. The artist’s audaciousness in publicly acknowledging his own entanglement with the substance is inspiring. Presiding over the whole exhibition which highlights our own entanglements with petroleum, *Formed Structure of Feelings* is a mask that each of the visitors can feel they are wearing. Carrying on this responsibility of situating petroleum closer to each and every one of us is *Holding Forming Structure*. In this sculpture, ideally placed to be seen while entering as well as exiting the exhibition space, the artist’s hands are placed so as to be holding a certain amount of crude oil in the palms. It is a provocative gesture, one that could easily be mistaken for an uncritical tribute to the power of this fossil substance. However, this sculpture is first and foremost a potent offering. The hands thus placed and thus filled condense the meaning of the extraordinary gift that the artist and each of the collaborators and participants of the *Reflecting Oil* project as a whole are offering to the spectators. By staging such a direct encounter with oil, Logar’s artworks demand an unconditional willingness from visitors not only to engage with the substance instead of conveniently ignoring it, but also to admit their complicity in a fuel-based economy, thus sparking a serious reflection on how to step out into a truly different energy and cultural regime. Ultimately, and despite oil’s many blessings, we will have to operate a physical separation from oil’s multi-scalar materialities (consumer goods, fuels, chemical compounds, etc.) as well as an emotional detachment from the kind of life it made



possible, however difficult it may be to relinquish. But as one needs solvents made of transformed crude oil (or other fossil fuels) in order to clean crude oil from the equipment used during scientific experiments, so one may paradoxically need more oil to end its reign over society, and it is meaningful to think that the way out of oil is maybe not simply away from it, but *closer* to it, at least temporarily.

One last sculpture ensemble by Ernst Logar, probably the most moving artwork of the show despite its unostentatious aspect, presents an honest picture of where to start this journey. In *The Space Between Us*, white and greenish shapes resembling bleached coral or even miniature glaciers seem to float on a sea of brownish-black crude oil. Set into a glass cube, the strange landscape provides a welcome distancing from the intense proximity displayed by some of the other artworks. More importantly, by zooming out, we get to see oil as part of an ecosystem. Are these shapes, all made of white plaster, except one made of pieces of shredded money, a reference to the coral reefs currently dying because of the rising temperature of the oceans? Or are they melting glaciers surrounded by a massive oil spill? Many interpretations are possible, and each is free to imagine what landscape they see. Over time, the porous materials of the white shapes absorb part of the surrounding crude oil by capillarity. The effect is quite dramatic, and by the end of the exhibition only the green shape made of shredded money has kept its original colors, while all the other white shapes have soaked in the oil and are now brown. The fact that only the money shape remains practically unaltered is quite telling. The nature of these shapes adds a further layer of significance, perhaps a more hopeful one: each of these forms is the molded space between a pair of shaking hands. The artist could easily have just used his own clenched fist to mold these shapes. But the fact that this artwork required different people, from different backgrounds, and with different relationships to oil, to come into close contact to create these shapes resembling natural entities is quite thought-provoking. A poignant metaphor for the impressive and inspiring dialogue held throughout the whole *Reflecting Oil* project between art and science, artists, and scientists, the “space between us” is this contaminated landscape from where to summon a common willingness to tear down the dominant energy consumption regime and the symbolic value system it helps sustain. It reflects how crude oil is composed of a myriad of identities to interact with, to understand, to challenge, and to bid farewell to; nay, to *fight* to be able to *collectively* and *ubiquitously* bid it farewell.

- 1 “We Thought It Was Oil, But It Was Blood” is the title of both a collection of poems published by Nigerian writer and activist Nnimmo Bassey in 2002, and of an online essay. See Nnimmo Bassey, “We Thought It Was Oil, But It Was Blood. Resistance to the Military-Corporate Wedlock in Nigeria and Beyond” (2016). In an interview with journalist Vanessa Baird about environmental activism, Bassey explains: “[...] I found that in the struggle it’s essential to take some aspects of performance. [...] and so some of my poems are not just for people to read quietly, but for people to be part of the reading so that there are calls and responses; so, for example, when I say ‘we thought it was oil’ the audience responds ‘but it was blood’.” Vanessa Baird, and Nnimmo Bassey, “I’ve not got a nice one for fracking...” *New Internationalist*, n° 448 (2011), 39–40. I originally saw an excerpt of this interview in Philip Aghoghovwia, “The Poetics and Politics of Transnational Petro-Environmentalism in Nnimmo Bassey’s ‘We Thought It Was Oil but It Was Blood’,” in *English in Africa* 41, n° 2 (2014), 62. Hence, the epigraph to this text is meant to be read with the performative and oral quality that Bassey describes, chanted between poet and crowd.
- 2 Rosemary Hennessy, *In the Company of Radical Women Writers* (University of Minnesota Press, 2023), 1.
- 3 Chorus from the lyrics of the song “Everybody Knows” released in 1988, co-written by Leonard Cohen and Sharon Robinson.
- 4 I would like to heartily thank Amanda Boetzkes for her companionship throughout this project.
- 5 A term coined by professor of English and Environmental studies Stephanie LeMenager in her book, *Living Oil: Petroleum Culture in the American Century* (Oxford University Press, 2014). For further exploration of this, see Imre Szeman, Jennifer Wenzel, and Patricia Yaeger, eds. *Fueling Culture: 101 Words for Energy and Environment* (Fordham University Press, 2017).
- 6 See of course Matthew T. Huber, *Lifeblood: Oil, Freedom, and the Forces of Capital* (University of Minnesota Press, 2013); or for an aesthetic approach to oil: Amanda Boetzkes and Andrew Pendakis, “Visions of Eternity: Plastic and the Ontology of Oil,” in *efflux* 47 (2013). For other examples of quotes and different valences between petroleum and blood, see Alexander Klose and Benjamin Steininger, *Atlas of Petro-modernity* (Punctum Books, 2024), 252.
- 7 For the relationship between oil and the unconscious, see Oxana Timofeeva, “Ultra-Black: Towards a Materialist Theory of Oil,” in *efflux* 84 (2017).
- 8 Philip Aghoghovwia, “The Poetics and Politics of Transnational Petro-Environmentalism in Nnimmo Bassey’s ‘We Thought It Was Oil but It Was Blood’,” (2016), 61.
- 9 Each type of crude oil presents at least a thousand different chemical compounds. See Sabine Rode, “Éléments de distillation continue,” video, Université Numérique Ingénierie et Technologie, Fondation Maison des Sciences de l’Homme (2021).
- 10 Amanda Boetzkes and Andrew Pendakis, “Visions of Eternity: Plastic and the Ontology of Oil,” in *efflux* 47 (2013), 1.
- 11 Anthony Swift, “Tar Sands Tailings: Alberta’s Growing Toxic Legacy,” Natural Resources Defense Council of Canada, June 26, 2017, <https://www.nrdc.org/bio/anthony-swift/tar-sands-tailings-albertas-growing-toxic-legacy>.
- 12 For more on this and the porphyrin in blood and oil, see Oxana Timofeeva “Ultra-Black: Towards a Materialist Theory of Oil,” 7, especially her take on Reza Negarestani’s 2008 novel.
- 13 *Crude Capitalism* is the powerful title of Adam Hanieh’s recent book. See Adam Hanieh, *Crude Capitalism: Oil, Corporate Power, and the Making of the World Market* (Verso Books, 2024).
- 14 The hula hoop exhibited in the show is reminiscent of the installation *Oil in Honey* that the artist presented during the *Reflecting Oil Colloquium* in 2022. Honey was circulated in a big transparent circular tube where crude oil was regularly injected. The artwork was presented during the performance *Spinning Melancholy*, co-created by Kat Válastur, Mia Lietke, Thomas Grill, and Ernst Logar. In the 2024 exhibition, a photograph of the event by Markus Ladstätter is exhibited close to the version of the hula hoop filled with honey and crude oil.
- 15 The photograph is by Mari Fraga, 2024.
- 16 Alejandra Rodríguez-Remedi, “Through a Glass, Darkly: Visualisation, Revelation and Reflection in Ernst Logar’s *Invisible Oil*,” in *Ernst Logar—Invisible Oil*, Ernst Logar, ed. (Springer, 2011), 65.
- 17 In this regard see Jeff Diamanti, *Climate and Capital in the Age of Petroleum: Locating Terminal Landscapes* (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2021).
- 18 See Amanda Boetzkes, *Plastic Capitalism. Contemporary Art and the Drive to Waste* (The MIT Press, 2019).
- 19 More about the creation of economics’ and politics’ principles based on oil’s properties in Timothy Mitchell, *Carbon Democracy: Political Power in the Age of Oil* (Verso Books, 2011) and Diamanti, *Climate and Capital in the Age of Petroleum: Terminal Landscapes* (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2021).
- 20 Alexander Klose and Benjamin Steininger, *Atlas of Petro-modernity* (Punctum Books, 2024), 113–119.
- 21 For more about the peculiar position of Dubai with respect to oil and climate change, see Aiora Zabala and Emilie Rutledge, “COP28: Inside the United Arab Emirates, the Oil Giant Hosting 2023 Climate Change Summit,” in *The Conversation*, (November 27, 2023).
- 22 Sara Dorow, “Community,” in *Fueling Culture: 101 Words for Energy and Environment*, Imre Szeman, Jennifer Wenzel, and Patricia Yaeger, eds. (Fordham University Press, 2017), 91–94.
- 23 Gavin Bridge, “The Resource Archipelago: Spatial Aesthetics and Resource Ecologies,” in *World of Matter*, Inke Arns, ed. (Sternberg Press, Turtleback Books, 2015), 64.
- 24 See the work of German artist Albert Scopin titled *Dance, baby, dance*, in European Cultural Centre, ed., *Personal Structures—Reflections* (2022), 28–29.
- 25 For an analysis of the American “way of life” and oil, see Matthew T. Huber, *Lifeblood: Oil, Freedom, and the Forces of Capital* (University of Minnesota Press, 2013), 30.
- 26 For the complete story of this board game see Wikipedia Foundation, “Game of Life [The],” Wikipedia, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Game_of_Life.
- 27 Andreas Malm, “Long Waves of Fossil Development,” in Brent Ryan Bellamy and Jeff Diamanti, eds., *Materialism and the Critique of Energy* (Chicago: MCM, 2018), 183.
- 28 Jean-Baptiste Fressoz, *More and More and More: An All-Consuming History of Energy* (Allen Lane, 2024), 2.
- 29 The question of the “sacrifice zones” has most importantly been raised by Venezuelan artist Sattva Giacosa during the panel discussion “Oil, Petroculture and the Transition out of the Oil Age” organized on October 3 2024 as part of the program accompanying the exhibition. For more on the subject, I advise reading Ryan Juskus’ article on sacrifice zones, especially for the notion of “counter-sacrifices”: Ryan Juskus, “Sacrifice Zones: A Genealogy and Analysis of an Environmental Justice Concept,” *Environmental Humanities* 15, n° 1 (2023): 3–24.
- 30 Carmen Gonzalez G., “The Sacrifice Zones of Carbon Capitalism: Race, Expendability, and Loss and Damage,” in *Research Handbook on Climate Change Law and Loss & Damage*, Meinhard Doelle and Sara L. Seck, eds. (Edward Elgar Publishing, 2021), 19.
- 31 As part of the accompanying program of the exhibition, and held at the Angewandte Interdisciplinary Lab, Vienna, Austria, on October 3, 2024.

