

Aesthetici zing Petroleum: An Exploratory Workshop



Friday, March 07, 2025
Columbia University, Burke Center, Schermerhorn 807
organized by Avinoam Shalem and Eva-Maria Troelenberg

It is undeniable that fossil fuel dependency is a prevalent form of societal, cultural and personal addiction. Our dependency on fossil fuel is not only all-pervasive but also often concealed from human senses and perception.

[Uusitalo, "Coming Off Fossil Fuels...", *Visual Studies* 37,3 (2022), 185]

The naming of our world's eras tends to focus on specific crude substances. These are usually the specific matters which played a major role in world's evolution and revolutions of technologies. It is needless to say how important these substances are, as they clearly shaped the specific courses that our civilization took. From the Stone Age to the Bronze Age and to the age of Gun Power and the atomic bomb, these specific terming illustrate how extracted substances and those produce on the surface of the globe defined the specific routes of technological revolutions and were used and misused by imperial powers to maintain martial hegemony and sustain economic supremacy. The "Age of Petroleum" is another stirring chapter in the long and entangled history of materials and imperial powers.

How have extractions and circulations of petroleum shaped culture and art? How have they been entangled with modernism and even nation-identity-making, especially as they went through aestheticization and poetization processes in the arts and especially in the visual media? Sociologists like John Urry have hinted at the encompassing pathways of dependence which emerge with the rise of the so-called 'machine age', and particularly during the period of fossil-driven acceleration. The iconography of the 'age of (black) oil' is visible today, either in its forceful interventions in landscape, namely our world's oil fields, or in its representations in varied artistic practices. And yet, in other instances, the impact of petroleum remains subcutaneous, as it literally provides the invisible infrastructural grid which allows, but also disrupts, cultural mobilities.

The aestheticization approach towards petroleum lends itself particularly well to our possible full understanding of the age of petroleum. This exploratory workshop takes its first cue from an interest in Baku, the earliest modern site for the industrial extraction of petroleum, and in the Mediterranean as a site of global connectivity, yet conflicted economic inequality, and as the primary corridor for the extraction and circulation of black oil. This workshop brings together several scholars and artists who, by looking at a range of exemplary media, sites, and practices around the world, might suggest reading the period commonly labelled as modernity through the lens of petroculture. The question of the aestheticization of petroleum appears as a timely query, which slices through layers of (trans)national and transcultural histories at the intersection of the environmental, social and economic layers of historiography.



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9.30 Welcome Tea and Coffee

MORNING SESSION

10.00 Opening words
Eva-Maria Troelenberg and Avinoam Shalem

10.20 Opening Lecture
Timothy Mitchel: Afterthoughts on Carbon
Democracy

11.00 Avinoam Shalem: Petroleum (Nafta)
before the Age of Petroleum

11.30 Eva-Maria Troelenberg: Hounds of
Progress” and “Mastiffs of Tradition”: Venice as
the (un)likely site of Petromodernity

12.00 Open Discussion

12.30 Lunch

AFTERNOON SESSION

2.00 Lindsay Harris: The Lives of Everyone:
Photography at Standard Oil (New Jersey),
1943-1956.

2.30 Iheb Guerhazi: Oil Shock, Artistic Waves:
The 1973 Crisis and the London World of Islam
Festival.

3.00 Coffee Break

3.30 Yasmine Seale: A Barrel of Laughs:
Muhammad al-Maghut’s al-kumidiya al naftiyya

4.00 Benjamin Steininger: Modern Arts as a Key
Towards an Understanding of Petro-Modernity

4.30 Catherina Borelli: Motel Africa: A
Documentary on AGIP Building in Dar es
Salaam

5.00 Jennifer Wenzel: Concluding Remarks

