

Petroleum in (and out of) the Visual Arts (New York, 3 Mar 26)

The Heyman Center, Second Floor Common Room, Columbia University, New York, Mar 03, 2026

sofheyman.org/events/petroleum-in-and-out-of-the-visual-arts

Sarah Gould, Paris

Oil has long been entangled with the visual arts, whether in the petroleum derivatives found in materials for creation and conservation, the money that underwrites museum philanthropy and the art market, or the ways that art shapes cultural imaginaries that make oil dependence feel like freedom. In an era of climate collapse, how is the imperative of a transition away from fossil fuels changing the art world? How are artists, curators, critics, conservators, and restorers working toward a world without oil?

An international cycle of events in Paris, New York, Mexico City, and Lagos in 2025-26 is exploring these questions while minimizing our use of jet fuel. In-person gatherings at each site are connected to each other by live stream.

Featuring talks by Siobhan Angus, Brian Jacobson, Jessica Varner, Kate Orff, Tony Vazquez, Avinoam Sholem, and Iheb Guerhazi. Organized by Sarah Gould and Jennifer Wenzel.

Access:

<https://www.eventbrite.com/e/petroleum-in-and-out-of-the-visual-arts-tickets-1980991781746?aff=oddtcreator>.

In-person panel discussions about oil's long entanglement with the visual arts. If you are a Columbia/Barnard affiliate with campus access, please use your Columbia/Barnard email when registering. Each attendee must have their OWN registration and email address.

Registration for external guests closes at 4PM on March 2. Registration will automatically close at that time. Columbia/Barnard affiliates may register at the door.

Please email disability@columbia.edu to request disability accommodations. Advance notice is necessary to arrange for some accessibility needs. This event will be recorded. By being present, you consent to the SOF/Heyman using such video for promotional purposes.

PROGRAMME

Panel 1: Petroleum, Photography, and the Corporation

9:30am-11:00am

Chair: Avinoam Sholem, Art History, Columbia University

1. Petrocapitalism's Wellsian Worlds

Siobhan Angus, Carleton University

In 1941, Ansel Adams photographed the Union Carbide chemical complex for *Fortune* magazine, presenting the petrochemical plant as a futuristic “Wellsian World” that echoed the techno-utopian imaginaries of H. G. Wells. This vision aligned petrochemical production with narratives of progress, modernity, and scientific inevitability. Yet, when read through a materials-driven and extractive framework, these photographs disclose obscured labor histories and material dependencies that underpin the visual spectacle. Adams’ images reveal a dense network linking oil and mineral extraction to chemical refinement, the emergence of synthetic materials, and photography’s own reliance on petrochemical processes. In doing so, this paper situates photographic modernism within the infrastructures, economies, and cultural imaginaries of petro-capitalism.

Siobhan Angus works at the intersections of art history, media studies, and the environmental humanities. Her current research explores the visual culture of resource extraction with a focus on materiality, labor, and environmental justice. Angus is an Assistant Professor of Media Studies at Carleton University. She is the author of the award winning *Camera Geologica: An Elemental History of Photography* (Duke University Press 2024) and her research has been published in *Environmental Humanities*, *liquid blackness*, and *October*.

2. Capturing Ethylene: Dow Chemical and the Architecture of Oil and Gas (1923–1962)

Jessica Varner, University of Pennsylvania

“Capturing Ethylene” examines the mid-century photography of Torkel Korling, documenting Dow Chemical’s ethylene industry in Texas and Michigan. Known for depicting skyscrapers for *LIFE* magazine covers, architectural photographer Torkel Korling’s images captured Dow’s production ethos at a moment when the company shifted to use a limited palette of petroleum derivatives (oil and gas) from new cracking techniques for a growing market— building materials. Rereading Korling’s photographs, alongside other environmental, landscape, and marketing media from the 1940s to the 1960s, this talk examines how Dow’s commissioned images served a political purpose, naturalizing both the products they promoted and the rapidly transforming petrochemical industry. Korling’s photography and the role of disinformation in the mid-century moment raise significant questions about the relationship between the materiality of oil, the arts’ role in selling ethylene-based plastics, and the chemical industry’s early environmental representation in the United States. More broadly, the talk situates architecture’s materiality in ethylene, questioning how new Dow building materials came to undergird the chemical industry’s success and its ecological catastrophe in plastics amidst global mid-century material shortages, as industrial photography changed the nature of the “goodness” of chemicals. Finally, the talk explores the residual representational challenges posed by the escalating problems of the fossil fuel industry still evident today.

Jessica Varner is an Assistant Professor of the History of Landscape and the Environment at the University of Pennsylvania. Her research examines the intersections of the histories of synthetic chemistry, design, and chemical landscapes. She earned her Ph.D. in the History of Art and Architecture (HTC) from MIT in 2021 and is currently working with the University of Chicago Press on her forthcoming book, *Chemical Desires: When the Chemical Industry Met Modern Design (1870–1970)*. Her work has been supported by the ACLS, Getty Research Institute, Fulbright Program, Max Planck Institute for the History of Science, Science History Institute, USC Society of Fel-

lows, National Science Foundation, and the Graham Foundation. Trained as an architect, she works collaboratively with the Environmental Data & Governance Initiative (EDGI), where she co-founded A People's EPA (APE). Together, she works to center justice in toxics policy to build alternatives and seek repair for the seemingly insoluble environmental problems today. Her current projects include an NSF-funded study on community-led environmental history and cumulative exposures, a co-edited volume on consent and refusal in environmental right-to-know futures, and a new book on neurotoxins, material culture, and extraction in the 18th and 19th centuries.

3. Detection/Depiction: Schlumberger, Magnum, and the Visual Epistemologies of Prospecting Brian Jacobson, California Institute of Technology

During the expansive prospecting years of the 1950s, French oilfield service firm Schlumberger became an important client for the Magnum photo agency, providing work for photographers including Henri Cartier-Bresson, René Burri, Eliot Erwitt, George Rodger, Cornell Capa, and Werner Bischoff, who died in the Peruvian Andes in 1954 while on assignment for Schlumberger. Seeing photography as a “driving force useful to a driving organization,” Schlumberger sent Magnum photographers from Peru, Colombia, Bolivia, Ecuador, Argentina, and Venezuela to Egypt, Algeria, and the North Sea. The commissioned photos filled glossy annual reports and employee magazines, where their epistemological function—to capture human interest and shape public understanding of otherwise distant and secretive work— dovetailed with the company's technical operations in the field. That fieldwork, too, was driven by a visual imperative: to see, and thereby know, the nature of hidden subterranean worlds. This paper explores the connections between detection and depiction that shaped Schlumberger's speculative epistemology and the relationship with Magnum through which it attempted to balance the uncertainty of oil prospecting with the promise of photographic truth. What visual and photographic forms, it asks, did oil take in the field, particularly as photographers seeking human drama encountered landscapes of extraction and exploitation?

Brian Jacobson is Professor of Visual Culture at the California Institute of Technology. He is the author of *The Cinema of Extractions: Film Materials and Their Forms* (Columbia University Press, 2025) and *Studios Before the System: Architecture, Technology, and the Emergence of Cinematic Space* (Columbia UP, 2015). His edited volume, *In the Studio: Visual Creation and Its Material Environments* (University of California Press, 2020) won the Society for Cinema and Media Studies award for Best Edited Collection and the Limina Prize for Best International Cinema Studies Book. With James Leo Cahill and Weihong Bao he edited “Media Climates,” the Winter 2022 issue of *Representations*, and he is currently editing, with Maggie Bell, “Art + Electric Light,” a special section of *Leonardo*. His next book is about the visual world of French oil and gas, 1944-1975.

Panel 2: Reflections on Aesthetic Practice

11:30am - 12:45pm

Chair: Iheb Guermazi, Society of Fellows and MESAAS, Columbia University

4. Petrochemical America

Kate Orff, Columbia University

This talk will reflect on the approach and methodology of the publication *Petrochemical America* (Richard Misrach and Kate Orff, *Aperture*, 2012). Fifteen years later, what has changed? Moments

from the book and its creative process will be connected with the author's continuing exploration of engaging regional landscapes in the wake of fossil fuel extraction, pollution and ecological collapse.

Kate Orff is a Professor at Columbia University with a joint appointment at the Graduate School of Architecture and the Climate School. She is also the founder of the landscape architecture and urban design practice SCAPE, with offices in New York, New Orleans, and San Francisco. Kate is co-author with Richard Misrach of *Petrochemical America* (2012) and author of *Toward an Urban Ecology* (2016). Kate was the recipient of the 2017 MacArthur Fellowship.

5. Oil as the Condition of Art

Tony Vazquez-Figueroa

This talk reflects on my artistic engagement with oil as a Venezuelan artist, shaped by a long-standing awareness of oil's central role in the country's social and economic life. While oil had always been deeply rooted in Venezuelan culture and widely understood as the foundation of collective well-being, it was only through the political rupture of the early 2000s—followed by a near-total oil strike—that I began to grasp its full structural dimension. The interruption of oil's circulation did not reveal its importance, but made perceptible the speed and extent to which it had already reorganized everyday life, history, and perception, disfiguring a long rural and underdeveloped past through accelerated processes of modernization and extraction.

From this moment of structural legibility, the talk turns to oil's artistic potential: a material that can enter artistic practice precisely because of its position at the intersection of economy, politics, culture, and desire. Through a selection of my artworks, I explore how oil operates simultaneously as material, metaphor, and framework, moving from national narratives to questions of subjectivity, visibility, and cultural representation. As these works become public, the talk considers the relationship between individual artistic practice and the system of art in which it takes place.

The talk concludes with an examination of the image selected for this conference cycle, using it to address the ecological paradox at the core of this practice: the impossibility of fully standing outside oil while attempting to critique it. Rather than offering resolution, the work inhabits this contradiction, asking what it means to create art from within a condition that continues to sustain the system it seeks to question.

Tony Vazquez-Figueroa (b. 1970 Caracas, Venezuela) has explored the substance of crude oil and its many manifestations with the intention of activating this lens to analyze its effects on one of the richest global powers of the late 20th century – Venezuela. Using bitumen as a key material in the creation of works, Vazquez-Figueroa has developed a personal archive of paintings, sculptures, objects, and installations that form the collective memory and heritage for himself and others experiencing this shared history. His deeply personal research into how oil-rich countries create unique physical, socio-economic, and cultural environments informs his artistic practice to create a body of work that distills the dystopic reality of over-industrialization.

Reference:

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(accessed May 19, 2026), <<https://arthist.net/archive/51857>>.