

Text 1 / Kathedraal

In bed with petroleum.

In the air. On the road. On the plate.
All over and inside bodies.

It's a love affair that modern industrial civilization has been having with oil (and gas), its fuels and the materials created from it. More than that: it's a love of life, profoundly influencing how people live, move, eat, dress, love, experience, aspire, and believe. A love, though, that has increasingly expressed destructive aspects, excess, exhaustion, abuse, addiction, and contamination.

Everything is plastic, it's fantastic!

The second natures of petromodernity realized themselves in artificial materials that were forged in petrochemical processes. Plastics became the new *prima materia* from which everything is shaped. And how strong, how enduring, how flexible, how indispensable these new materials are! If worse comes to worst, Barbies and He-Men will outlast humanity. The over-affirmation of plastics could go on in evolutionary processes without its creators. The fact that microplastics and other potentially poisonous petromodern particles are found in most biological organisms, including humans, seems to indicate the possibility of this turn of events.

The post-petromodern realized as a world without humans, the remains of petromodernity, including our bodies, becoming future oil...

Symptoms of petromelancholia.

"Petromelancholia" is the condition that the US energy humanities scholar Stephanie LeMenager diagnosed as being at the core of her home country's cultural and political struggle to hang on to "oil culture". The more people realize that the age of oil is eventually going to end—and has to in regard to the state of the planet—the harder they cling on to it. Following this diagnosis, the world has lately been swept by waves of petromelancholia. Acknowledging the long-lasting success of these dynamics of denial, which started 50 years ago, a mere "energy transition" might turn out to be not enough to get over modernity's true love. Wouldn't we also need acceptance and grief, reconciliation and reparations—processes that eventually lead to profound cultural, political and economic transitions?

Text 2 / Barbaar

Oil Encounters

The intimacy began roughly 100 years ago. At first, it was mainly connected to war, greed, and geo-politics. Then it distributed itself into an increasingly ubiquitous set of peacetime technologies and became a cultural-evolutionary force. These technologies provided the individualized petromodern masses with: super-human velocity, abundant nutrition, clothing, hygiene, health care, information, entertainment, and all kinds of luxurious items and activities formerly reserved for only the rich. In the meantime, the war went on at home and elsewhere, largely unseen by its beneficiaries, and waged against the poor, the (formerly) colonized, the (formerly) enslaved, and nature at large.

The “Oil Encounter” has taken place in cultures around the globe.

The confrontation and transformation of environments and individuals by the technologies and materialities of oil has been happening everywhere, from historical centers of industrialism to the seemingly remotest parts of the planet. However, this encounter plays out differently depending on where and who people are. There’s an unbridgeable gap between purchasing an electric car for environmental reasons, and securing electricity by running a diesel generator. There are profound differences between living in the USA, Iran, Norway or Saudi Arabia, in the Netherlands or Indonesia. Yet, all these scenes and cultures share aspects of the transformation by petromodern dynamics.

Petrocultural comparison must by no means level out defining differences and thereby fall into the traps of petromodern ideology. Nevertheless, by collecting petromodern traces—in the field, in different kinds of environments, and in the cultural archives—and making visible the heterogenous meshwork of intentional and non-intentional entanglements, it may help to comprehend the state of the world’s first truly global epoch in all its heterogenous and contradictory aspects.

Text 3 / Ruin

Toxic Legacy and the Museum of Petromodern Futures

Petromodernities, whether in their capitalist, socialist or post-colonial variants, have oriented themselves towards futures based on technology and growth: more revenues, more wealth, more mobility, more interconnectedness, more comfort, more security, more equality, more people... whatever.

What they also surely brought forth were more emissions and more contamination. In the frightening total of anthropogenic inputs that has induced the designation of a new geohistorical epoch, the outputs of petromodern technologies take the predominant share. This qualifies "petromodernity" to be used as an alternative critical concept that is more precise in its political, sociological, cultural, and technological target than "Anthropocene", the chosen term.

The whole earth has been turned into an archive of petromodern activities.

The increasing concentration of CO₂ and global warming, rising sea levels and coastal subsidence, ocean acidification and their increased nitrogen deposition, ubiquitous dispersion of plastic particles, and urban soil-sealing via the spread of concrete structures can all be classified as side-effects of central petromodern dynamics. Naturecultures around the planet, including its atmosphere and lithosphere, store petromodern activities. Not only this, the Earth's environments also function as displays for petromodern remains, some less some more spectacular, some less some more toxic.

What would a Museum of Petromodernity deliberately put on display?

The excesses of an abundant lifestyle.

Memorials for lost technologies, places, and feelings.

A warning sign to the hyper-volatile oil economy of the past.

An understanding of post-petromodern art as the production of carbon sinks out of petromodern trash? An element of an historical healing process?

The memorialization of petromodern culture as a heroic story has begun long ago in museums of technology and design. It is time to add the dark and destructive as well as the immaterial, psychological, and emotional aspects.

Text 4 / Bureel

Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet

While we are speculating about the times after petromodernity, they're already out there. The fashioning of its toxic afterlives occurred decades ago. Some of these material remains will outlast human historical timespans. On the other end of the scale, evolutionary adaptations to changing climatic and molecular conditions, such as increased levels of toxicity, might develop within us and other creatures much faster than expected. However, the "slow violence" inflicted by contamination and severe climate events hits much harder in poor, non-white communities. The degree to which people are affected by destructive petromodern dynamics is as unevenly distributed as the well-being and prosperity it afforded.

Steps to acceptance

The old forces of colonialism, racism, patriarchy were all somehow loosened and at the same time reinforced during petromodernity.

How can we possibly come to terms with this state of affairs?

The steps beyond the current petromodern condition resemble the stages of grief, akin to accepting a severe illness or an uncomfortable truth:

Denial—Anger—Bargaining—Despair.

Petromelancholia seems to encompass all four emotions; the condition can be used as an emotional compass on the way out. What are the things people fear losing the most? What are the areas they don't dare to look at?

Reclaim our futures

Historically, big corporations like Exxon and Shell and government institutions have been in the forefront of developing future scenarios. They first did so to manage anticipated disruptions, to secure stability, and maintain a steady flow of revenues. Beginning in the 1980s, though, they have deliberately ignored and falsified knowledge regarding the dangerous eco-systemic developments that were an effect of their actions. Now, in the so-called "energy" or "green transition", these companies and institutions again lead the way, accompanied by a couple of tech companies.

Yet, the path might be more twisted, the changes more radical than corporations are willing or even able to anticipate and sustain. To pass into real post-petromodern futures, a lot of self-organization, a lot of self-taught knowledge, openness to radical speculation and change, new explanations and narrations, a lot of forgiving, re-aligning and community-building will be necessary.