Carbon Cultures (Kassel, 4-5 Mar 27)

Kassel, University of Kassel, Mar 4–05, 2027
Deadline: Nov 30, 2026

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Carbon Cultures: Practices, Visualities and Material Ecologies in the Fossil Age.

This workshop is organized by the Profile Area Raw Material Cultures at the RAW Center for Resources Across Worlds. We use carbon culture as an analytical category to situate modern and contemporary art and cultural production within the fossil resource worlds of their creation, circulation, and valuation. These conditions have long been treated as neutral background rather than as culture. This workshop takes that invisibility itself as its object of study. To this end, we propose establishing a research field called Carbon Art History, a rewriting of art and cultural history through the lens of carbon culture. It asks how fossil resources came to be perceived as a natural condition instead of a political project that produces legitimation, visual regimes, and orders of knowledge.

Carbon culture produces more than just narratives; it produces a material culture in the most literal sense: artworks, exhibitions, archives, and the apparatuses through which images and collections are created, transported, and preserved, and the material and epistemic conditions of producing art. Methodologically, the workshop builds on Energy Humanities, extending them specifically into art history as cultural history. It brings together approaches from archaeology, museum studies, material cultural studies, and visual culture, combining them with close readings of artistic and archival production.

As an emerging field, Carbon Art History cannot rely solely on Energy Humanities. It requires a genuinely interdisciplinary methodology that combines materialist approaches with postcolonial and decolonial material histories. Drawing on posthumanist thought, we shift attention from human actors to the material life of resources, artifacts, and images. However, we hold this shift accountable to questions of power. In our approach, materiality is never abstracted from the colonial and postcolonial histories through which specific resources, sites, and images became extractable, valuable, or invisible.

The workshop employs several complementary lenses. A sociopolitical and historical lens asks about the entanglements between extractivism, petromodernity, archaeology, and museum formation, and how coloniality persists as a structure while manifesting in different forms across various modes of extractivism. A material lens examines the ecological footprint of image production and the underlying resource dependencies of photography and cultural heritage. A political lens traces how oil economies have shaped visuality, cultural and artistic infrastructures.

Considering these different accounts, the workshop asks what it means to (re)write a decolonial

material history of art, one that acknowledges the agency of things and the colonial and postcolonial conditions of their extraction, circulation, and preservation. How do material and discursive registers co-produce each other in these processes? Aesthetics may become complicit with fossil ways of life through these very material entanglements, without losing sight of the specific historical, geopolitical, and institutional conditions under which carbon cultures take shape. At the same time, the arts constitute their own mode of knowledge production, which can challenge and unsettle dominant epistemologies and has the potential to resist and dismantle dominant forms of fossil modernity. This tension serves as the workshop's productive starting point. Thus, the workshop aims to test the analytical potential of carbon culture across regions, periods, and media, as well as to develop shared concepts and methods for Carbon Art History.

Guiding Questions:

• How does carbon culture manifest itself in aesthetics, narratives, and worldviews across different historical and regional contexts? What new periodization does this reveal?
• What visual, material, and media cultures have formed around fossil and carbon-based raw materials, and how have these cultures shaped perceptions of energy and modernity?
• How does coloniality persist as a repeatable yet variable structure across different extraction regimes?
• Which cultural blind spots, silences, and exclusions have allowed carbon cultures to persist unnoticed as merely infrastructural?
• How have oil economies built, funded, and shaped cultural infrastructures, such as museums, biennials, and collecting institutions?

RAW Center for Resources Across Worlds

The RAW Center for Resources Across Worlds, a Käte Hamburger Kolleg based at the University of Kassel and funded by the German Federal Ministry of Research, Technology, and Space, is an interdisciplinary research center for advanced studies. The center is dedicated to interdisciplinary research on the global transformation of resource worlds and the profound cultural, aesthetic, political, economic, social, and ecological changes associated with them. Embedded in the University of Kassel's strong profile in research on sustainability, critical arts, the humanities, and global political economy, the center brings together international fellows and early career scholars. It offers a space for collaborative, theory-driven, and empirically grounded research on the possibilities and conflicts of contemporary material and cultural transformations and energy transitions. Rather than treating resources as given material objects or as neutral inputs into economic processes, the center approaches them as part of historically specific "resource worlds": configurations in which material properties and infrastructures intersect with institutions, power relations, social practices, knowledge, technologies, cultural meanings, and imaginaries. Bringing together perspectives from the humanities and social sciences, the center examines how such resource worlds emerge and stabilize, how they organize access, use, and distribution, and how they are contested and transformed. Its four Profile Areas – Raw Material Cultures, Raw Material Practices, Raw Material Regimes, and Critique/Reflection – provide integrative, interdisciplinary, connected, and complementary perspectives on these processes.

The center's first thematic year, Carbon Culture, takes the fossil foundations of modern societies as its common point of departure. Coal, oil, and gas have not simply supplied energy to otherwise

independently developing societies; their extraction, circulation, and use have become deeply embedded in infrastructures, institutions, patterns of production and consumption, everyday practices, forms of social reproduction, and cultural meanings and imaginaries. Carbon Culture therefore refers to the historically specific social formations through which fossil resources have become constitutive of modern ways of life and societal organization. The first thematic year asks how these fossil-based resource worlds emerged and became institutionalized, why they have proven so persistent despite mounting ecological, technological, political, and geopolitical pressures, and how they are currently being challenged, adapted, and recomposed. Rather than assuming a linear transition from a fossil to a post-fossil order, the center examines the tensions between persistence and transformation and the ways in which existing and emerging resource worlds become layered, recombined, fragmented, or replaced.

Information and requirements for participants

The workshop offers space for up to 12 participants, and the call is addressed to researchers at postdoctoral level and above. A publication is planned to follow the workshop. Prospective contributions should be presented and discussed during the sessions. Limited funds are available to support travel and accommodation. Venue: Wilhelmshöher Allee 47, University of Kassel, 34117 Kassel.

Application modalities

Applicants are invited to submit a 250-word abstract and a 150-word short bio to rohstoffwelten@uni-kassel.de by 30 November 2026 as a single PDF including the title, abstract, and short bio, affiliation, and contact details. Please use “Workshop W1-3” as the subject line of your email. If the abstract is accepted, a five-page paper draft will be required for circulation among workshop participants in advance. The deadline for this paper draft will be 31 January 2027.

Organizers: Prof. Dr. Liliana Gómez and Dr. Katrin Nahidi.

Reference:
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