

# Petromodernity and its tenacities

Alexander Klose,  
research collective Beauty of Oil ([beauty-of-oil.org](http://beauty-of-oil.org))



Plastic-wrapped pepper  
from supermarket in  
Stavanger,  
Norway August 2022  
©Alex Close

*Anthropocene*  
How small is man?

One last time, by declaring the anthropocene, the human is put in the center of everything. This happens, though, to the price of a consequent shrinking. The age of the anthropos is not named thus, because 'he' has everything under control, nothing less than that.

Humankind as a species is determining it the same way as isotopes and isothermes or carbon atoms determine the wheel of geological history: as an accumulation of an egregious multitude of single phenomena.

How does one practice the anthropocene?

What we need are exercises in change of perspective and scale,  
in decentration or in humbleness.

from initial concept text for *Blackmarket for Useful Knowledge and Non-Knowledge No. 18: On Becoming Earthlings—150 Dialogues  
and Exercises in Shrinking and Expanding the Human*

Musée de l'Homme, Paris, 21 November 2015, 9 days before the beginning of COP 21



CREDITS

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PRESENT:

## Blackmarket for Useful Knowledge and Non-Knowledge No.18



### On Becoming Earthlings: 150 Dialogues and Exercises in Shrinking and Expanding the Human

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Blackmarket for Useful Knowledge  
and Non-Knowledge No.18



Blackmarket  
for Useful  
Knowledge  
and Non-  
Knowledge  
No. 18: On  
Becoming  
Earthlings—  
150 Dia-  
logues and  
Exercises in  
Shrinking and  
Expanding  
the Human.

Poster with  
program,  
frontpage



ine you are living in a world with-  
t women. Introducing their current  
cumentary project, the filmmakers  
ke you to contemporary Japan, into a  
crocosm that is fantastical and real  
the same time.

-Alain Della Negra and Kaori Kinoshita  
are documentary filmmakers. For  
over a decade, they have been working  
together, exploring the relation-  
ships between personal identity and  
avatars, virtual characters, masks  
and disguises, looking to find pos-  
sible scenarios that inevitably  
arise from these encounters.

Marie-Hélène Moncel

*Adaptation or death: resilience of the prehistoric  
hominids* (FR, EN)

e survival of our ancestors, differ-  
t groups of hominids, was a result  
their reactivity and flexibility  
wards climate changes. Here is an  
timistic view relying on prehistoric  
oofs on our potential for survival in  
e era of the Anthropocene.

-Marie-Hélène Moncel is a director of  
research at the CNRS in the Insti-  
tute for Human Paleontology of the  
National Museum of Natural History.  
Her work focuses on the first human  
settlements, the occupation of ter-  
ritories and the technical behaviors  
of the populations.

Sylvie Teveny

*laup ugguusivallianinga — the right to coldness!  
Inuit confronted with global warming* (FR)

uit are directly affected by the  
crease in sea ice that constitutes  
eir hunting ground. Hunting and  
shing techniques are abandoned.  
e transmission of traditional knowl-  
ge becomes difficult. How do they  
apt?

-Sylvie Teveny, an ethnologist  
trained in Inuit culture and lan-  
guage at the National Institute  
for Oriental Languages and Civiliza-  
tions (L'INALCO), led several  
research missions in the Canadian  
Arctic. For more than fifteen years,  
she has been the director of the  
Association "Inuksuk", the Inuit  
cultural center of Paris.

## "ANTHROPOCENE"

Évelyne Heyer

*Who will we be? A guided tour to the future of  
Humankind* (FR, EN)

elyne Heyer introduces and discusses  
e newly remade permanent exhibition  
the Musée de l'Homme in the light of  
e Anthropocene.

-Evelyne Heyer is a professor of an-  
thropological genetics at the Na-  
tional Museum of Natural History.  
She works on the interaction between

## ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE

Marie Lechner

*Bot or not? (FR)*

Bots are the "shadow army" of the In-  
ternet. These autonomous agents index  
information on the web, edit Wikipedia  
articles, find the best deals, gather  
in online games, but can also manipu-  
late opinions and provoke crashes.  
What is this new species that lives  
with us in the techno-natural world  
that is the Anthropocene?

-Marie Lechner is a journalist, re-  
searcher in media archeology and  
botanist in the collective academic  
and artistic research project  
"Média Mediums".

## CHILDREN'S BOOKS

Judith Boon

*A retelling of Christophe Galfard's novel 'The  
Prince of Clouds* (FR)

This novel tells the story of a village  
that is built on clouds. The protago-  
nist Tristam and his best friend will  
have to travel the sky in order to  
understand how the weather works and  
prevent the Lord of the Kingdom of  
Clouds from turning the Earth's cli-  
mate into a weapon of war.

-Judith Boon is a schoolgirl. She  
enjoys reading and may want to  
become a doctor. Christophe Galfard,  
the author, holds a PhD in Theoret-  
ical Physics. He worked on black  
holes and the origins of the uni-  
verse before writing award winning  
children's novels.

Rachel Easterman-Ulmann

*Nils Holgersson: From the sky on the Anthropocene*  
(FR)

In order to be able to tell the (his)-  
tory of the nature and culture of Swe-  
den, Selma Lagerlöf shrunk her hero to  
the size of a dwarf, and expanded his  
vision by putting him on the back of a  
goose. Using a deck of cards with text  
excerpts and illustrations, Rachel  
Easterman-Ulmann retells key passages  
and ideas of the nobel prize-winning  
children's book.

-Rachel Easterman-Ulmann is a visual  
artist and writer. Her videos, instal-  
lations and photographic work focus  
on human evolution in the world as  
perceived by the senses. Currently,  
she is working on a children's book

enough to expect major changes.  
-Mathieu Baudin is an historian and  
futurologist, CEO of the Institute  
for Desirable Futures, Paris. Ac-  
companied by a team of a hundred  
experts and artists, he organizes  
and conducts intellectual explo-  
rations aiming to achieve a better  
navigation and projection into the  
future.

Yona Friedman

*No Title, 2015* (FR, EN)

The animation film "No Title", espe-  
cially made for this Blackmarket,  
questions the philosophy of earthlings  
in relation to their natural and built  
environment. Its screening leads to a  
telephone conversation with Yona  
Friedman.

-Since the middle of the twentieth  
century, Yona Friedman, architect  
and visionary artist, has been de-  
veloping his concept of a "mobile  
architecture", according to which  
dwellings and urban planning have  
to be thought organically, as moving  
and improvised forms of architec-  
tures, modelled on unpredictable  
future uses.

Ashkan Sepahvand

*As though its body were by love possessed:  
speculative organology design for sensualizing  
consciousness* (EN)

How can we (re)learn how to feel? Pres-  
enting fictional design materials from  
his on-going science-fiction research  
project "Mountgrove", Ashkan Sepahvand  
speculates on how the pleasure imagi-  
nation industry aims to produce the  
future of the species vis-à-vis a range  
of theoretical "sex toys".

-Ashkan Sepahvand is a writer, editor,  
and researcher based in Berlin. His  
current work engages with celebra-  
tion cultures, labor and leisure,  
the future of capital and the ecsta-  
sy of becoming human. From 2012 to  
2014, he was a Research Fellow for  
"The Anthropocene Project" at Haus  
der Kulturen der Welt, Berlin.

## DECOLONIZATION

Seloua Luste Boulbina

*Having a monkey on your back (body, race and  
racialization)* (FR)

In the not-so-far beginnings of West-  
ern modern society, the anatomy of  
the white body entered science and the  
anatomy of the black body entered the  
cabinet of curiosities. Talking about  
hair and skin as signifiers of a cons-  
tructed difference, Seloua Luste  
Boulbina wonders how far we have come  
in terms of decolonizing our percep-  
tions.

-Seloua Luste Boulbina is a French-

conditions of the world? Kalina Raskin  
introduces bio-inspiration as a way to  
rethink our relations to the world, to  
reconnect ourselves to the biosphere  
and to reinvent society and technology  
by imitating the evolutionary processes  
of nature.

-Kalina Raskin is an engineer in  
physical chemistry and a biologist  
in charge of the scientific develop-  
ment of CEEBIOS, a new European  
center dedicated to the promotion  
of bio-inspiration, a place with an  
integrated scientific and innovative  
approach of this new discipline.

## DONNA HARAWAY

Nathalie Magnan

*At the Musée de l'Homme, the universal man  
vanishes in the light of Donna Haraway's  
writings* (FR)

From cyberfeminism to animal studies,  
to critical readings of the Anthro-  
cene - the American theoretician of  
science Donna Haraway is one of today's  
most important thinkers, with a radi-  
cally new take on nature, culture, and  
technology. Nathalie Magnan invites  
you to discuss with her some of Hara-  
way's key terms and concepts.

-Nathalie Magnan, media theorist,  
feminist, and professor at the  
École nationale supérieure d'art de  
Bourges, has translated key texts  
of Donna Haraway and introduced her  
thinking in France.

Nadim Ghodbane

*From compassion to love, a spiritual path to  
vegetarianism* (FR)

Sufism encourages compassion, love for  
the other and humbleness. Vegetarianism  
can be seen as an act of compassion to-  
wards the animals. How is it possible to  
change habits within a religious com-  
munity, but also for the generations to  
come?

-Nadim Ghodbane is an ecology activ-  
ist who has taken part in several  
ecological associations for a long  
time. He also initiated the first  
Islamic ecological conference. He  
is a practicing Muslim in the Sufi  
tradition.

Anahita Grisoni

*Is health allowed to be natural? Amateur  
knowledge on food and preventive healthcare*  
(FR, IT, ES, FA)

Hardly any field of our daily lives is  
as strictly guarded and governed by  
experts as health. The struggle between  
modern Western medicine and alternative  
forms of medicine is a cultural battle-  
ground.

-Anahita Grisoni is a sociologist  
and urban planner associated to the  
research program "Environment, Ville  
et Société" in Lyon. Her work focuses  
on contemporary social movements and  
the construction of political  
ecology.

Jennifer Teets

*The contingency of cheese — goat milk, metabolic  
processes and matter in flux* (FR, EN, ES)

A storm traumatizes the goats of a re-  
gion of France, causing a disease that  
makes their digestive systems black and  
that is passed on to the next genera-  
tion. How does this affect the quality  
of their milk? And how can we deal with  
a goat's psychosomatic disorder?

-Jennifer Teets is a researcher,  
curator and performer based in Paris.  
She is known for her research on  
cheese, mud, and terra-sigillata -  
their transitioning towards materi-  
ality and entity and their ability  
to become something else when put  
in an exhibition or an essay.

## IMAGINEERING

Sebastian Grevs Mühl

*A Political History of "Spaceship Earth": from  
Cold War to geoeengineering* (FR, EN, GE)

The beauty and vulnerability of the  
Earth as it is drifting through space  
have always been emphasized by those  
who have seen it from outer space. Back  
on earth, this image carries an addi-  
tional set of meanings: power, control

the dead. Vinciane Despret investigates  
how people maintain often inventive  
relationships with their dead, and how  
human sciences try to theorize, often  
less inventively, these experiences.

-Vinciane Despret is a philosopher  
and researcher at the University of  
Liège. For about twenty years, she  
has been working on animals issues  
and relationships with the dead.

Sigrún Úlfarsdóttir

*Icelandic heritage: cohabitation with nature and  
its invisible beings* (FR, EN)

In Iceland, cohabiting with a wild and  
ever-changing nature has always been  
the key to survival. The inhabitants  
of Iceland have managed to preserve  
the respect and understanding of the  
invisible world within nature, its var-  
ious beings and their well-being.

-Sigrún Úlfarsdóttir is a fashion  
designer. She lives and works be-  
tween Paris and Reykjavik.

## LEAVING EARTH

Silvia Casalino

*What do we need a space program for?*  
(FR, EN, IT)

Why do we continue to send astronauts  
on space missions when almost all the  
work actually is or could be done by  
computers? Why don't we replace them  
by dogs or rats? Heretical reflection  
from an insider.

-Silvia Casalino is a space engineer  
and film director. She has been  
working as a project manager at the  
french space agency CNES (Centre  
National d'Études Spatiales) in Paris  
since 2001. At the same time, she  
wrote and realized "No Gravity", a  
queer-feminist space documentary  
that premiered in 2011.

Fabien Giraud

*Conceptual exercise in dismantling the Earth*  
(FR, EN)

What would become of us if we truly left  
the Earth, without ever coming back?  
Using this speculation as a starting  
point, Fabien Giraud seeks to overcome  
a conception of the Anthropocene that  
projects yet another set of anthropo-  
morphisms on our environments and pos-  
sible futures. He introduces to a type  
of thought committed to the double task  
of continuously dismantling and recon-  
structing itself.

-Fabien Giraud is an artist. He is  
presently co-directing a series of  
works entitled "The Unmanned" which  
tells in reverse a non-human history  
of technology. He is also the co-di-  
rector of "Glass Bead", a research  
platform and journal dedicated to  
the synthesis of knowledge.

Yann Minh

Sophie Godin-Beekmann

*From the ozone hole to climate change — resem-  
blances, differences, and interactions between two  
global environmental problems caused by human  
activities* (FR, EN)

In the fight against the ozone hole,  
ozone destroying gases have been re-  
placed by less destroying ones. But  
both have an impact on climate. Sophie  
Godin-Beekmann introduces us to the  
complex processes in the atmosphere.

-Sophie Godin-Beekmann is an atmos-  
pheric physicist at the CNRS.  
Specialized in the study of the  
stratosphere and its impact on cli-  
mate, she is also interested in the  
link between ultraviolet radiation  
and health problems.

Sophie Houdart

*Obtaining the big through the very small. The  
operators at CERN between particles and cosmos*  
(FR, EN)

The notion of field in ethnographic  
research is usually used to talk about  
social environments. Sophie Houdart's  
research at the CERN (European Center  
for Nuclear Research) focuses on fields  
of particles and how the scientists are  
struggling with the very very small in  
order to get answers for the biggest  
questions: the beginning of the uni-  
verse, life and everything.

-Sophie Houdart is an anthropologist.  
She works at the CNRS and is a mem-  
ber of the laboratory of ethnology  
and comparative sociology (LESC).  
In 2011, in the course of a collec-  
tive project on the change of scales  
in knowledge practices, she led an  
investigation on the Large Hadron  
Collider (LHC) at the CERN.

## MYCOLOGIES

Marc-André Selosse

*Mutual benefits between organisms: the ecology of  
symbioses* (FR, EN, DE)

Germs are team players, one could say.  
They enable interspecies collaboration.  
What is the symbiosis between species,  
where organisms of different species  
are reciprocally helping each other?  
How are microbes necessary for survival  
of plants and animals, including human  
beings?

-Marc-André Selosse is a microbiolo-  
gist and a professor at the National  
Museum of Natural History and at  
the universities of Gdansk (Poland)  
and Viçosa (Brazil). His research

Book an Expert  
for 30 min. at  
the CHECK-IN  
Counter



75 experts at  
25 tables sit  
and talk with  
one member  
of the audi-  
ence for 30  
minutes. The  
rest of the  
audience  
listens via  
headphones  
to Black-  
market radio.

© photo-  
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... and yet, it might be much more accurate and productive, both in critical and analytical terms, to talk about petromodernity instead.



# What is petromodernity?



# Ist Erdöl tot?

Stellen Sie sich vor, unsere Autos fahren mit Atomkraft, und unsere Häuser werden mit Sonnenenergie beheizt.

Und trotzdem brauchen wir Erdöl.

Denn Erdöl ist mehr als Heizöl und Benzin.

Erdöl ist Dünger. Erdöl ist Asphalt. Erdöl ist Kunststoff.

Mit Erdöl kann man unfruchtbare Erde fruchtbar machen.

Mit Erdöl werden Schädlinge bekämpft, Häuser isoliert und Krankheiten geheilt.

Ohne Erdöl können die Bauern ihre Trecker nicht bewegen, stehen die Räder vieler Mühlen und Zuckerfabriken still, erfrieren Blumen und Gemüse in den Treibhäusern, werden auf Geflügel-farmen keine Küken ausgebrütet und auf den Meeren keine Fische gefangen.

Dabei ist das erst die Spitze des Eisbergs.

90 Prozent der Rohstoffe, die in der organisch-chemischen Industrie verwendet werden, stammen aus Erdöl.

11 Millionen Tonnen Erdöl verbraucht allein die deutsche Petrochemie in diesem Jahr.

Wir brauchen Erdöl. Sie brauchen Erdöl.

Ihre Zahnbürste ist aus Erdöl. Ihre Schaumstoffmatratze ist mit 50 Liter

Erdöl gefüllt. Der Lack Ihres Autos ist aus Erdöl.

Die Hälfte aller Dinge, mit denen wir täglich in Berührung kommen, ist mit oder aus Erdöl hergestellt.

Und in Zukunft werden es noch mehr sein. Vielleicht wird es eines Tages möglich sein, mit Erdöl den Hunger in der Welt zu besiegen. Denn aus Erdöl oder Erdgas kann man Eiweiß machen.

Vielleicht wird Erdöl helfen, daß unsere durchschnittliche Lebens-erwartung auf hundert Jahre steigt.

Denn mit Erdöl werden Medikamente, künstliche Gelenke, Blutgefäße und Herzklappen hergestellt.

Und eines Tages das komplette künstliche Herz.

Wir brauchen Erdöl. Nicht nur, um mit unseren Autos zu fahren und um unsere Wohnungen zu heizen.

Sondern um zu leben. Deshalb braucht es die Mineralölindustrie. Die Gesellschaften, die Erdöl suchen, fördern, transportieren und weiter-verarbeiten.

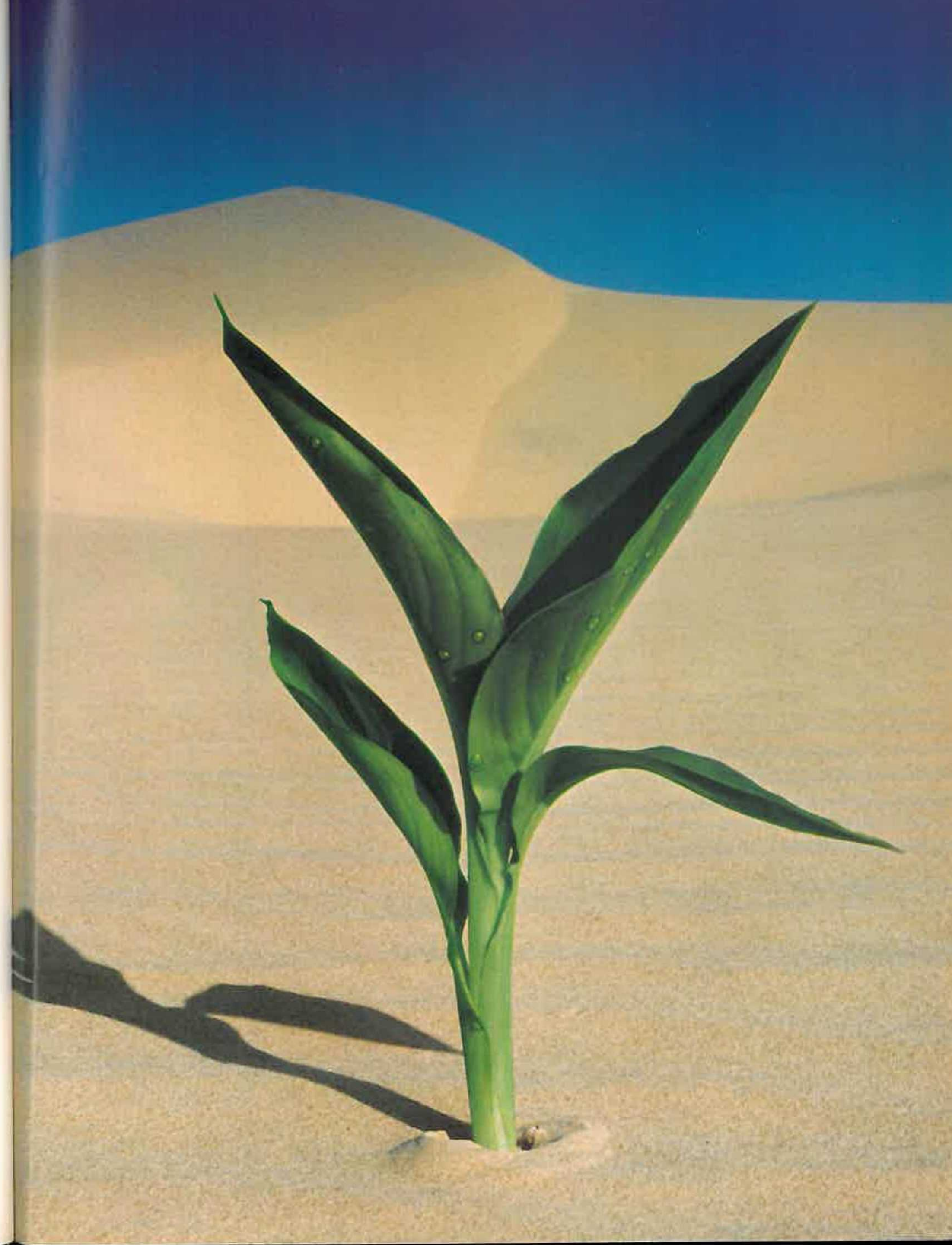
Vielleicht denken Sie daran, wenn Sie das nächstemal an einer unserer Tankstellen halten.

Benzin ist ein wichtiger Teil von dem, was wir machen.

Aber das ist noch lange nicht alles.



Eine Information der Shell.



*Is Petroleum dead?*

—"Petroleum is more than heating and fuel.

(...) Petroleum is fertilizer, asphalt, plastics. (...) Your toothbrush is made

out of petroleum. Your foam matrace is

filled with 50 liters of petroleum. Your car's finish is made from petroleum.

Half of all the things that we get in touch with daily, is made with or from petroleum. And in the future, it will be even more.

(...)

Gasoline is an important part of what we are doing. But it's by far not everything.

Shell magazine ad, 1976





# Film1: *Oil Man*

Videomontage from found footage by Beauty of Oil (Hopfengärtner/Klose/Steininger) for *Revue Petro noir* in „Hydrocarbons“-Section at *Technosphere* Festival, Haus der Kulturen der Welt Berlin, October 2017.





Oil man

A human figure sunk in the slick embrace of oil. Is it a human being drowning in the beloved substance? Or is it a new kind of creature emerging from it like from some primordial ooze?

The crisis of petromodernity begs the question of the relationship between humans and their favorite resource:

Who is ruling whom?

All of modern human life is steeped in oil. With fossil help humans have learned to fly and to reshape and re-invent their environments by artificial materials. Vast swathes of the human population have developed intimate relationships with oil technologies and materialities and have thus, arguably, become part of the most successful liberation movement of the twentieth century, what the environmental philosopher McKenzie Wark calls the

Carbon Liberation Front.



The petrochemical industry has only been around for a few generations, but does it already demand a revised definition of “human”?

A member of the species *Homo sapiens*, distinguished from other apes by a large brain, the capacity for speech and an insatiable appetite for oil.

Might Aristotle writing today replace *Zoon politikon* with *Zoon petroleum*?

The common saying goes: We are dwarves standing on the shoulders of giants. Modernity inverts this relationship.

The petromodern life form — gigantic on a planetary level — is standing on the shoulders of microorganisms. The world's current expenditure of oil in a single year requires approximately 600,000 years of plankton accumulation and compression into fossil fuel.

Hydrocarbons are everywhere: in machines, but also in the air and in water, in bodies, thoughts and dreams. Hydrocarbons are the rule and the exception. Even to oppose oil, you must use oil.



Humanity has become addicted to oil.  
How is it going to get sober?  
And does it even want to?

# Hypernormalisation, petromelancholia, and griefwork



Our fuels contribute to the formulation of our thoughts. We are not just, following Darwin, relatives of monkeys and bacteria, and, following Freud, prisoners of unreflected traumata, we are also guided by a black drug which conditions our perspectives on the world.

We are convinced that only by acknowledging the profound inconsistencies and ambiguities of the landscapes, processes, techniques, peoples and biota of the petrol age, reasonable, realistic and responsible courses of action for the advancing from the current condition can be developed.

The research collective Beauty of Oil wants to contribute to this groundwork.





# Beauty of Oil

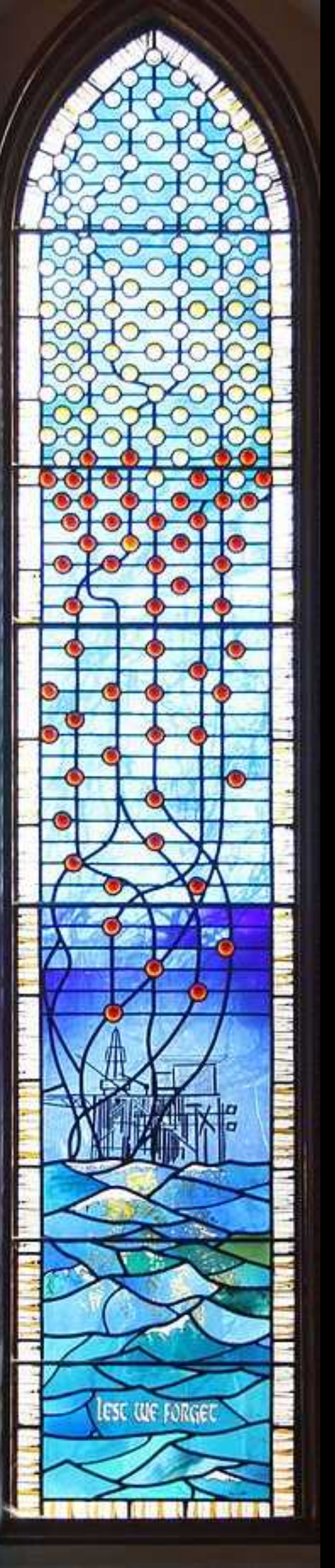
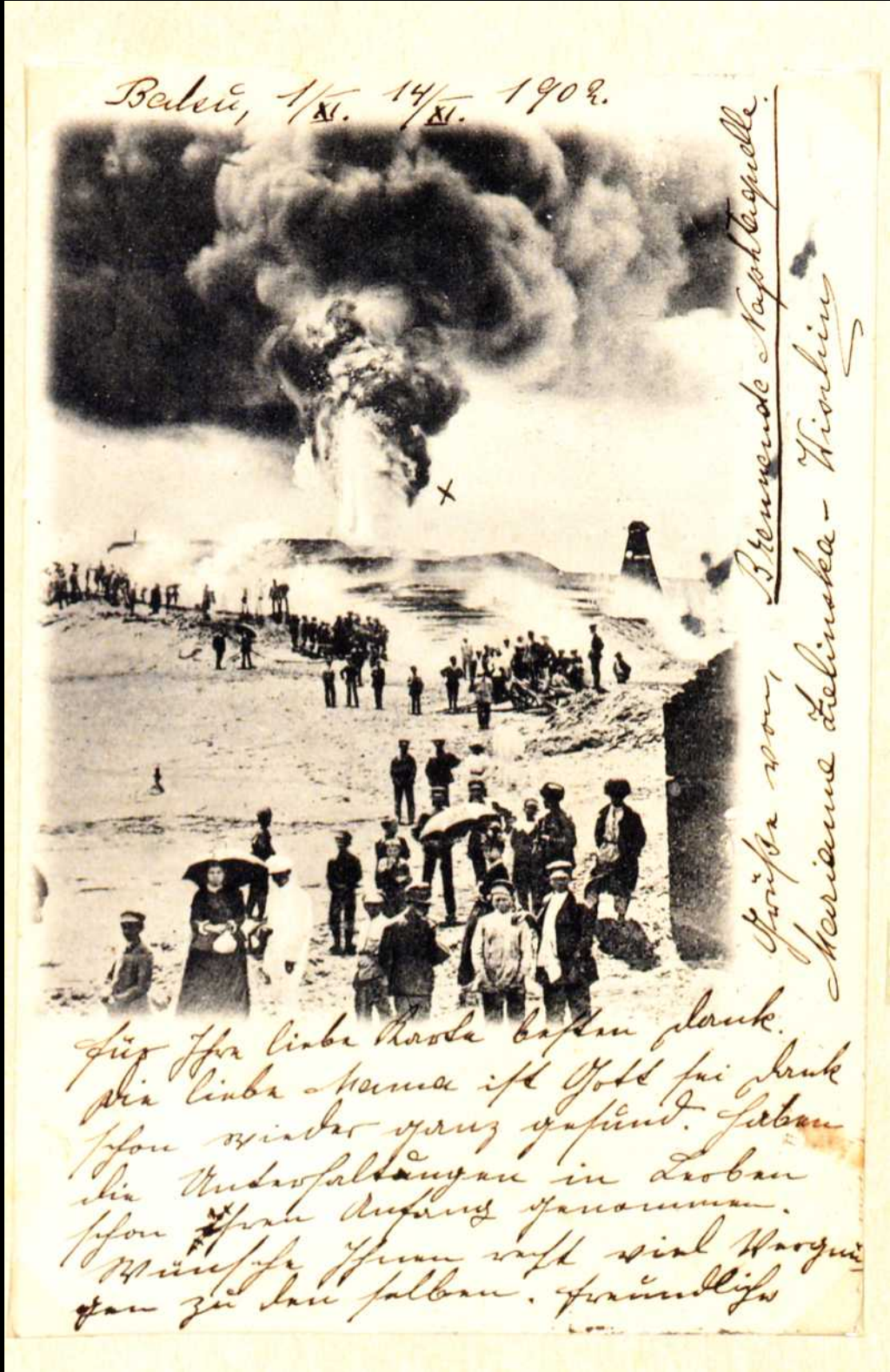
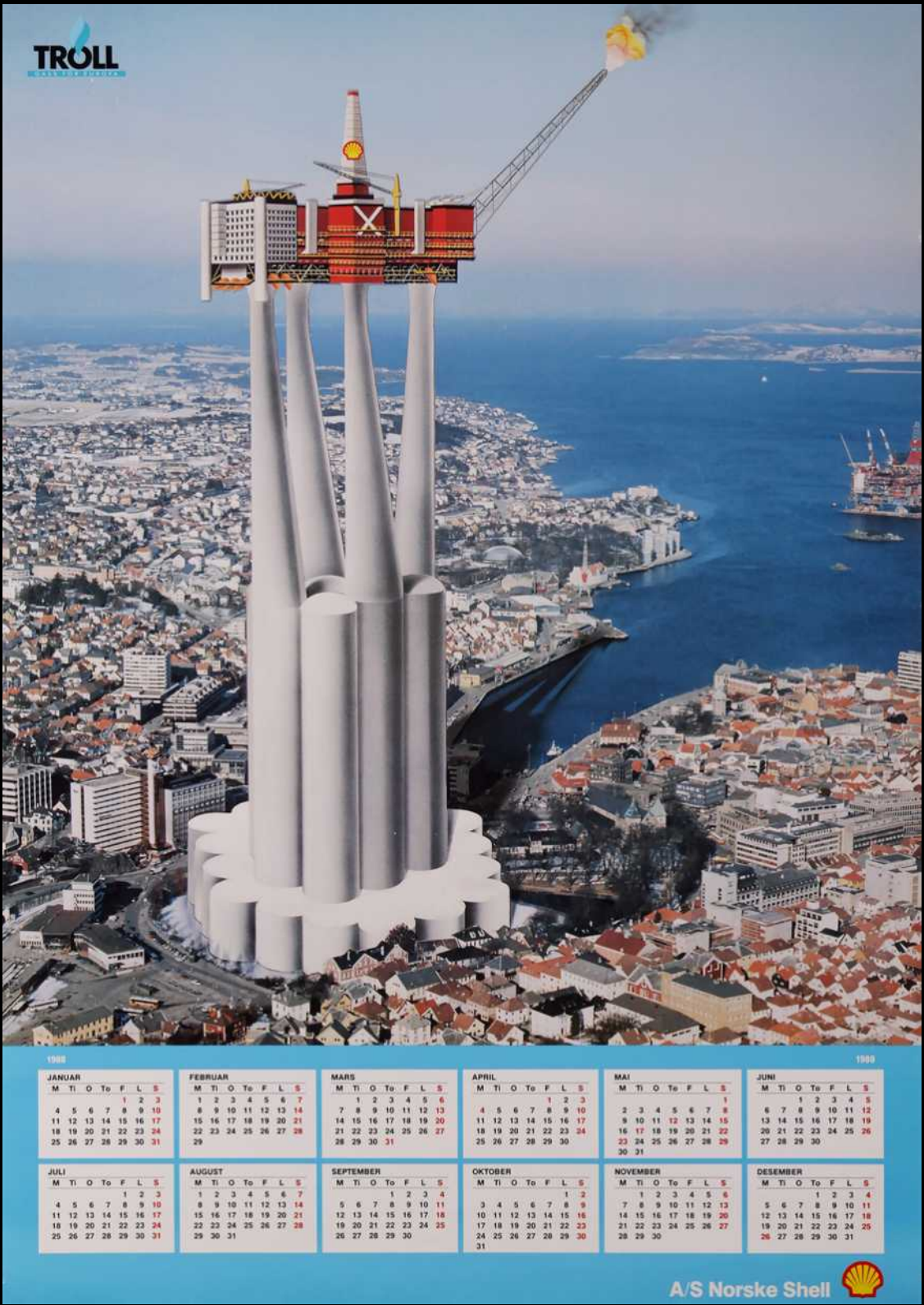
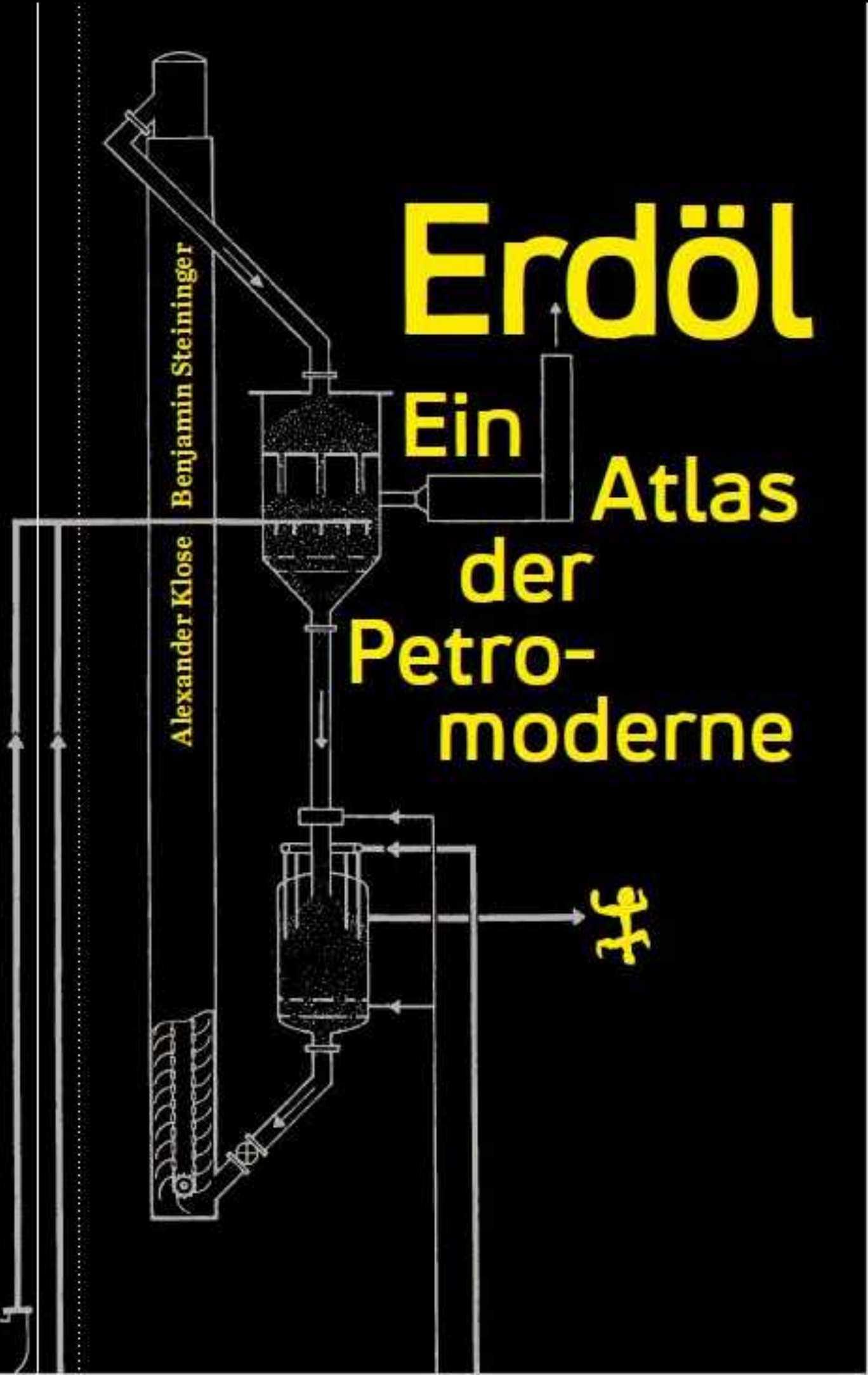
understanding petro modernity

© Joachim Dette





# A Curatorial Research Project





*An archeology of the presence—a retrospective  
of the oil age!*

*What do we need to leave behind?*

*What do we want to keep?*



An exhibition

Kunstmuseum  
Wolfsburg

Menü

# *Oil* Schönheit und Schrecken des Erdölzeitalters

4.9.2021  
—9.1.2022



















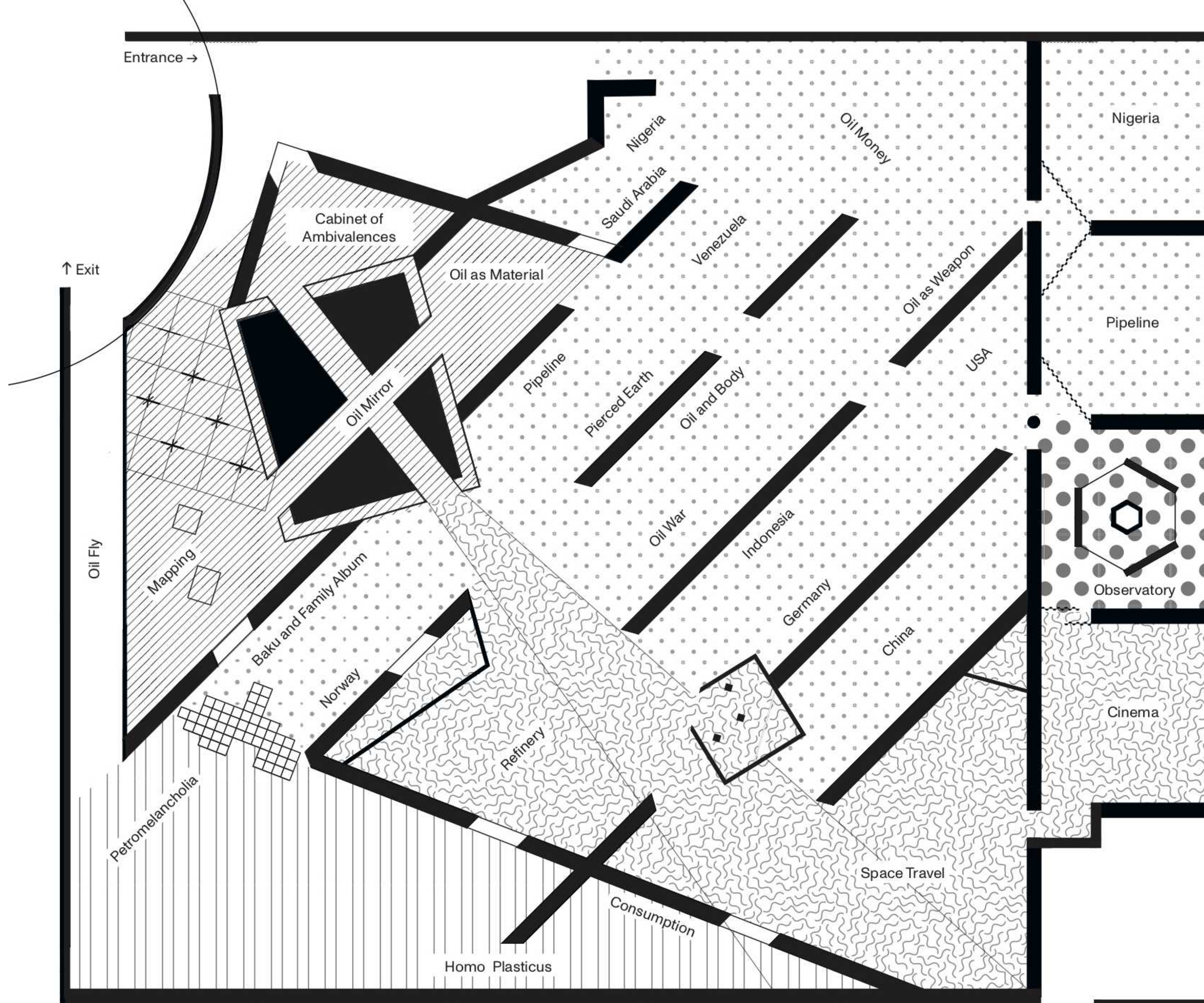
### Molekulare Mobilisierung

Seit dem 19. Jahrhundert werden in der chemischen Industrie Rohstoffe aus fossilen Brennstoffen wie Kohle und Erdöl gewonnen. Diese Rohstoffe werden in kleine Moleküle zerlegt, die dann zu verschiedenen Produkten wie Kunststoffen, Drogen und Farben weiterverarbeitet werden. Dieser Prozess ist als Molekulare Mobilisierung bekannt.

Die Molekulare Mobilisierung ist ein zentraler Bestandteil der chemischen Industrie. Sie ermöglicht die Herstellung von Produkten, die in der Natur nicht vorkommen. Dieser Prozess ist jedoch mit erheblichen Umweltbelastungen verbunden.







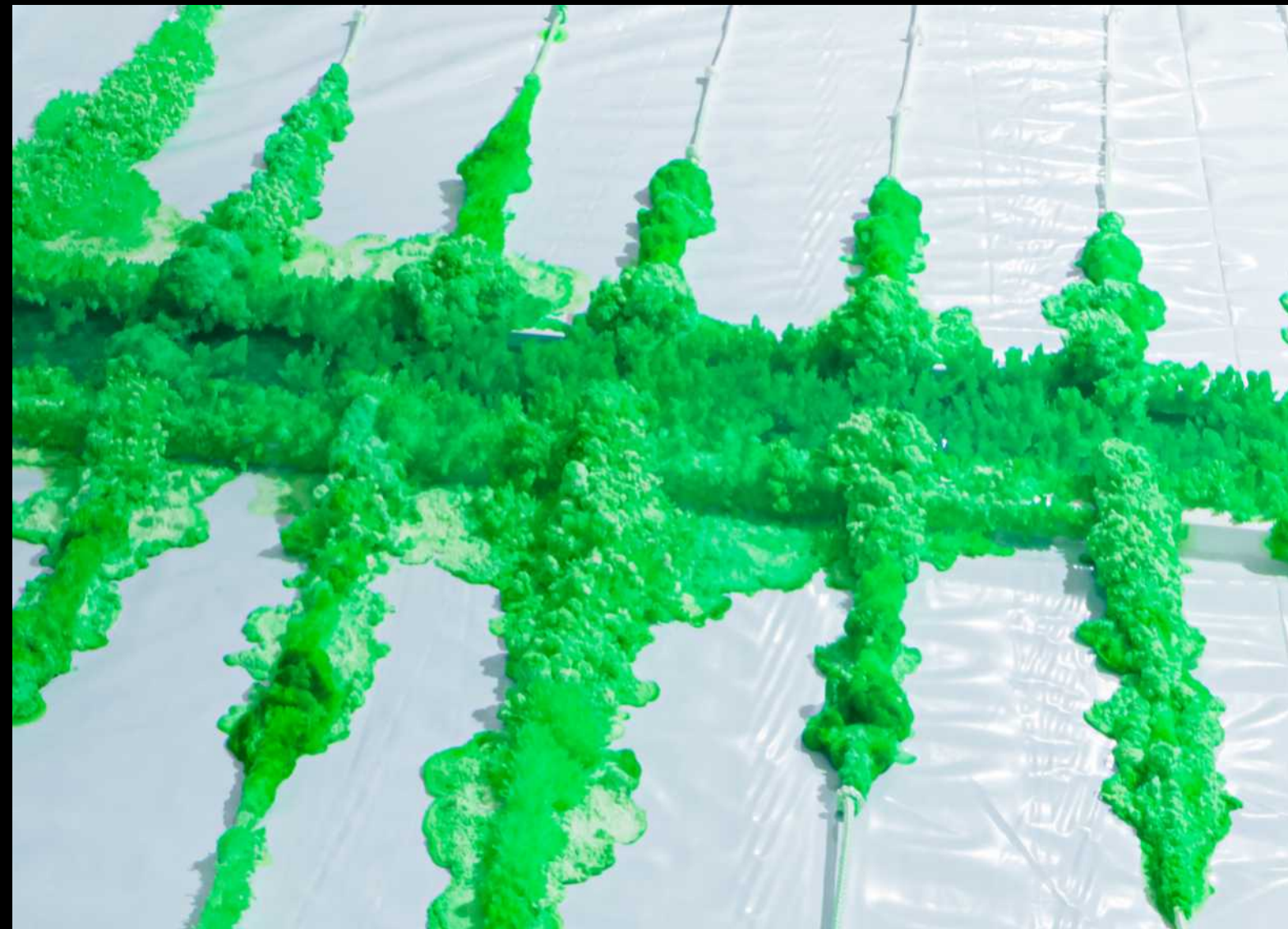
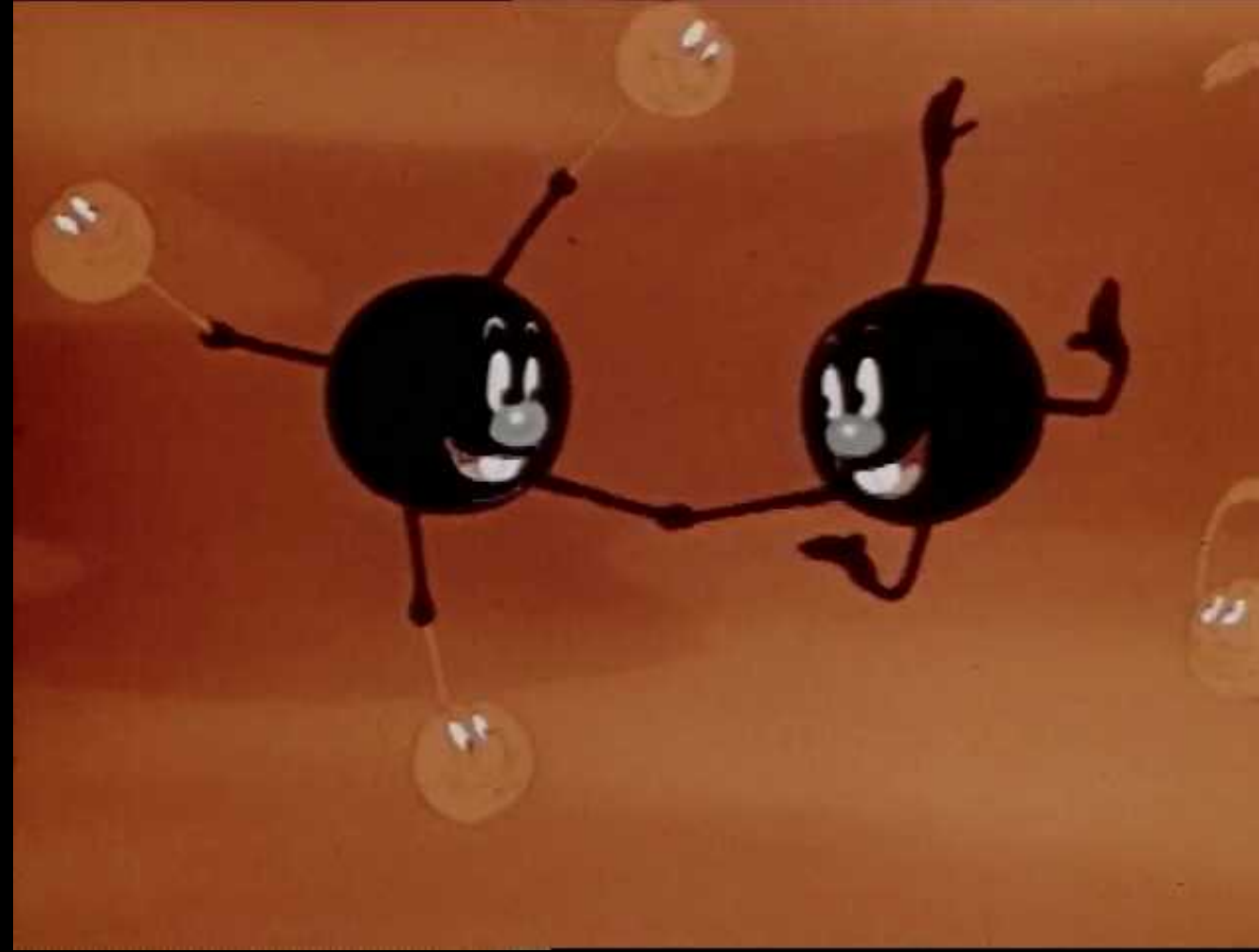


# Oil Encounter: Petroculture comparison





# Chemical Cultural Theory





# Petroleum, Art, and Capital





# Natural History



all photographs of the exhibition: ©Marek Kruszewski 2021 for Kunstmuseum Wolfsburg



another paradigm:  
transition from whale oil to petroleum



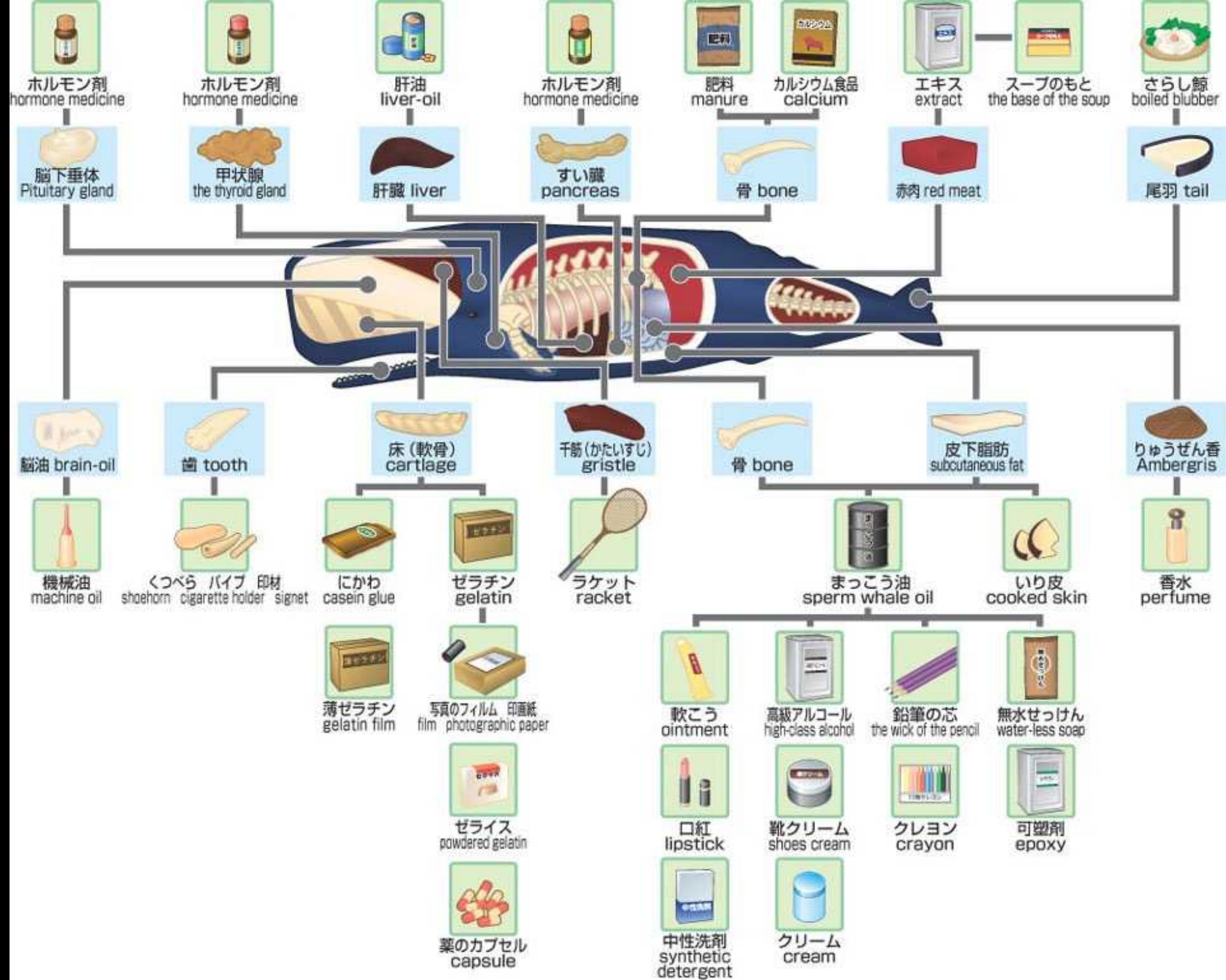


GRAND BALL GIVEN BY THE WHALES IN HONOR OF THE DISCOVERY OF THE OIL WELLS IN PENNSYLVANIA.













1992, Lubegard ATF engine protectant, first high-temperature synthetic Liquid Wax Ester (LXE) as replacement for sperm whale oil.



*So...*

what will we do with petroleum in the post-  
petromodern futures?