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## **Pinpointing Petroleum: An analysis of petro-modernity in art exhibitions presented in Wolfsburg and Rotterdam**

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# PINPOINTING PETROLEUM

AN ANALYSIS OF  
PETRO-MODERNITY IN  
ART EXHIBITIONS PRESENTED IN  
WOLFSBURG AND ROTTERDAM

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## INTRODUCTION

When I was growing up we had a few standard locations, as a family, for a day hike close to home, like the marshes of the Broekpolder in Vlaardingen, or further away in the country. For the latter, we would drive in our trustworthy white 1994 Ford Mondeo along the A4-highway to the Beneluxtunnel: the start of a sort of *katabasis*. Emerging from the tunnel we would make a turn to the A15, either in the direction of Pernis or Charlois, both directions providing intriguing industrial views. This region of Rotterdam, on either side of the Maas river, is filled with chemical factories, oil refineries and office buildings of energy companies like Shell plc and Exxon Mobil. The landscape was familiar yet foreign, alluring yet repulsive. During night time, the lights from the factories were captivating and magical. I was not necessarily conscious of the light pollution, rather deeming the twinkling electrical lights of the industry as the stars in the night sky, and the seemingly infinite burning diffusion flame as the pole star, guiding us home after spending a long day outdoors.

Reminiscing about such childhood memories and experiences now feels out of place, considering the context of the current climate crisis. I am much more aware of the ecological pollution these companies mentioned above are responsible for on a local level, having used the Broekpolder as a chemical waste dump, for example.<sup>1</sup> But on a more fundamental level, I understand now that the petroleum industry as a whole is at the root of most environmental challenges we face today.

At the time of writing, the climate crisis is inescapable: it has become a never-ending topic of discussion with new records of extremes hitting the news every day. The enormity of the crisis is daunting, because it revolves around so many aspects of the planet's ecosystems, emission of greenhouse gasses, effects of global warming, social systems and more, which are eventually all entwined and interlinked. In recent years, the renowned Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) has published reports with a clear message: social transformation is crucial to tackle climate change.<sup>2</sup>

Thus, critical reflection on human behavior and social systems of past and present is key. For many years, in the field of climate research, the focus has been on technological challenges and possible measures, so-called technofixes, but more recognition is growing

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<sup>1</sup> Infamously, the Rotterdam harbor got rid of sludge by dumping the polluted material in the Broekpolder area, among other places, using the area as a 'baggerdepot' (dredged material disposal site). See for the ecological impact on soil and flora, due to these practices by the Rotterdam harbor: Van Driel & Nijssen, "Development of Dredged Material Disposal Sites", 101-126; Kay, Scholten & Bowner, "Mobility of Soil Contaminants in an Ecosystem of Trees Growing on Dredged Material", 1-62.

<sup>2</sup> Creutzig, Roy, Devine-Wright et al., "Demand, services and social aspects of mitigation", esp. 505, 509, 514.

for the value of reflection on human social behavior in relation to the natural world, with the presence of the academic discipline of 'environmental humanities', for example.<sup>3</sup> An interdisciplinary subfield of environmental humanities has emerged in recent years which is concerned with the study of the relation between culture and energy systems, with petroleum in particular, namely 'energy humanities'.<sup>4</sup> The social and cultural perspective on petroleum has proven to be fruitful, inserting exciting perspectives and insights on how petroleum has influenced our habits, morals, values, and epistemologies, leading to the coinage of the term *petrocultures*.<sup>5</sup>

As the urgency of the crisis continues to grow, more and more spheres of society are participating in the debate on how to move forward in a sustainable manner. Cultural institutions with a strong conscious position in society are providing spaces for the public to reflect on the climate crisis. Though with some hesitation or precaution, art museums and exhibition spaces are also becoming more active partners in this regard. But how and to what extent such cultural institutions choose to implement the climate crisis, especially with regard to the use and impact of petroleum in society, in their activities profile, remains a legitimate question, since there is lots of room for interpretation and maneuvering. This will be the central research question of my thesis.

In order to give an answer to this question, I analyze two case studies in this thesis, namely two cultural institutions and the exhibitions they have hosted on this particular topic: *Oil: Beauty and Horror in the Petrol Age*, on view in Kunstmuseum Wolfsburg from September 2021 until January 2022, and *Petromelancholia* in Brutus, in Rotterdam, on view from September until November 2023. Both these exhibitions have been set up by a German research collective named *Beauty of Oil*. Though the exhibitions share similarities (the selection of international artists is partly the same, for example), differences are noticeable, which I aim to highlight, and add value to each exhibition.

The research collective *Beauty of Oil* is coordinated by Bernd Hopfengärtner (designer and futurologist), Alexander Klose (cultural theorist, curator and concept developer) and Benjamin Steininger (cultural theorist and historian).<sup>6</sup> Since 2015, they have collaborated with

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<sup>3</sup> I do not mean to say that techno-fixes should not be part of the overall discussion on climate change. However, I do believe that the reflection I emphasize in this thesis is of great value and should be held in the same regard, at least.

The literature on environmental humanities is already extensive, and only growing. For a broad insight in the field of environmental humanities, I refer to the recent volume *Introduction to the Environmental Humanities* (2022), edited by J. Andrew Hubbell and John Ryan.

<sup>4</sup> See Wilson, Szeman and Carlson, "On Petrocultures", 4. For a comprehensive overview of the field of energy humanities, please see *Energy Humanities: An Anthology* (2017), edited by Dominic Boyer and Imre Szeman.

<sup>5</sup> See Hindelang, *Iridescent Kuwait*, 25.

<sup>6</sup> Beauty of Oil, "Current members are:".

Bernd Hopfengärtner was only involved in *Oil: Beauty and Horror in the Petrol Age*, in Kunstmuseum Wolfsburg.

several scientific and cultural institutions to critique the role and effect of petroleum in society, via scholarly publications, discussion sessions and art exhibitions, for example.<sup>7</sup> The exhibitions chosen for this thesis provide reflection on the impact of petroleum on society from the distance of a hypothetical future. The legacy of oil is explored, investigated and criticized by artists in various forms. In Wolfsburg, curators Klose and Steininger opted for a first retrospective of 100 years of art, related to *petrocultures*. The exhibition in Rotterdam had a focus on our current relationship with petroleum.

By executing this research, I participate in the broader academic debate in the field of museum studies, which is concerned with the position of museums in society. More and more museum scholars agree that museums ought to take a more pro-active stance in the climate crisis and function as accelerators in climate change awareness.<sup>8</sup> Museums especially have the potential to improve methods of communicating about climate change, because they can provide spaces to enable visitors to participate on their own terms in discussions with multiple perspectives.<sup>9</sup> Yet most museums insist they ought to take an objective and neutral position in society, in order to safeguard their trusted position in society.<sup>10</sup> An argument that is used frequently has to do with the possibility of losing esteem of the public if museums would become too outspoken on certain matters. Museum scholar Robert Janes calls this the “fallacy of authoritative neutrality”, and condemns such an attitude.<sup>11</sup> In his view, remaining neutral equals to maintaining the status quo, which has proven to be deficient in these times of crisis. Moreover, neutrality can be debated in itself: every decision is political in a way and has consequences that need to be faced.

At the same time, one could question whether museums really are fit for the role of effectuating societal change. The modern museum is defined by hierarchies, dualisms, and western notions of objectivity and truth, with the effect of deeming the museum as separate above society and inadequate to partake in the challenges that society is currently facing.<sup>12</sup> They are also a vivid legacy of all sorts of practices, such as imperialism, colonialism, extractivism and so on, which have led to this exact climate crisis.<sup>13</sup> Perhaps this legacy can

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<sup>7</sup> For an overview of their activities: Beauty of Oil, “Activities”.

<sup>8</sup> Prominent museum scholars proclaiming this perspective are, among others, Fiona Cameron and Brett Neilson, Henry McGhie, Rodney Harrison and Colin Sterling, Robert Janes. I refer to their relevant publications *ad hoc* in the following footnotes.

<sup>9</sup> See Cameron, Hodge & Salazar, “Representing Climate Change in Museum Space and Places”, 10, 18.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Janes, *Museums without Borders*, 243.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>12</sup> See Cameron, “The Liquid Museum”, 345.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Harrison & Sterling, *Reimagining Museums for the Future*, 12. See also Szeman, “On the politics of extraction”, 441, 442-445, for a detailed account of the link between extraction practices (removal of earth’s materials for energy use and thus economical gain) and social and political transformations.

be turned into a responsibility. But to carry that responsibility new approaches and practices are needed.<sup>14</sup>

In fact, a whole new epistemic angle can be instrumental for museums in these turbulent times, as museum scholar Fiona Cameron also presents with her proposal of the concept of the 'liquid museum'.<sup>15</sup> Traditionally, the museum conveyed positivist certainty and absolute truth to the public, with little room for complexity or ambiguities.<sup>16</sup> However, circumstances like climate change are much more complicated, layered, paradoxical than this positivist science approach allows for.<sup>17</sup> Thus, thinking about what the future may hold, becomes more and more difficult and dubious, because the outcomes of the climate crisis are not at all clear or stagnant. In order to cope with this prospect and think of alternative, sustainable futures, the capacity for imaginative and creative thinking ought to be fostered and encouraged. Museums are seen as safe places, looking at the past, but a temporal shift toward future- and forward-thinking is constructive in these times of crisis.<sup>18</sup> Engaging with temporal reframing, like future-thinking in curatorial practices, is not only a method of making visitors reflect on their own attitudes and behavior in society, but also of the exhibition space being a place for presenting variables affecting a multitude of possible futures or long-term temporal trajectories, instead of more common in society short-term trajectories.

Museums ought to be flexible, adaptive and resilient: be ready for possible changes when necessary, whether it be in content production, communication or management.<sup>19</sup> This can translate to a variety in the organizational team, like we see with the collaboration with *Beauty of Oil* with both Kunstmuseum Wolfsburg and Brutus Rotterdam, and the multiple (and possibly conflicting) goals an institution might have. The Brutus art exhibition space, technically not a museum, proves with its flexible and unconventional attitude to already work with these liquid practices.

The regenerated focus on sustainability in museum practices is another example of new approaches in the field of museums. Although sustainability – in terms of preserving and caring for collections and heritage to stand the test of time – has always been a fundamental concern for museums, the matter has become more extensive as of late.<sup>20</sup> The

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<sup>14</sup> Cf. Harrison & Sterling, *Reimagining Museums for the Future*, 9.

<sup>15</sup> See Cameron, "The Liquid Museum", 345-361. The liquid museum concept is linked to Zygmunt Bauman's notion of liquid modernity: with liquefaction, traditional institutional structures and boundaries can be conceived more freely, flexible and fluid (354).

<sup>16</sup> See Cameron, "The Liquid Museum", 354.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 348.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 346-348.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 354.

<sup>20</sup> See ICOM, *ICOM Code of Ethics for Museums*, esp. 14.



term 'sustainability' has been anchored in the discourse on battling climate change on societal level, and thus these connotations are also of relevance for the museum sector. In 2018, the International Council of Museums (ICOM) set up the Working Group on Sustainability, with the direct aim to take into consideration global climate policy, established with the renowned Paris Agreement of 2015 during the 21<sup>st</sup> UN Climate Change Conference (CoP21) and the publication of UNESCO's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).<sup>21</sup> The ICOM workgroup acknowledges that museum sustainability is a multifaceted undertaking: on the level of 'greening' the museum (regarding museums' carbon footprints, for example), but also on intellectual and social level.<sup>22</sup> In addition, the workgroup has reflected on the roles a museum can possibly have in this specific discourse. Not only the position of information resources and educators, but also activists and advocates are underscored. In the Paris Agreement, museums are explicitly mentioned as having a key role in ensuring action for climate empowerment, by implementing education, public awareness, participation and access to information.<sup>23</sup>

The exertions of the ICOM workgroup have been fruitful: a noteworthy change in the renowned ICOM museum definition, published in 2022, is the implementation of the term sustainability:

A museum is a not-for-profit, permanent institution in the service of society that researches, collects, conserves, interprets and exhibits tangible and intangible heritage. Open to the public, accessible and inclusive, museums foster diversity and *sustainability*. They operate and communicate ethically, professionally and with the participation of communities, offering varied experiences for education, enjoyment, reflection and knowledge sharing.<sup>24</sup>

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A potential risk could be that terms like diversity and sustainability lose depth of meaning, because they are overused, or used without actual depth. As museum scholar Robert Janes also writes: "[sustainability] has lost its power of reference and precision, and is commonly used for narrower, materialistic purposes." (Janes, *Museums without Borders*, 189).

<sup>21</sup> ICOM, "ICOM establishes new working group on sustainability".

<sup>22</sup> Cf. Janes, *Museums Without Borders*, 180-181.

<sup>23</sup> See the formal decision piece published by the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, "Decision -/CMA.1."

<sup>24</sup> ICOM, "Museum Definition". (emphasis added).

The ICOM museum definition dates back to 1972, when the partnership between UNESCO and ICOM organized the Round Table in Santiago, Chile. Cf. Garlandini, *Ecomuseums*, 8-12.

The webpage provides extensive information on the process (methodology and reports on multiple in-between consultations) of formulating this new definition. The report on consultation no. 3 shows the engagement with and deliberation of the term 'sustainability'.

The updated museum definition showcases the multiple connotations of sustainability in museum practices: with the reference to reserving and caring for collections, as well as the new connotation advocated for by the ICOM workgroup.

The abovementioned Sustainable Development Goals (17 in total) are meant to tackle social and environmental challenges to create a sustainable future by 2030.<sup>25</sup> They are intended for use in various social spheres and contexts, including the cultural sector. One example is museum scholar and ecologist Henry McGhie, who advocates strongly for implementing these SDGs in the museum sector, due to the unique position museums have in society, as I also discuss above.<sup>26</sup> We see this in practice with McGhie's publication *Curating Tomorrow*, a helpful guide for museums to connect the SDGs to practical museal activities to support sustainable development for the future. McGhie highlights the umbrella term 'Education for Sustainable Development' (ESD) and connects this to museums as educational institutions.<sup>27</sup> This is a holistic and transformational approach: it is insufficient if people are only knowledgeable on climate problems and challenges, they need to actually care about them and feel empowered to partake in solutions.

With my qualitative case-study approach, I aim to gain a more in-depth understanding of exhibiting about petroleum in certain local contexts. In recent years the topic of climate change and fossil fuels have gained more momentum, with on a global scale numerous exhibitions revolving around this topic, either in a direct or indirect way. However, the exhibitions presented in Wolfsburg and Rotterdam are especially interesting due to the locality of these exhibition spaces. Both cities Wolfsburg and Rotterdam are intrinsically linked to or affiliated with petroleum: due to the influential presence of the car company Volkswagen in Wolfsburg and the characteristic oil refineries in the Rotterdam port area.

Thus, to obtain grasp on the exhibition spaces in question and the influence on the respective localities, I discuss how these spaces came to be in a socio-historical context. I situate the Kunstmuseum and the Brutus space in their respective cities, bringing attention to their site-specificity, architecture and intended audience. Moreover, I treat the mission statements of Kunstmuseum and Brutus to help place the abovementioned exhibitions in the respective exhibition policies. It must be made clear that Brutus is not a museum, but an

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<sup>25</sup> For the 17 SDGs: United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, "The 17 goals".

<sup>26</sup> See McGhie, *Curating Tomorrow*, 32-35 for an overview of why the SDGs need museums and the other way around.

<sup>27</sup> See McGhie, *Curating Tomorrow*, 47-50. The respective SDGs under ESD are: quality education (SDG4), responsible consumption and production (SDG12), climate action (SDG13) and peace, justice and strong institutions (SDG16).

For further information on Education for Sustainable Development, see UNESCO, *Roadmap*, esp. 12.

exhibition space: Brutus considers themselves to be an addition to the museum field, because they are more unconventional.<sup>28</sup> The physical context (i.e. locality and architecture) and personal context (i.e. audience experience, their background) is of great importance for the overall experience of visiting, as museum scholar Kali Tzortzi emphasizes in her publication *Museum Space: Where Architecture Meets Museology* (2015).<sup>29</sup> Furthermore, the lived, affective experience of visitors is influenced by embodied sensations, brought forth by the exhibition space, which is part of the meaning making of the exhibitions.<sup>30</sup> Via this lens, I examine the exhibitions *Oil: Beauty and Horror in the Petrol Age* and *Petromelancholia*.

In my analysis of these exhibitions, I present a walkthrough of the exhibitions, highlighting a selection of the curated artworks, placing them in the narrative of the exhibition. In the appendix, images are included of the exhibition spaces in Kunstmuseum and Brutus, artworks, and more. Furthermore, I pay attention to the tools which were offered to the visitor to enhance their experience visiting the Kunstmuseum and Brutus, such as wall texts, audio guides, exhibition catalogue, and so on. By discussing these elements, I can make an indication of the visitors' experience perceiving these exhibitions, with the help of exhibition reviews and news articles. Do they leave the exhibition spaces both informed and educated, and with the feeling of empowerment, as McGhie sets out with his guide?

A lot of material of the exhibitions in question has been published online, making this research more feasible. However, because I have not been able to visit these exhibitions myself, I am aware that there are gaps missing. In Rotterdam I have conducted fieldwork to experience the physical context, by visiting the Brutus exhibition spaces, and by bicycle the Rotterdam harbor, since this landscape was considered to be an extension of the exhibition space. Unfortunately, I have not been able to do the same in Wolfsburg, not counting my digital visit to Wolfsburg via Google Maps streetview, meaning there is some disbalance in this part of my research. Nevertheless, I aim to convey the atmosphere of the relevant areas of both Rotterdam and Wolfsburg in my written text.

Ultimately, with this research I intend to highlight these local contexts of the exhibition spaces in Rotterdam and Wolfsburg in the broader context and discourse on cultural institutions, aiming for their potential to serve as proactive agents of societal change, fostering public engagement, education and empowerment in the pursuit of a reimagined sustainable future.

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<sup>28</sup> I elaborate on the character of the Brutus exhibition space further in the third chapter.

<sup>29</sup> Cf. Tzortzi, *Museum Space*, 68-70.

<sup>30</sup> Cf. Tzortzi, "Museum architectures for embodied experience", 494-496.

## CHAPTER 1: PETROCULTURAL THROUGH AND THROUGH

A yellowish-black, gooey, odorous substance has spread and seeped through all aspects of contemporary life: it can be found in all corners and nooks of society. Even in unexpected areas it has left its traces, like in our own bodies. Be that as it may, the matter provides us energy, efficiency and luxury, shaping our everyday life. Consequently, we find ourselves sticking to the substance and seemingly cannot escape its powerful grip. It is quite overwhelming how we have managed to create such a wide variety of products derived from this particular material; we have truly made the most of petroleum.

Because the research of this thesis is concerned with the ways in which museums and exhibition spaces interact with the workings of petroleum and the impact it has on our society, an analysis of the methodological and theoretical discourse surrounding petroleum is warranted. The exhibitions I examine in this thesis make use of various concepts, like *petro-modernity*, *petrocultures* and *petromelancholia*. The curators have grounded themselves in the academic debate surrounding these concepts, centered in the field of energy humanities. *Beauty of Oil* reflects via curatorial practices on our use of petroleum and how this has influenced our way of thinking for decades. The exhibitions I discuss in the following chapters function as a communication strategy to bring awareness of this subject to a broader audience through artworks.

Although these abovementioned terms challenge traditional disciplinary boundaries and scholarly methods, and are therefore difficult to navigate, they are key to helping us understand how our conceptions of modernity are linked to petroleum and how these conceptions influence our way of thinking.<sup>31</sup> I aim to show in this chapter that these concepts provide certain levels of context, like my investigation of *petromelancholia*, and the term *petroleumscape*, the latter being relevant for the larger background of this thesis, regarding the locations of the cultural institutions I discuss. The Rotterdam harbor, including the petroleum factories, and Wolfsburg with its Volkswagen affiliation are epicenters of *petro-modernity*, as I illustrate below.

### 1.1 PETROLEUMSCAPES

How do these epicenters of *petro-modernity* actually work? Or how can we identify such hubs of petroleum-related activity? Before I dive into the concept of *petro-modernity*, I first explain the impact of petroleum on the landscape, immediate surroundings, but also on a

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<sup>31</sup> See Hindelang, *Iridescent Kuwait*, 29: she connects the mobility of oil to the fluidity in petroleum scholarship, crossing academic disciplines.

social level. I do this by treating the concept of the *petroleumscape*, coined by architecture and urban planning scholar Carola Hein.<sup>32</sup> She has introduced this concept to connect the landscape of oil refineries to the immaterial influence of petroleum, dissecting this *petroleumscape* in several layers. It is crucial to bring together various facets of petroleum, opposed to studying these phenomena separately without acknowledging the broader context, as has previously been done, in order to better understand the widespread complexity of petroleum. The spatial *petroleumscape* is of interest for this research, because it treats the multiplicity of petroleum spaces, ranging from industrial sites, to ancillary and even philanthropic practices.<sup>33</sup> These components are relevant to the case studies at hand, namely Wolfsburg and Rotterdam, and both the respective museum and exhibition space.<sup>34</sup>

First, the *industrial petroleumscape* concerns the actual objects needed to handle crude oil: drilling platforms, storage places, oil pipelines, ports, chemical factories and oil refineries, and so on. The scale of this *industrial petroleumscape* is almost unfathomable. For illustration, the Shell Energy and Chemicals Factory at the Vondelingenplaat in the Rotterdam port area is the biggest oil refinery in Europe: 404.000 barrels of crude oil are processed *every day*.<sup>35</sup> Keep in mind that this particular area is only one participant in the global field of energy infrastructures, this is only one contribution to the overall global *industrial petroleumscape*. Moreover, to facilitate the global spread of oil and its industry, extensive infrastructures are needed, like ports, railways, highways, bridges, and more, which Hein identifies as the *infrastructural petroleumscape*.<sup>36</sup>

Even though the Rotterdam port has great territorial impact due to its enormous size, the industrial structures are not accessible to the public.<sup>37</sup> However, efforts can be made, as I present in chapter 3, with the publication of bicycle routes in this specific area. Upon visiting an *industrial petroleumscape* up close, it becomes clear how oil bulks out and takes up space, making changes to the quality of air, the horizon, light, and more.<sup>38</sup>

Next, ancillary activities of oil companies are of interest. These activities are necessary for the functioning and operation of the petroleum industry, think of housing, streets, or even entire city structures.<sup>39</sup> Hein treats places where oil has been found in the

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<sup>32</sup> See Carola Hein's edited volume *Oil Spaces* (2022) and her article "Oil Spaces: The Global Petroleumscape in the Rotterdam/The Hague Area" (2018).

<sup>33</sup> Cf. Hein, *Oil Spaces*, 10.

<sup>34</sup> The research collective *Beauty of Oil* is also linked to the research on petroleumscales, specifically on the Rotterdam region. They have collaborated with Hein on a conference she hosted in Delft in 2017, and have since published the chapter 'Greenhouse' dedicated to this topic in their book *Erdöl: Ein Atlas der Petromoderne* (2020).

<sup>35</sup> Shell, "Shell Energy and Chemicals Park Rotterdam".

<sup>36</sup> Cf. Hein, *Oil Spaces*, 11.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>38</sup> Cf. LeMenager, *Living Oil*, 13.

<sup>39</sup> Cf. Hein, *Oil Spaces*, 11.

ground and in order to extract the material as efficiently as possible, cities are built around this entire affair. I believe this particular undertaking is also applicable to the case study of Wolfsburg, though that city was not founded near a petroleum seep. It was however established next to the factories of the Volkswagen car company. Because the automobile is such an emblem of *petro-modernity* I consider Wolfsburg an *ancillary petroleumscape*. I elaborate on this part of Wolfsburg's history further in the second chapter.

Furthermore, the philanthropy component, *petroleumscape of philanthropy*, is an indication for how oil industry actors have used urban spaces to convey to the public how they are beneficial to society and truly have the best interests at heart.<sup>40</sup> By making investments in social spheres of education, health and culture, the oil industry grounds itself firmly in society with their philanthropic footprint.<sup>41</sup> These acts of sponsorship facilitate a social legitimacy: it becomes difficult for the public to voice criticism if the polluting industry is also showing itself to be helpful in other regards. Especially with funding cultural institutions like museums, opera houses and theaters, the industry fuels the conception of being a favorable Maecenas.<sup>42</sup> I believe this behavior to be happening in Wolfsburg with the presence of Volkswagen. As I show in the next chapter providing socio-historical context of the city of Wolfsburg, Volkswagen also makes its mark on Wolfsburg by investing in schools, housing, and, of relevance to this research, Kunstmuseum Wolfsburg.

While the petroleum industry operates on a global scale, national infrastructures and local spaces are crucial for this industry to function as they desire.<sup>43</sup> The industry's impact on a local or regional level, researching local particularities, admittedly is a big undertaking, yet necessary to get a better grip on the varying ways this impact can take shape. This research aims to contribute to that understanding, by investigating the local contexts of Wolfsburg and Rotterdam.

The importance of regional sites, in the bigger framework of the globalized economy, is underscored by energy humanist Stephanie LeMenager.<sup>44</sup> Regional sites are where the bigger, often elusive narratives of global industries become visible: the impact becomes more explicit so that we can actually sense and see it.<sup>45</sup> In terms of the energy industry, they have truly transformed regions physically: shaping infrastructure, building cities, increasing

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 12.

<sup>41</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>42</sup> See also Mel Evans' publication *Artwash: Big Oil and the arts* (2015).

Activist groups like Fossil Free Culture NL have the ambition to bring to light these practices and raise awareness among the bigger public via art performances in cultural institutions. See their website here: Fossil Free Culture NL. 2023. <<https://fossilfreeculture.nl/>>. Accessed May 12<sup>th</sup> 2024.

<sup>43</sup> Cf. Hein, *Oil Spaces*, vii, 6.

<sup>44</sup> Cf. LeMenager, *Living Oil*, 12-15. See also her other monograph *Manifest and Other Destinies* (2005), in which she talks about charismatic and unsustainable commodities.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 13.

pollution, subsidizing museums.<sup>46</sup> Thus the energy industry's influence really matters for its direct surroundings. In this thesis I employ regional consciousness, which may have started in the Broekpolder area with the polluting activities by the Rotterdam harbor, like I mentioned in the introduction above.<sup>47</sup> Ultimately, this is part of a much bigger narrative on energy systems: the local contexts I discuss in this thesis are linked to a strong global narrative of *petro-modernity*.

## 1.2 WE ARE ALL PETRO-MODERN BEINGS

The regional frame can also help in the pursuit of digging up ultradeep core memories, affects and emotions, which are embedded ultimately in oil, but work through in thousands of items made from petroleum.<sup>48</sup> This notion brings me to the concept of *petro-modernity*. I have mentioned this term a few times already, let me explain now fully what is meant by this in the field of energy humanities.

Petroleum is a relatively cheap and manageable material, which makes it so attractive to use in so many different ways. The possibilities of permutation of the raw material have been exploited to the maximum, making oil refineries and chemical factories places of great value. Thus, the Rotterdam port with numerous of these refineries and factories has big esteem, as it is a substantial player in the national economy and in the global petroleum industry, facilitating our current lifestyle. It is important to keep this reputation in mind for the rest of this research.

The modern alchemy of petroleum permutations have resulted in the reality that petroleum is the key ingredient for the production of almost every single object we use on a daily basis: fuel for our car's engine, electronical devices, toothbrushes, shampoo, the clothes we wear, and so on. Our entire livelihood has been structured around the matter. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, in the field of energy humanities, a new recognition has developed of petroleum shaping social imaginaries, understandings of modernity, morals, values and belief systems, because of the immense presence of petroleum: the concept *petrocultures* denotes this phenomenon.<sup>49</sup>

It must be said, however, that the use of petroleum has in fact been practiced for millennia: multiple sources from antiquity point towards different permutations of petroleum

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 13-14. LeMenager refers to social historian Martin Melosi when addressing this energy-led development.

<sup>47</sup> LeMenager speaks of this 'regional consciousness': *Living Oil*, 14.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 13.

<sup>49</sup> See e.g. Szeman, "How to Know About Oil", 148; See Wilson, Szeman and Carlson, "On Petrocultures", 11, 14-15.

used in daily life.<sup>50</sup> Nevertheless, the momentum petroleum-use has gained the past few decades is unique. Especially in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the use of petroleum got a real boom in everyday culture, as more chemical refining processes were discovered. Our conception of modernity depend on this material: namely the values that we associate with this era – mobility, electrification, urbanization and liberty, for example – are all made possible by our consumption of petroleum.<sup>51</sup> Therefore the term *petro-modernity* is coined by scholars.<sup>52</sup> The accessibility of fossil fuels, petroleum-derived materials and other consumer goods make a country to be considered wealthy and modern in our current globalized world. Thus, this kaleidoscope of objects, practices and values lends itself greatly for critical reflection via the means of artworks, which the research collective *Beauty of Oil* has recognized and put to use in their two exhibitions.

One key example of *petro-modernity* is the use of the automobile.<sup>53</sup> In this object all aspects of *petro-modernity* come together: the technological possibility of producing automobiles, the boost of the automobile industry to promote the use of cars directed to individual citizens, making use of the notion of mobility and the freedom that comes with that mobility. These values and identity markers (being mobile and free) are actively marketed by the industry. Our relationships to such commodities and consequently the related identity tropes have long been figured as natural, logical outcomes of the use of petroleum and the progress that we have made in the last century.<sup>54</sup> When in fact, it has been marketed by the industry, mixing up socio-cultural developments in economic practices. As I discuss in further detail in chapter 2, the Volkswagen car company in Wolfsburg is very much partaking in these practices. In Wolfsburg the automobile is the emblem or true identity of the city as a whole.

Common associations with *petro-modernity* are unlimited progress and change at unprecedented speed: these associations have been considered to be positive and beneficial for decades now.<sup>55</sup> But in stark contrast to these positive connotations, are the toxic disastrous effects of the activities that uphold this lifestyle. The ecological impact, severe environmental pollution, culminating in the phenomenon of climate change as a whole cannot

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<sup>50</sup> Ancient Greek historiographer Herodotus, for example, writes in his *Histories* about the city walls of Babylon and how hot bitumen pitch is used as mortar (book I,179). Moreover, Herodotus describes some sort of asphalt extraction process in Ardericca (book VI,119.2-3). His technical language remains quite vague, which makes the reader wonder whether Herodotus has actually seen and understood the process. He makes special mention of the name and smell. See also book IV,195.3-4 for a similar passage on the extraction of asphalt in Zakynthos.

<sup>51</sup> Wilson, Szeman and Carlson, "On Petrocultures", 11.

<sup>52</sup> Cf. LeMenager, *Living Oil*, 67-72.

<sup>53</sup> See the foreword by Imre Szeman in the graphic novel *Gasoline Dreams*  
Cf. Hindelang, *Iridescent Kuwait*, 29;

<sup>54</sup> Wilson, Szeman and Carlson, "On Petrocultures", 11.

<sup>55</sup> Cf. Hindelang, *Iridescent Kuwait*, 111; Hein, "Oil Spaces: The Global Petroleumscape in the Rotterdam/The Hague Area", 4.



be ignored any longer. But to lessen our use of petroleum is extremely difficult, precisely because it entails a multitude of fundamental shifts.

Consequently, energy scholar Stephanie LeMenager has identified the following cultural phenomenon in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, but also noticeable in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, as *petromelancholia*: the grievance one can feel thinking about the decline or loss of conventional, easily accessible oil resources, due to the intimate, loving relationship we have had with oil.<sup>56</sup> As an extension of this grief for the source material, LeMenager links the grievance of modernity to this term as well: we do not wish to give up on the freedom or mobility petroleum has given us. Due to the close and embodied proximity of petroleum infrastructure – I can easily recall the car rides on the highway past the Rotterdam port, like I stated in the opening of this thesis –, we cannot imagine living without oil. LeMenager warns for inertia, or impedance of moving down a more sustainable route for the future.<sup>57</sup>

However, I believe the exhibition space in Rotterdam to be a fine example of productive grieving of oil. The space used to be a port warehouse, but due to lack of port activities, the building has been repurposed as an art exhibition space. Because the architectural character of the former function is harbored, space has been created to acknowledge and grieve previous activities.

### 1.3 VISUALIZING THE (IN)VISIBLE

In the field of energy humanities, scholars often speak of ‘invisible oil’: by employing this term, they can grasp the overarching patterns and the ubiquity of oil in modern life.<sup>58</sup> The academic discipline sets out to turn this notion of invisible oil into *visible* oil, by examining, investigating and appreciating all sorts of cultural forms of expression, like literature, theatre, music, visual arts, etc. all engaging with petroleum in one way or another.<sup>59</sup>

However, Stephanie LeMenager is wary of the attitude often taken for granted within the field of energy humanities. With the reliance of media cultivating empathy among the broader public, which can then be turned into political action.<sup>60</sup> The question remains what such political action actually looks like. Empathy is not attached to any particular plan of action. Moreover, it can contribute to the notion of inertia, a paralysis due to the inaccessibility of political power for the individual citizen.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> See LeMenager, *Living Oil*, 102.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 104–106.

<sup>58</sup> See Hein, “Oil Spaces: The Global Petroleumscape in the Rotterdam/The Hague Area”, 4.

<sup>59</sup> See e.g. Fakhrkonandeh, *Oil and Modern World Dramas*, xvii–xxi.

<sup>60</sup> LeMenager, *Living Oil*, 17.

<sup>61</sup> Ibidem.

Nevertheless, critical reflection on the energy industry is needed and one productive way of doing so is via visual arts. The level of abstraction that occurs in the arena of the petroleum industry is a complicating factor for the comprehension of petroleum, in part due to the ubiquity of petroleum in our society. Therefore, visual aspects are considered to be of great value to communicate to others what petroleum entails in full. With the re-visualization of petroleum, the insight that *petrocultures* provides, we can employ a counterstrategy to move the material from the margins to the center of our perception. Employing this counterstrategy can also be seen by the curators of research collective *Beauty of Oil* for the exhibitions they have set up. By communicating via a broad selection of artworks to the bigger public, they aim to raise awareness of this subject among a new audience, beyond the academic discipline of energy humanities. After all, the necessary energy transition is an affair that concerns all citizens.

## CHAPTER 2: EXHIBITING OIL IN THE WOLF'S DEN

Wolfsburg may be most known for being the birthplace of the iconic Volkswagen Beetle car, its soccer team VfL Wolfsburg, or the renowned Phaeno Science Center, but the city also has a respected art museum: Kunstmuseum Wolfsburg. Founded only in 1994, the museum has made a proper name for itself in the contemporary art scene. This may be somewhat unexpected, considering the fact that Wolfsburg started out as an industrial city, with a different general interest than contemporary art. Precisely the fusion of these elements, the industrial character of the city and the museum's engagement with contemporary art, makes Kunstmuseum Wolfsburg an interesting object of study.

In this chapter, I will focus on Kunstmuseum Wolfsburg with their exhibition *Oil: Beauty and Horror in the Petrol Age*. In order to get a more in-depth understanding of this exhibition, in paragraph 2.1 I first provide socio-historical context on the town of Wolfsburg, since the intended public of the museum is for a large part the citizens of Wolfsburg. The Volkswagen car company is a direct presence in Wolfsburg and in the Kunstmuseum, which adds a fascinating dimension to this particular exhibition. In paragraph 2.2, I dissect the identity of the museum, by zooming in on the locality and architecture of the Kunstmuseum, how the museum positions itself in society and their exhibition policy. Then, in paragraph 2.3, I analyze the abovementioned exhibition, by discussing the chosen narrative, the set-up of the exhibition in the museum space, including a selection of the artworks, and other additional material offered to the visitors to engage with the topic of the exhibition.

### 2.1 FUELED BY VOLKSWAGEN

Wolfsburg has a fascinating exceptional historical background: though young in years, a lot of history has happened already and has made its mark on the town, which is still apparent today. In 1938, initially named 'Stadt des KdF-Wagens bei Fallersleben', Wolfsburg was established by the National Socialist Party to house workers for the new large automobile factory of Volkswagen. The town was envisioned to be a commune with the Volkswagen factory north of the railway and the canal, and south of these the city structure, with housing and communal buildings.<sup>62</sup> Thus the *ancillary petroleumscape* as explained in the previous chapter, commenced: the facilitation of the Volkswagen factory in the form of an entire city had begun.

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<sup>62</sup> Riederer, "Die nationalsozialistische Musterstadt wird geplant".

The main aim of the National Socialists was to achieve mass motorization for the German population via the production of Volkswagen cars.<sup>63</sup> In the present day, as a commercial enterprise, Volkswagen promotes mass motorization on a global level. The overwhelming presence of cars, or car culture in general, which is a direct connection to the notion of *petro-modernity*, makes the city of Wolfsburg inherently a true 'petro-town'.

Ever since the foundation of Wolfsburg, the intimate connection between Volkswagen and the city has always been nurtured: starting from 1953, the prosperous Volkswagen factory intervened in the housing construction programs to accommodate its workers.<sup>64</sup> Now, Volkswagen or affiliated companies are the main employers, benefactors and sponsors of cultural events, and Volkswagen's power plant is the energy provider for parts of the city.<sup>65</sup> Such societal investments are characteristic for the previously mentioned *petroleumscape of philanthropy*, with the intent of promoting more consumption of oil-based products and activities.<sup>66</sup>

Social sciences scholars Elham Moonesirust and Andrew Brown have analyzed the social relations between the citizens of Wolfsburg and Volkswagen: according to local residents (also being employees at Volkswagen), Wolfsburg and Volkswagen are one single entity, a "micro-cosmos".<sup>67</sup> In addition, Moonesirust and Brown have shown that being a Volkswagen employee is a beneficial status to have in the city of Wolfsburg: by providing all sorts of advantages to their employees, on both economic and social level, Volkswagen creates a position for itself to exercise control over the populace in question.<sup>68</sup> Some employees choose to live elsewhere to escape the ubiquitous presence of the company, which is an indication for the pervasiveness of Volkswagen on a daily basis.<sup>69</sup> It is important to keep this influence in mind, since the intended public of the Kunstmuseum is for a large part the local populace of Wolfsburg. The identity of this particular visitor group is shaped by

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<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

In the Second World War, the factories were deployed to produce ammunitions and various military vehicles, all with forced labor. The city was rebaptized as Wolfsburg by Great Britain after the war, and Volkswagen operated as a commercial enterprise afterwards. Cf. Moonesirust & Brown, "Company towns and the governmentality of desired identities", 508.

<sup>64</sup> Cf. Riederer, "Das Verschwinden der Baracken".

<sup>65</sup> See Moonesirust & Brown, "Company towns and the governmentality of desired identities", 503.

<sup>66</sup> See Hein, *Oil Spaces*, 12.

<sup>67</sup> See Moonesirust & Brown, "Company towns and the governmentality of desired identities", 510.

Moonesirust and Brown have conducted interviews with residents, employees, current or ex-members of Volkswagen, questioning them on, among other things, the role and influence of Volkswagen in Wolfsburg, see for the data collection and analysis: 508-510.

<sup>68</sup> Moonesirust and Brown make use of Foucault's concept of 'governmentality' and 'biopower' in neoliberal societies to get a better understanding of Volkswagen's mechanisms to execute power. For their discussion of social advantages: 510-513.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 516-517.

Volkswagen and that is of relevance for the museum: they should be aware of the (prior) knowledge, preconceptions and experiences of their intended audience.

It comes as no surprise then that Kunstmuseum Wolfsburg is not left untouched by Volkswagen: the museum receives financial support from the non-profit Kunststiftung Volkswagen, the Holler Foundation, founded by owners of Volkswagen-Versicherungsdienst GmbH (VVD), and Volkswagen Financial Services AG.<sup>70</sup> Even funding for the foundation of the museum was provided by the company Volkswagen, among the municipality and private donors. These financial partnerships are pivotal for commencing an intimate bond of trust and indebtedness between museum and Volkswagen. Moreover, the initiative 'Volkswagen Group Art4All', which aims to make art accessible for all social groups, is part of the Kunstmuseum, organizing all sorts of activities in the museum.<sup>71</sup> Thus the influence of Volkswagen also touches upon museum practices. The financial means provided by Volkswagen are considered an impartial affair and because the museum is not tied to the public state, independence is a guarantee.<sup>72</sup> But it would be a fault to perceive this dynamic as independent or impartial. Especially since Moonesirust and Brown have shown convincingly that the influence of a company can interfere on more levels of society than just the economic level, and in a disquieting manner.

Unfortunately, Moonesirust and Brown do not include cultural partners, like the Kunstmuseum, in their research on the influence of Volkswagen on social partners as they do with the municipality and public schools.<sup>73</sup> In my opinion, this is a lacuna in their research. Especially since the cultural sector is prone to strategic philanthropic actions by influential corporations part of or affiliated with the fossil fuel industry, for instance.<sup>74</sup> The arts is considered an effective realm to embed itself in, as it holds enormous overall social esteem. Such companies burrow themselves in society by providing financial support on various levels of society, which functions simultaneously as an investment in the so-called 'social license to operate'. This term entails a community's perception of the credibility and acceptability of a certain company and its local operations is influenced by societal

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<sup>70</sup> Kunstmuseum Wolfsburg, "About us".

<sup>71</sup> See for further information on this initiative: Volkswagen, "Culture for everyone' at Neue Nationalgalerie: 1 year Volkswagen Group Art4All".

See for an overview of activities in Kunstmuseum Wolfsburg: Kunstmuseum Wolfsburg, "Tag: Volkswagen Group Art4All".

<sup>72</sup> See Mandel, "Kunstmuseum Wolfsburg", 160: "Finanziert wird das Museum von einer privaten, volkswagennahen Stiftung, die eine Unabhängigkeit von öffentlichen Geldern und öffentlicher Einflussnahme garantiert."

<sup>73</sup> See for the discussion on Volkswagen and municipality, Moonesirust & Brown, "Company towns and the governmentality of desired identities": 510-511; the relation between Volkswagen and schools: *ibid.*, 514-515.

<sup>74</sup> See Evans' publication *Artwash: Big Oil in the arts* (2015) for a thorough analysis of the fossil fuel industry (Big Oil) and their strategy of *artwashing*: sponsoring the cultural sector to mask their actions which have disastrous effects on society. Cf. Evans, *Artwash*, 76-93.

investments.<sup>75</sup> This social license cultivates goodwill from the public and can then function as a guarantee for the company, if certain operations are harmful in any way.

## 2.2 IDENTITY OF KUNSTMUSEUM WOLFSBURG

To this day, Wolfsburg is in terms of city planning a particular case: it does not have a clear city center with a vibrant living environment. Kunstmuseum Wolfsburg is located in the south part of the city, near the city hall and public library, all connected to the Porschestraße.<sup>76</sup> The streetscape is not very open or inviting with many tall, concrete, grey buildings. In order to enliven the city center of Wolfsburg, the city council has set up an initiative to strengthen and activate the city center, with among other things, cultural activities, which the Kunstmuseum is a part of as well.<sup>77</sup> In this way, the art museum is a more active and present player in the city, reaching out to the local public.

What is more, the museum positions itself as a valuable communication center in society: they want to engage with visitors and create an open space for critical debates and discussions.<sup>78</sup> The museum space aims for visitors to think outside of the box and encourages an open and curious attitude to the new and the unknown.<sup>79</sup> The museum then is considered to be a social space, a *rendez-vous*, where people meet up, do activities together and interact with each other. The architecture of the museum building reflects this attitude with the design choice of a transparent, glass urban lodge, with a spacious, open exhibition room, suitable for displaying artworks flexibly.<sup>80</sup> The roof of the building is made of glass, which allows for lots of sunlight to enter the space. In addition to the overall openness of the space, the museum also makes use of so-called wob<sup>3</sup>walls: these installations are suitable for easily making changes to the exhibition room, in order to customize the exhibition architecture for each exhibition held in the museum.<sup>81</sup> The museum promotes this wall system as part of their sustainable exhibition architecture, since the wob<sup>3</sup>walls are reusable.

Museum scholar Kali Tzortzi links these features – the social function, the transparent glass form enclosing an open space, and flexibility in layouts – to the spatial

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<sup>75</sup> Cf. Evans, *Artwash*, 82, see also 76-86.

<sup>76</sup> See section 1, image 1 in the appendix for a map of the city.

<sup>77</sup> WMG für Wolfsburg, "Perspektive Innenstadt!". See for the cultural part of the Porschestraße: WMG für Wolfsburg, "Kunst in der Porschestraße". The museum is part of the group 'Kulturquartier': a bond of cultural institutions in the city which do activities together (Kulturquartier Wolfsburg, "Kulturquartier Wolfsburg").

<sup>78</sup> Mandel, "Kunstmuseum Wolfsburg", 160.

<sup>79</sup> Kunstmuseum, „Über uns“, their mission statement is as follows: „Ein lebendiger Ort für alle, die sich für Kunst interessieren oder sie kennenlernen möchten, die sich von ihr inspirieren lassen oder sich an ihr abarbeiten wollen, die den Blick über den Tellerrand wagen und die Freude am Neuen, am Ungewöhnlichen und manchmal auch am Provokanten haben.“

<sup>80</sup> Mandel, "Kunstmuseum Wolfsburg", 161.

See section 1, image 2 in the appendix for an impression of the architecture of the Kunstmuseum.

<sup>81</sup> Kunstmuseum Wolfsburg, "Wob3Walls".

museum type, the 'open museum'.<sup>82</sup> This type of building is linked to the ideology of the modern museum, being democratic and without particularities or unique characteristics. Moreover, the need for open space and flexibility in the exhibition architecture relates to the contemporary museum regularly rearranging their collections and exhibitions.<sup>83</sup>

Kunstmuseum Wolfsburg mainly presents group exhibitions, with a certain theme concerning modern, acute topics, which are explored critically via contemporary artist's perspectives. In their mission statement, Kunstmuseum writes how they aim to produce art exhibitions in which visitors are challenged to reconsider social issues and cultivate new perspectives and insights.<sup>84</sup> Looking at the museum's archive of past exhibitions, they do mostly organize exhibitions engaging with current debates on social and political topics.<sup>85</sup> See for example the following past exhibitions, *Inside – Out. Konstruktionen des Ichs* (2019–2020), an exhibition on identity and social norms co-organized by youths from Wolfsburg, *Macht! Licht!* (2022), an exhibition linking artworks with artificial light to political, ecological, social and economic statements, *Blow Up! Vom Wachsen der Dinge* (2022–2023), explores the growth of things, in the broadest sense.<sup>86</sup> Due to the scope of this thesis, I cannot delve into these exhibitions critically, but the themes and approaches employed in these exhibitions fit the museum's ambition.

As I have made clear in section 2.1 above, the Volkswagen company is an immediate presence in Wolfsburg, but also in Kunstmuseum Wolfsburg. I already mentioned the initiative 'Volkswagen Group Art4All' with their numerous activities held in the museum, but I also want to shed light on a honorary exhibition held in 2023: *Peter Keetman. 70 Jahre Volkswagenwerk 1953 (70 Years of the Volkswagen Factory 1953)*.<sup>87</sup> The celebration of 70 years of Volkswagen was presented in the Kunstmuseum, highlighting the affiliation of the museum with the company. Photographer Peter Keetman is known for his intriguing documentation of the production process of the VW Beetle car, showcasing shiny, chromed parts of the Beetle. With the exhibition of his photographs, the Volkswagen car factory is put on a pedestal, especially because the open attitude of the company towards Keetman is lauded explicitly in the description of the exhibition.<sup>88</sup> If we take this exhibition into account

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<sup>82</sup> Tzortzi, *Museum Architecture*, 82.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid., 83.

<sup>84</sup> Kunstmuseum Wolfsburg, „Über uns“.

<sup>85</sup> See for a complete overview of past exhibitions in the museum: Kunstmuseum Wolfsburg, „Ausstellung“.

<sup>86</sup> The webpages for the respective exhibitions are: Kunstmuseum Wolfsburg, „Inside out Konstruktionen des Ichs“; „Macht Licht“; „Blow up vom Wachsen der Dinge“.

<sup>87</sup> Kunstmuseum Wolfsburg, „Peter Keetman“.

<sup>88</sup> See the following statement on the exhibition's website (Kunstmuseum Wolfsburg, „Peter Keetman“): „Seitens des VW-Werkes wurde mir jede Unterstützung zuteil – ich durfte mich im Werk nach freiem Ermessen umschauen. Auch wurde mir ein junger Mann aus dem Werk beigelegt, der mir dann sehr hilfreich war. Ich hatte nur eine Rolleiflex, Filme und ein Stativ, und keinerlei Beleuchtung, keinen Blitz etc. Alles konnte ich nur mit dem

from the critical perspective of *petrocultures*, the attitude of the Kunstmuseum is especially interesting, because the Kunstmuseum is complicit in showcasing *petro-modernity* in a positive and enticing light.

### 2.3 LOOKING BACK AT THE PETROL AGE

Moving on to the exhibition that is the main case study for this chapter, do we see the Kunstmuseum as a stage for exhibiting and lauding aspects of *petro-modernity* in a similar way as the Peter Keetman exhibition? *Oil: Beauty and Horror in the Petrol Age* was on view in the museum from September 2021 to January 2022. Seemingly, this exhibition has a more critical approach to *petro-modernity*.

Before opening, the project of *Oil: Beauty and Horror in the Petrol Age* has had a long prelude: in 2016 the first conversations took place between the museum, former director Ralf Beil and the research group *Beauty of Oil*.<sup>89</sup> In October 2018, as a way of preparation for the planned exhibition, *Beauty of Oil* organized together with the Kunstmuseum the symposium *True Oil* on the multitude of meanings of petroleum in material objects and our imaginaries.<sup>90</sup> Curators Alexander Klose and Benjamin Steininger have been involved from the beginning, but in the meantime the museum has switched from directors. Andreas Beitin is Ralf Beil's successor in office since 2019. There has been a lot of speculation and media coverage on this unexpected turn of events for the organization of the museum.<sup>91</sup> The exhibition in question is given as a reason for the leave of Ralf Beil: apparently after Beil's critical perspective on the city of Wolfsburg, including the presence of Volkswagen and its controversial history, in the exhibition *Wolfsburg Unlimited* (2016), the stakeholders of the museum were not keen on another exhibition with possible critique on cars and Volkswagen specifically.<sup>92</sup>

Though it is not stated in black and white whether Beil's dismissal has to do with his critical attitude towards Volkswagen, it is valuable to take this unexpected turn of events into account, considering the context of Wolfsburg and Volkswagen's serious influence, as I discussed above. It is not far-fetched that criticism on the automobile would hit too close to home, considering the dominant position of the car in the cityscape of Wolfsburg. It makes

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natürlichen Tageslicht aufnehmen, aber ich war so glücklich und so dankbar, daß man mir seitens des Werkes so großzügig entgegengekommen war.“

<sup>89</sup> *Beauty of Oil*, „»Oil. Schönheit und Schrecken des Erdölzeitalters«. Ausstellung am Kunstmuseum Wolfsburg 6-9/2021“.

<sup>90</sup> For the symposium, see Kunstmuseum, “True Oil”.

<sup>91</sup> E.g. Trinks, “Ölmalerei in der Dieselmoderne”; Fuchs, „Wolfsburg: VW-Aufsichtsrat sorgt für Rauswurf eines kritischen Museumsdirektors“.

<sup>92</sup> See e.g. Briegleb, “Wie geschmiert”; Trinks, “Ölmalerei in der Dieselmoderne”.



one question to what extent the Kunstmuseum is as open and inviting to difficult discussions as they make themselves out to be.

Be that as it may, the collaboration between Kunstmuseum Wolfsburg and Klose and Steininger has been particularly fruitful. After this internal obstacle, plus the struggle with the COVID-19 pandemic at the time, the exhibition still took place in Kunstmuseum Wolfsburg in 2021. With an impressive amount of more than 70 collaborating artists, 220 objects on display, the exhibition is a true *magnum opus*. Other output of this collaboration between Kunstmuseum and *Beauty of Oil*, next to the abovementioned symposium, has been the publication of an exhibition catalogue, with a foreword by the museum director and other contributions of numerous scholars.<sup>93</sup> An online curatorial issue has also been published, providing extensive background information on, for example, petroleum as a fossil fuel, the history of our consumption of it (starting in Mesopotamia), the environmental impact of our consumption with the example of Earth Overshoot Day, the forms of wealth petroleum has given. Both the catalogue and curatorial issue implement, contextualize and engage with the artworks which were part of the exhibition.<sup>94</sup>

For *Oil: Beauty and Horror in the Petrol Age* the curatorial team has chosen to show a retrospective overview of global oil modernity reflected in art, covering multiple decades. The curators wanted to present a collection of artworks representative of past, current, and possible future practices with petroleum. The main questions being raised by the curators are: what is characteristic for this petrol age, what is beautiful and horrifying, and how is this reflected in art?<sup>95</sup> The opening piece in the foyer of the Kunstmuseum is a great incentive for these questions: *Raumzeichnung (Bass)* is an in-situ installation of 6 kilometers of black plastic, adhesive tape and paper, self-handedly produced by artist Monika Grzymala in the museum.<sup>96</sup> The materiality of crude oil and the interweaving of the material in our society was the main inspiration for Grzymala. A tar-like monstrosity is the result, which grabs the attention of the visitor immediately and sets the mood for the rest of the exhibition.

On a conceptual level, the exhibition takes the viewpoint of a fictional temporal distance, while at the same time seeking thematic and emotional proximity for the visitor to

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<sup>93</sup> See for the exhibition catalogue: Steininger, Benjamin, Andreas Beitin and Alexander Klose, eds. *Oil: Beauty and Horror in the Petrol Age* (2021).

<sup>94</sup> Kunstmuseum Wolfsburg, "Oil: Schönheit und Schrecken des Erdölzeitalters, 4. 9. 2021–9. 1. 2022".

<sup>95</sup> Kunstmuseum Wolfsburg, "Oil. Beauty and Horror in the Petrol Age".

<sup>96</sup> In section 2 in the appendix of images I have included images of the exhibited artwork and the exhibition spaces in Kunstmuseum Wolfsburg (images 3-11). I refer to this section whenever I discuss an artwork that is part of the exhibition.

See the work in progress by Monika Grzymala in the following video: Kunstmuseum Wolfsburg. *Making-of „Raumzeichnung“ von Monika Grzymala im Kunstmuseum Wolfsburg*. November 17, 2021. <[https://youtu.be/qta8W--jco8?si=j\\_2FtKnAP5g2yQMR](https://youtu.be/qta8W--jco8?si=j_2FtKnAP5g2yQMR)>. Accessed on June 7, 2024.

relate to.<sup>97</sup> The narrative of the exhibition is centered around the presentation of the archaeology of our present use of petroleum, with the exhibition set-up representing an archaeological excavation site.<sup>98</sup> With a so-called archaeological excavation site, the visitor is taken on a journey throughout the twentieth and twenty-first century, related to petroleum.

To add to the notion of an excavation site, the wob3walls of the museum are put diagonally through the exhibition space, meaning to portray abstracted layers of the earth.<sup>99</sup> Partly due to the sterile architecture of the museum building, I find it difficult to go along with this line of thought of the organization, regarding the exhibition design. Moreover, one expects from an archaeological point of departure that the exhibition narrative follows somewhat of a chronological order. However, as exhibition reviewer Christian Götter says, this reasoning is quickly left behind as the visitor enters the main exhibition space: a broad collection of artworks is exhibited, without following a clear line of argument.<sup>100</sup> As the brochure of the exhibition makes clear, the artworks are grouped on a thematic level.<sup>101</sup> Unfortunately, the specific wall texts of the exhibition have not been published, which makes it more difficult to reconstruct the narrative chosen by the curators. It seems that the crucial cultural-historical background of petroleum is mainly discussed in the abovementioned accompanying exhibition catalogue. The thematic areas are divided on geographical level (e.g. Norway, USA, China), political level (e.g. oil war) or stages of oil consumption (e.g. refinery, pipeline). This curatorial choice makes the temporal archaeological excavation site a bit messy: it becomes more of a big heap of petroleum heritage, depending on clear thematic distinction only.

As a prologue to the exhibition, so strictly speaking not part of the archaeological excavation site, the visitor encounters the fossil ichthyosaur, which was excavated between Wolfsburg and Braunschweig.<sup>102</sup> With this object, petroleum is placed in the larger context of natural history and tailored to the locality of Wolfsburg. In terms of highlighting the locality of Wolfsburg in relation to petroleum, this effort is rather meager, considering the chimneys of the Volkswagen car factory looming on the horizon of Wolfsburg.

Moving to the main exhibition space, the set-up of the exhibition and the loose arrangement of objects made the visitors move through the excavation site on their own account. Though this may be beneficial to the individual meaning making of the visitors, it can

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<sup>97</sup> Kunstmuseum Wolfsburg, "Oil. Beauty and Horror in the Petrol Age".

<sup>98</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>99</sup> See the exhibition plan, image 3.

<sup>100</sup> Götter, "Exhibition review of "Oil. Schönheit und Schrecken des Erdölzeitalters, 04.09.2021 - 09.01.2022 Wolfsburg".

<sup>101</sup> Kunstmuseum Wolfsburg, *Oil. Schönheit und Schrecken des Erdölzeitalters, 4. 9. 2021 – 9. 1. 2022*. Wolfsburg: Kunstmuseum Wolfsburg, 2021.

<sup>102</sup> Loan from the Staatliches Naturhistorisches Museum, Braunschweig, inventory number unknown.

leave them in the dark, when there are so many aspects of oil discussed. In terms of the exhibition space, the white cube atmosphere is undeniable in Kunstmuseum Wolfsburg, making it more difficult to put the petroleum artworks in a larger context. The embodied or affective experience, as Kali Tzortzi advocates for, asks a lot of the imagination of the visitor. In spite of that, the art installation *Ölspiegel* submerges the visitor in a dark, reflective underground space with glass mirrors and low vessels with 400 liters of oil.<sup>103</sup> This encounter with such a deep focus on the materiality of crude oil is of great value for an exhibition engaging with conceptual thinking.

In more or less the center of the main exhibition space, the installation *Naptha Cracker* (2012) by sculptor Joep van Lieshout is presented (whom we will meet again in the next chapter in Brutus, Rotterdam). It stands on its own in the room, the robust character of the installation in stark contrast with the sterile exhibition space. This part of the exhibition deals with the chemical processes of petroleum: though on the tiniest molecular level, the biggest changes in regard to fueling our modern culture have taken place.<sup>104</sup> Oil refineries are considered to be the modern form of alchemist practices, making people's lives much more colorful. *Menschenmenge* (1984) by Tony Cragg shows a brightly colored new species against the background of the white exhibition wall: the *homo plasticus*.<sup>105</sup> Though the intention of Cragg may have begun with our fascination for plastic and the widespread use of the material, the work regains new meaning with the knowledge that humans consume lots of microplastics, resulting in the physical state of our body slowly changing. Thus the human species can really be called the *homo plasticus*.

With the main focus on the history of the twentieth century with the selected artworks, the curators provide an elaborate global overview of the past hundred years. The critical attitude is mostly pointed to the section on China in the exhibition, posing questions on propaganda material on oil, the idea of progress surrounding petroleum, and more. It can be debated whether the curators actively maintain enough of a critical attitude, or if with lack of information given to the visitor, the objects on display are still put on a pedestal, with the atmosphere of the exhibition space inevitably adding to this possibility.

And what about the future? The future-thinking thought experiment of the curators is handed over to the visitor by means of an audio guide presented alongside the exhibition, but

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<sup>103</sup> Steininger, audio segment *Ölspiegel*; Steininger, "»Oil« has left the building.

<sup>104</sup> Kunstmuseum Wolfsburg. *Oil. Schönheit und Schrecken des Erdölzeitalters*, 4. 9. 2021 – 9. 1. 2022. Wolfsburg: Kunstmuseum Wolfsburg, 2021.

<sup>105</sup> See image 11.

following its own narrative. This particular audio guide has been created by Bernhard Hopfengärtner, futurologist and member of the *Beauty of Oil* collective.<sup>106</sup>

The introduction of the audio guide is curatorial advice from the future: the end of the petrol age has begun and the visitor is invited to envision a future past this current petrol age, explore the imagination and join the speculative journey in the Kunstmuseum.<sup>107</sup> The visitor can then listen to five 'Ölspuren' (oil traces): various scenarios of the future, with or without petroleum, such as alternative energy systems, like solar and wind energy (segments *Alles Zucker*, *Windrüsten*), or our signature on the planet in the form of a global plastic vault (segment *Global Plastic Vault*). In a passionate rhetorical speech (segment *Künstliche Intelligenz*), the speaker warns about the invasive ubiquitous infiltration of petroleum: in order to save the planet, we need to change the future generation's relationship with oil. The speech ends with an exhortation to let artificial intelligence find the residues of our 'Ölgeist', to alter these thinking patterns, and to free us of petroleum once and for all. A round of applause, but also booing can be heard at the closure of the segment: is this meant to resemble the ambivalence of the public opinion?

In fact, how has the exhibition been received by the public? Numerous reviews of this exhibition have been published.<sup>108</sup> Interestingly enough, the relationship between Kunstmuseum and Volkswagen is frequently touched upon in reviews. The opinions are divided, though: some say the presence of Volkswagen is made clear via many artworks referring to the company, others state that critical contemplation of the museum and car company is missing.<sup>109</sup> The self-reflection is considered a lacuna in the exhibition: it is understandable that visitors expect this critical attitude of both the museum, as a socially engaged cultural institute, and Volkswagen, as a big player in the industry, when dealing with a topic like the influence of petroleum. With regard to their own impact, it is inequitable and unproductive if influential social institutions let themselves off the hook, leaving the self-reflection mostly on the plate of the individual.

Unfortunately, the exhibition has contributed to exactly that. The multitude of material is on the one hand applauded as an impressive curatorial affair, on the other hand it is dispraised as being overwhelming to the visitor. Paraphrasing the words of exhibition reviewer Till Briegleb: visitors will probably feel like carrying two oil barrels of information

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<sup>106</sup> Hopfengärtner, "Ölspuren. Text- und Audiointerventionen aus der Zukunft".

<sup>107</sup> Hopfengärtner, audio segment Einleitung.

<sup>108</sup> I refer to some of these reviews in the next footnotes.

On the webpage of the exhibition, Kunstmuseum has also referred to press material, but the segments of these articles are not very constructive, mostly treating the point of departure for the exhibition. See Kunstmuseum, "Presse".

<sup>109</sup> See Götter, exhibition review of *Oil. Beauty and Horror of the Oil Age* for the former opinion. The latter is voiced for example by Fischer, "Stählerner Fingerzeig nach oben".

leaving the museum, not knowing what to do with them.<sup>110</sup> The efforts done by the organization to encourage visitors' reflection on oil and activate future-thinking, for example, by additional means of the Ölspuren audio guide, have not been appreciated fully. Perhaps the criticism of the lack of prospect also has to do with the uncertainty of visitors, wishing for more clarity on such a topic, but as I stated in the introduction of this thesis, in the case of climate change, clear-cut future-thinking is non-viable. Nevertheless, following McGhie's holistic approach, people ought to feel empowered and supported by bigger institutions to partake in these kind of debates.

## 2.4 CONCLUSION

To conclude, Wolfsburg, inherently being a 'petro-town', with the presence of Volkswagen and fundamental layers of the *ancillary petroleumscape*, is the perfect place to open up the discussion on petroleum, in the context of the climate crisis. A large group of the visitors of the Kunstmuseum, the local citizens of Wolfsburg, are closely tied to the car company and is thus an interesting crowd to have around the table in this discussion. As we have seen, the exhibition *Oil: Beauty and Horror in the Petrol Age* does present countless artworks highlighting both the beautiful and horrific aspects of oil on several levels, but the self-reflection is lacking. Without this self-critical attitude, Kunstmuseum Wolfsburg insists on an objective and neutral position, refusing a more activist position, which is needed in the context of the climate crisis. The future-thinking practices, encouraged by Fiona Cameron, as discussed in the introduction above, are encouraged to the visitor by means of additional exhibition material, but the disbalance between museum and visitor has not gone unnoticed. With the celebratory exhibition on Keetman's photographs of the petrocultural icon the Volkswagen Beetle two years later, it seems that Kunstmuseum Wolfsburg did not stick to the insightful stains that *Beauty of Oil* left in the museum.

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<sup>110</sup> Briegleb, "Wie geschmiert": "Besuchern, die sich lange genug in der Ausstellung aufhalten, um wirklich alle 220 Elemente betrachtet und verstanden zu haben, verlassen sie vermutlich mit dem Gefühl, sie trügen zwei Öltanks an Informationen mit sich, ohne zu wissen, wohin damit zu steuern sei."

## CHAPTER 3: PETROMELANCHOLIA IN A FORMER PORT WAREHOUSE

BRUTUS IS A CROSS BETWEEN A MAZE AND A TIME MACHINE, A BOMB SHELTER AND A LAUNCH PAD, A LABORATORY AND AN INDUSTRIAL RUIN, A CABINET OF CURIOSITIES AND A THINK TANK.<sup>111</sup>

The quote above is, on the website about the organization, the opening statement of the description of the Brutus exhibition space, located in Nieuw-Mathenesse, Rotterdam. Seemingly Brutus is a place to get lost, travel to other speculative realities, and do (imaginary) experiments in this labyrinth in Rotterdam. Both artists and visitors are invited on this creative journey by the organization. The choice of words in the statement above are supposed to illustrate the dynamic, unconventional and playful character of the exhibition space. But how is this exhibition space actually used, and what is the added value of such an unconventional space?

In this chapter, I analyze the Brutus exhibition space in further detail and I discuss the exhibition *Petromelancholia*. I provide more context on the Brutus space in paragraph 3.1, with focus on their mission statement and description of the physical space. According to the organization of Brutus, the site-specificity of the Rotterdam harbor is of great importance for their identity as an exhibition space. Therefore, in paragraph 3.2, I dive into the locality of Brutus and the ties to the Rotterdam harbor, relating this to Carola Hein's theoretical framework surrounding the *petroleumscape*, as discussed previously in chapter 1. Moreover, the locality of the space played a key role in the organization of the exhibition with research collective *Beauty of Oil*. In paragraph 3.3, I provide an analysis of *Petromelancholia*, looking into the exhibition set-up, the use of the exhibition space, a selection of the artworks on display, and more.

### 3.1 BRUTUS, AN OUTSIDER

In 2008, sculpture artist Joep van Lieshout founded 'Brutus Artist Driven Playground' to provide opportunities for artists to carry through their dreams and visions.<sup>112</sup> The name Brutus is inspired by the architectural style *brutalism*, which emerged in the 1950s post-war

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<sup>111</sup> Brutus. "About".

<sup>112</sup> Ibidem.

Atelier Van Lieshout is closely connected to the organization and has its own foundation, namely Brutus Base, which presents all projects and activities related to the Atelier. The second foundation is called Brutus Space: here all projects and activities related to other artists are hosted. Throughout this thesis I refer to this Brutus Space, when mentioning Brutus.

period.<sup>113</sup> Characteristics of this particular architectural style – namely robust structures of industrial materials, like concrete or brick – fit well with the ‘unpolished’ environment of the Rotterdam harbor, according to Van Lieshout. To add to that, the association with the historical Roman figure Brutus does not seem misplaced, considering his brutal actions against his contemporary status quo (i.e. being involved in Roman emperor Julius Caesar’s murder). Likewise, the Brutus space is an environment that is actively contesting or questioning current belief systems via contemporary art exhibitions.

In their mission statement, Brutus declares how themes are explored which are relevant to the whole of society. Issues like migration, social security, power perversion are explicitly mentioned, alongside climate change.<sup>114</sup> With the *Petromelancholia* exhibition, Brutus acknowledges the impact of petroleum as a topic worthy of and relevant for discussion among the bigger public. Unlike previous exhibitions, on a thematic level, *Petromelancholia* is the most suitable exhibition for this particular exhibition space.<sup>115</sup> Actively engaging with such contemporary societal matters, Brutus is positioning itself as an involved medium in society. Moreover, the organization fosters the moral to reject traditional social class differences in their environment. The disparity in background, whether it be on an educational or professional level, is not acknowledged when visitors enter the Brutus complex.<sup>116</sup> Usually, little information about the artworks is given to visitors, so that they can construct meaning for themselves. In addition, the visitor is invited to pay an entrance fee that fits their own budget. An accessible approach to art is maintained with these practices, aiming to include all sorts of social groups in the dialogues they present in their exhibition space.

The organization promises the cultivation of “a global revolution of the imagination” at their exhibition space, on the Keileweg.<sup>117</sup> It is implied that this revolution is made possible due to the liberty that Brutus has as an exhibition space and their non-restrictive ways of exhibiting and producing art.<sup>118</sup> Restrictions that may occur in museums are off the table in Brutus: they seek these ‘traditional’ boundaries and transgress them, in order to encourage raw creativity from artists, and creative thinking in visitors’ viewership. One example of such

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<sup>113</sup> Lange, “Van atelier tot kunstbuurt Brutus. Joep van Lieshout deelt zijn visie: ‘Kunst is niet alleen voor de happy few’”.

<sup>114</sup> Brutus. “About”.

<sup>115</sup> I elaborate on this point further below.

<sup>116</sup> Brutus. “About”.

On the website, the following is written: “Here, the distinctions between art connoisseur and layman, self-taught artist and established artist, forklift driver and professor are erased. The motto ‘everyone is an insider’ applies.”

<sup>117</sup> Brutus. “About”.

<sup>118</sup> In addition, Brutus Space provides artists residencies in the Brutus Lab: four to five artists are able to work, live, and/or exhibit in a workspace, located in renowned architect Jan van Teeffelen’s former villa. See: Brutus. “About”.

boundaries are practical: the size of the complex – namely 6.000 square meters, including the sculpture garden – allows for enormous art installations, which is nearly impossible in the confinement of conventional museum spaces. Purposefully, no climate regulation is present in the exhibition spaces. When walking around, the temperature, humidity and light exposure can change drastically in the maze of the warehouse. This means that the artworks are exposed to the elements, making them susceptible to damage.

Due to the particular environment of the exhibition space, visitors are warned to enter the complex on their own risk.<sup>119</sup> The spaces are not very neat, with uneven ground, wires sticking out, wet floors, etc. one may stumble or trip and hurt oneself. An exclusion of liability is published to have visitors take responsibility for their own actions: it is not the responsibility of Brutus to provide a safe environment for visitors. Visitors are encouraged to explore and roam freely throughout the entire complex on the Keileweg, and do their own thing. This exclusion of liability adds to the notion of roaming free and exploring for the visitors, but making visitors aware of the risks that they take. In the appendix of images you can find a photographic impression of the Brutus space, via some images of the exhibition spaces (images 19-30).

### **3.2 KEILEWEG, ROTTERDAM, AND BEYOND**

As a former port warehouse, the Brutus exhibition space is inherently connected to the Rotterdam harbor and its activities, including the Rotterdam landscape of oil refineries and chemical factories. As I discussed in chapter 2, sculptor Joep van Lieshout was part of the exhibition *Beauty and Horror* in Wolfsburg, with his installation *Naptha Cracker*. During the collaboration in Wolfsburg with *Beauty of Oil*, the idea was born to host a similar exhibition in the Brutus exhibition space in Rotterdam.<sup>120</sup> The direct link to the Rotterdam port and the petromodern activities happening there was too strong to ignore, as curators Klose and Steininger also acknowledged.<sup>121</sup> Moreover, Brutus allowed for new curatorial opportunities in terms of exhibition space.

The port warehouse, located on the Keileweg in the so-called M4H-area (Merwe-Vierhavengebied), used to be one of the biggest ports for warehousing and distributing all

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<sup>119</sup> Brutus, "Exclusion of liability".

<sup>120</sup> Personal conversation with Sanne ten Brink, May 3<sup>rd</sup> 2024.

<sup>121</sup> Brutus, "Petromelancholia". They write as follows on the website: "t's hard to think of a better location for *Petromelancholia* than at Brutus - situated in the Rotterdam harbour. In few places will the impact of the energy transition be more visible than here. This is therefore the most appropriate place for critical self-reflection with a good dose of melancholy and nostalgia."



kinds of products.<sup>122</sup> Due to a significant stagnation in the traditional port activities, the M4H-area is in rapid transformation to combat pauperization and falling.<sup>123</sup> At the same time, the unique raw character of the area is cherished and is meant to be kept through the transformations. This is noticeable in the new activities that are set up, but also in the way the space is used. Section 4 in the appendix provides an impression of the area (images 18-30).

In recent years, the transformation of the M4H-area should result in a 'makers district', with all kinds of facilities (including housing), corporations, cultural institutions and events.<sup>124</sup> Artist Joep van Lieshout has been a maker in this area since the 1980s: he has made his mark on the area, and is meaning to continue doing this in the future.<sup>125</sup> The Brutus exhibition space is part of this district. Although the space is now repurposed for experimenting with art, the direct context of the Rotterdam port is very much kept alive by the organization team of Brutus: they highlight this element as a formative part of Brutus' identity. The raw, crude and unrefined character of the port is fostered in the exhibition space, partly by deterioration, and their exhibition space plan. Cargo spaces, rooms used as warehouses, a silo, sea containers and an office space are the exhibition rooms and the names of these rooms are often still linked to their former function (e.g. Laadruimte, Containers, Bureel).<sup>126</sup>

The redevelopment of the warehouse, and the whole area in fact, is of big significance for imagining and realizing alternative futures. On the Keileweg, the perfect place is created for reflecting critically on the use of petroleum and the impact on society: the transformation of the existing place allows for new narratives on *petro-modernity*. The warehouse building has been given new purpose and thus new meaning, but with the inclusion of the history of the building, it is easier for people to reconsider past and novel energy flows, for example. By doing so, the feedback loop of petroleum flows and the boosting of oil use is broken down.<sup>127</sup> The *infrastructural petroleumscape*, which I discussed in chapter 1, is in part fractured. This counts as an act of being socially conscious and motivated, being rooted in time and place.<sup>128</sup> Museum scholar Suzan MacLeod underscores the biographic approach to

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<sup>122</sup> Schaecken, Janneke, Mirela Milosevic and Rik Dalmeijer, "Merwe-Vierhavens: van havenindustrie naar maakstad".

<sup>123</sup> M4H Rotterdam, "Over M4H Rotterdam".

<sup>124</sup> Part of Rotterdam Makers District, see M4H Rotterdam, "Over M4H Rotterdam". See also images 19 and 29 in the appendix.

<sup>125</sup> M4H Rotterdam, "Atelier van Lieshout".

<sup>126</sup> Please see image 31 in the appendix for the floorplan of the *Petromelancholia* exhibition to see the exhibition rooms.

<sup>127</sup> Cf. Hein, "Oil Spaces: The Global Petroleumscape in the Rotterdam/The Hague Area", 38.

<sup>128</sup> See MacLeod, *Museum Architecture*, 7.

histories of buildings: by prioritizing the lives lived in architectural spaces, the route towards telling new stories gains deeper meaning.<sup>129</sup>

As I emphasized before, the raw character of the port warehouse is fostered by the organization of Brutus. Previous meanings or narratives of a space are tightly interwoven in the architecture of such an exhibition space.<sup>130</sup> Both visitor and space together construct meaning. In the context of the exhibition experience, the physical nature of the site does have great impact on the visitor on a bodily level.<sup>131</sup> The environment of the Brutus exhibition space, dark, humid, cold, is part of the narrative of the exhibition *Petromelancholia*. I make remarks on the specific exhibition spaces in my analysis below.

Thus, the Rotterdam harbor is a fundamental part of the Brutus identity. Though the visitor may experience this on the Keileweg with the warehouse spaces, the experience is enhanced with a visit to the port itself. Precisely this is what the organization had in mind for the *Petromelancholia* exhibition. Visitors were invited and encouraged to visit the Rotterdam harbor alongside the exhibition: five bicycle routes were published in collaboration with TU Delft and PortCityFutures, an initiative led by Carola Hein.<sup>132</sup> With these bike tours the petroleum history and hidden oil spaces are brought to the foreground.<sup>133</sup> Several petroleum landmarks are highlighted along the route: ranging from the numerous petroleum ports (see nos. 12-15 on the map, images 12-13 in appendix), with chemical factories of Shell and sea container terminals, to office buildings of oil companies in Rotterdam and The Hague (nos. 4, 19-21), and from public buildings with an oil refinery-like appearance, like the Rotterdam public library (no. 5), to the Louwman car museum in Wassenaar (no. 22).

The port areas were considered to be an extension of the exhibition complex on the Keileweg.<sup>134</sup> By incorporating the actual landscape of the Rotterdam harbor in the exhibition program, the landscape itself is acknowledged as a relevant object of study and observation. Interestingly enough, when framing the landscape as an extension of the exhibition space, the landscape is susceptible to be experienced in a similar way as the exhibited artworks. When I myself cycled parts of these routes, I looked at the horizon of the chemical factories between Pernis, Botlek and Rozenburg with renewed wonder.<sup>135</sup> A fascination took over for

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<sup>129</sup> Ibid., 7-8, 33-35.

<sup>130</sup> Cf. Scorch, "The experience of a museum space", 194.

<sup>131</sup> Hale, "Narrative Environments and the Paradigm of Embodiment", 193.

<sup>132</sup> For PortCityFutures see PortCityFutures, "Who are we?".

See images 12-13 in the appendix for the Oil Spaces Bike Tour I treat here.

<sup>133</sup> The bicycle routes are based on the article "Oil Spaces: The Global Petroleumscape in the Rotterdam/The Hague Area", written by Carola Hein (2018).

<sup>134</sup> As Sanne ten Brink stated in our personal conversation, May 3<sup>rd</sup> 2024.

<sup>135</sup> In the appendix I have included photographs (images 14-17) I took during this cycling trip on June 6, 2024.

these factory buildings and silo's, the braids of pipelines, tubes, wires, staircases, and the enormity of the entire enterprise. What was I looking at exactly? What was actually happening there behind the barbed wires? What function do all those structures and buildings have? Asking myself these questions, I was viewing this petroleumscape via the lens of the 'operational aesthetic', a term coined by cultural historian Neil Harris.<sup>136</sup> These pragmatic questions about function, procedures and technicalities are stimulating precisely because the workings of petroleum and refinery processes are unknown to the broad public, and are actually meant to be kept that way.

Cycling here was an interesting experience, because it was different than riding past this horizon as I have done numerous times seated in a car, as I described in the opening of this thesis. I was much closer to the buildings and factories, experiencing the landscape more directly, seeing myself in the perspective of a small individual, in contrast with the big machinery. It simply takes more time to cross the landscape, which makes you more aware of the sheer size of the area and enables you to take in more details, like the penetrative smell of the refineries. The industry seemed within reach, but at the same time it felt even more far away, with the uninviting barbed wires and the overall liminal atmosphere of the space. To envision myself cycling or walking on the other side of the fences took a lot of effort: it did not feel like a possibility.

Having experienced the landscape myself (as far as possible) in the context of the *Petromelancholia* exhibition for this thesis, it would be fascinating to see responses from other visitors. Unfortunately, the Brutus organizational team has not received or collected feedback by visitors using these bicycle routes. Thus it is unknown how many exhibition visitors have cycled through the Rotterdam port and how the landscape has been perceived in this particular context, and whether this experience may or may not have been of influence for the interpretation of the exhibition.

### **3.3 ROTTERDAM REFLECTING ON PETROLEUM**

Let us now get back to the Keileweg in the M4H-area, to the Autumn of 2023, when the exhibition *Petromelancholia* took place in the Brutus exhibition space. The point of departure for the exhibition was the concept of the same name, coined by energy humanities scholar Stephanie LeMenager: *petromelancholia*. As I stated before in chapter 1, the concept of *petromelancholia* entails the intimate loving relationship we have had with oil for decades, which is now turning into a relationship of grievance as we face the hard truth of the decline

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<sup>136</sup> Cf. Harris, *Humbug*, 67-79. See also LeMenager, *Living Oil*, 172, 177-178.

of oil resources. As the focus was put on our current relationship with petroleum, active reflection was asked by the curators from the visitors, stepping-stones for contemplation and future-thinking were presented in the wall texts, for example.

*Petromelancholia* was set up in four main chapters with the following accompanying wall texts: 'In Bed with Petroleum', 'Oil Encounters', 'Toxic Legacy and the Museum of Petromodern Futures', 'Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet'.<sup>137</sup> These chapters portrayed to a certain extent stages of grief. In addition to these chapters, there were three other parts of the exhibition, namely *Disco Inferno*, an installation by Joep van Lieshout in exhibition room 'Brabo/Brutus', the 'PetroPropagandaStation' in 'Hal 1', and an extra reactive exhibition by Santiago Sierra in Barbarella. The curatorial choices of where to exhibit which artwork had to do for a large part with the environment circumstances of the exhibition spaces, for example the size of the space or humidity levels. The atmosphere of Brutus was considered to be the exhibition design, with the addition of neon orange plastic wrapping with the wall texts.

I will treat the exhibition in the order of these chapters, discussing the themes by means of selected artworks in the respective chapters with the online published objects texts, and the specific exhibition rooms. In the appendix, like I did for my discussion in chapter 2, I have made a separate section of relevant images.

First, an account of society's loving relationship, or love affair as stated in 'In bed with petroleum', was presented: the ubiquity of petroleum in all kinds of artificial materials, but also our own bodies. Moreover, LeMenager's concept of *petromelancholia* is introduced here, posing the question of how the necessary energy transition ought to look like. Upon entering the 'Kathedraal', via the outdoors sculpture garden, the visitor is met with numerous artworks portraying the versatility of *petro-modernity*. Christoph Girardet's video montage *Fountain* (2021) consists of scenes from industrial films, documentaries and commercials showcasing the explosion of petroleum use and the promises petroleum brought, not shying away from the inescapable environmental and geopolitical catastrophes that have happened because of this.<sup>138</sup> An overview like this gives the visitors a comprehensive frame of reference for the intricate topic of petroleum. In the 'Kathedraal', the curators also included Olaf Mooij's *Fontein der tranen*, as both a memorial to (human) victims of car traffic, and as a memorial to the petromodern era.<sup>139</sup> Mooij has reused parts of the iconic Volkswagen beetle car (bonnet, wheels, windscreen and rearview mirror) to build a fountain. By using the beetle car as emblem, which started as a national project in the Nazi regime, Mooij also criticizes

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<sup>137</sup> I refer again to the specific exhibition spaces in my discussion of the exhibition, which you can see in the appendix.

<sup>138</sup> Brutus, "Christoph Girardet. *Fountain* (2021)".

<sup>139</sup> Brutus, "Olaf Mooij".

specifically Volkswagen's legacy of car culture. *Fontein der tranen* was not part of the exhibition in Kunstmuseum Wolfsburg, though the immediate link to Volkswagen would have been especially interesting to exhibit there specifically.

Moving from the big former silo space, to the remodeled sea containers, the visitor is emerged in a colorful kaleidoscopic landscape of plastic flowers attached to electric massage machines with rave music and disco lighting, Rachel Youn's *Revival* (2022).<sup>140</sup> It is a festive and joyous experience, with the flowers dancing clumsy and erratically to the music, yet also reminds the visitor of the matter, i.e. plastic, that remains when humans have long passed. The metal walls of the sea containers adds to the industrial landscape in which these mechanic flowers flourish. Moreover, it is a special experience to walk through a former sea container, when used to seeing these objects from a far distance. When cycling past towers of these containers in the port area, I could recall this experience vividly.

The visitor is lured inside from the 'Kathedraal' by the enticing colorful lights of the installation, through this tunnel the visitor walks towards the next exhibition space. The 'Brabo/Brutus' space was (and at time of writing, still is) dedicated to Joep van Lieshout's installation *Disco Inferno*, which is a direct result of the close collaboration with curator Alexander Klose and Van Lieshout for the *Petromelancholia* exhibition.<sup>141</sup> *Disco Inferno* is a *Gesamtkunstwerk* with numerous parts, machines, generators, pumps and shredders. It represents the never-ending motion of the industry, in a broad sense, sustaining itself endlessly. In addition, *Oil on canvas II* by duo Heidundgriess (Alexandra Grieb and Jorel Heid) showed the constant flow of black waste, representing oil, either blackening the canvas completely or whitening it out.<sup>142</sup> Having experienced this part myself, the repetition in this exhibition space is quite overwhelming and unexpectedly disorientating, as it never becomes totally clear what each part is responsible for in the entire process.

The 'PetroPropagandaStation' in 'Hal 1' showed three video artworks on big screens with 1960s commercial footage from both sides of divided Germany, represented by Hugo Niebeling and Uwe Belz, and a video compilation by *Beauty of Oil* with contemporary material.<sup>143</sup> The works by Niebeling and Belz were also part of the exhibition in Wolfsburg, but must have had different impact, being exhibited now in a former storage room.

In the second chapter, 'Oil encounters', presented in 'Barbaar', tells the story of the impact of technologies and materialities of oil on the social and physical environment. These encounters play out differently in different parts of the world and thus the curated artworks

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<sup>140</sup> Brutus, "Rachel Youn. Revival (2022)".

<sup>141</sup> Brutus, "Disco Inferno. Atelier Van Lieshout".

<sup>142</sup> Brutus, "Heidundgriess. Oil on Canvas II - 2023".

<sup>143</sup> Brutus, "Uwe Belz. Elaste aus Schkopau (1968)" & Brutus, "Hugo Niebeling. Petrol Kraftstoff Carburant (1965)".

showcase the multitude and variety of such encounters. Tanja Engelberts' artworks *Decom* (2021) and *Cities of desire* (2016) portray the misty no man's land of oil drilling platforms and the decommissioning of them.<sup>144</sup> It gives a unique insight in the workings and the eerie environment of these places, with no humans in sight. In *Decom* the viewer becomes part of the violence of dismantling oil and gas platforms, and cannot look away. The context of the exhibition being *petromelancholia*, both *Decom* and *Cities of desire* portray the melancholic feeling of the dwindling of the oil platforms. The grey mist adds even more to that atmosphere of grief for the loss of oil. Moreover, I find these works by Engelberts especially interesting because they are a fitting match with the bicycle routes I discuss above: the artworks and landscape reinforce each other, each becoming more tangible in their own right. With the images that Engelberts puts together, it becomes easier to look beyond the fence in the Rotterdam port landscape.

To enter the third chapter of the exhibition in 'Ruin', 'Toxic Legacy and the Museum of Petromodern Futures', the visitor first enters the 'Barbarella' space, which contained the video artwork *245m3*, by Santiago Sierra. Again, like *Disco Inferno*, this is a reactive piece to the exhibition *Petromelancholia*. Though met with a lot of criticism in Germany, Sierra's *245m3* is on view in Rotterdam, which is an example of the non-restrictive character of the Brutus exhibition space.<sup>145</sup> Contrasting with Kunstmuseum Wolfsburg, where Sierra exhibited *52 Canvases Exposed to Mexico City's Air* (2019), which is a much more forgiving piece.<sup>146</sup>

In 'Ruin', the exhibition reflects on the legacy of oil and envisions a post-petromodern New York City. As a thought experiment, the question is posed: what would be put on display in a museum of *petro-modernity*? Moreover, in the wall text, attention is brought to the immaterial, psychological and emotional effects of petroleum use, besides the 'traditional' perspective on the technological ingenuity. The artworks on display in this section are an attempt at this experiment. The wall tapestries of Miriam Sentler, *Fossil Fuel Mnemosyne* (2022) and *Mining Myths* (2023), are a means of memorializing practices of *petro-modernity* via speculative future-thinking.<sup>147</sup> Petroleum, and fossil fuels in general, has been considered a magical substance, with the countless permutations possible. The medium of tapestry is chosen by Sentler to convey the traditional educational and political connotations this particular medium has.

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<sup>144</sup> Engelberts, "Decom"; Klose, "Petromelancholia – documentation".

<sup>145</sup> See Lange, Henny de, "Van atelier tot kunstbuurt Brutus. Joep van Lieshout deelt zijn visie: 'Kunst is niet alleen voor de happy few'"; Brutus, "Santiago Sierra. Pilot".

<sup>146</sup> See Kemper Art Museum, "Santiago Sierra: 52 Canvases Exposed to Mexico City's Air".

<sup>147</sup> Brutus, "Miriam Sentler. Fossil Fuel Mnemosyne (2022) and Mining Myths (2023)".

To conclude, the final chapter 'Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet' reflects on the necessity of action in our current dire situation. The temporal reframing and posed uncertainty of the future chosen by the curatorial team in Brutus seems to have been done more intentionally than we have seen in Kunstmuseum Wolfsburg. Perhaps *Beauty of Oil* has taken into account the exhibition reviews discussing these matters.

Nevertheless, the encouragement of the curators to partake in imaginative future-thinking does translate particularly well to the exhibition space in question. During the visit of *Petromelancholia*, the public was quite literally submerged in the main topic of this exhibition. Even though this sequential exhibition had a preferred walking route, visitors are encouraged to roam around freely and explore the spaces fully. This playful character of visit is beneficial to future-thinking practices. In a way this has proven to be fruitful, as visitors took an average of three to four hours to experience *Petromelancholia*, which is exceptionally long in terms of an exhibition visit.<sup>148</sup>

Another difference to the exhibition in Kunstmuseum Wolfsburg was the customization of *Petromelancholia* to the local context of Rotterdam, according to *Beauty of Oil* and the organization of Brutus. In part, this customization was done by involving specifically Rotterdam based artists in the artist selection for the exhibition (i.e. Olaf Mooij, Rowan van As, Jan Eric Visser and Johannes Steendam, next to Joep van Lieshout). However, with the aim to highlight the Rotterdam identity for this exhibition, I believe more efforts could have been made by the curators. For example, with the particular theme of post-petromodern New York City, including Rowan van As' New York inspired *TAXI* (2019), the discussion remains focused on the canonical visual language of United States of America, even though clear momentum was created to modify this theme to Rotterdam, instead of New York.<sup>149</sup> Especially considering the redeveloped space, the overall plans for the M4H-area and the curatorial practices of Brutus and Van Lieshout: this would have been a perfect opportunity to put the post-petromodernity future-thinking in the self-identified launch pad, laboratory and think tank to the test and invite visitors to think along with the organization about the future of Rotterdam, collect ideas and incorporate these ideas in future practices of artists in the M4H-area, for example.

### 3.4 CONCLUSION

On the Keileweg in the M4H-area, the Brutus exhibition complex positions itself as a place to showcase the unconventional and daring. The architectural characteristics of the complex

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<sup>148</sup> Personal conversation Sanne ten Brink, May 3<sup>rd</sup> 2024.

<sup>149</sup> Brutus, "Rowan van As. *TAXI* (2019 - ongoing)".

reflect this ambition: the unrefined and rough exhibition spaces are inviting to put on display topics and themes that are maybe less welcomed by traditional or conventional museums. The topic of *petromelancholia* in the exhibition I have treated here was of special relevance to the locality of Brutus in Rotterdam. The identity of the former port warehouse has been carefully integrated into the exhibition, with the inclusion of the oil bike tour, for example. Due to the redevelopment of the space, Brutus can be considered to be an institution firmly rooted in society, with a self-aware perspective on the local area. It must be said that the wall texts in the exhibition may be quite difficult to understand for visitors unfamiliar with the academic debate within the field of energy humanities on *petrocultures*, which can make the exhibition less approachable for visitors. However, the attainable experience of visiting a former port warehouse is particularly insightful and is of great value when treating a topic that is so closely tied to such a location. Critical self-reflection on former port activities is not part of the exhibition's narrative per se. But a general attitude of criticism to *petro-modernity* is more present in Rotterdam, than we have seen in Wolfsburg, with for example the case of Olaf Mooij's art installation: seemingly, more liberty was taken by presenting an artwork criticizing Volkswagen.



## CONCLUSION

*My bones burn*

*And the brain that's controlling 'em*

*Knows that the soul needs petroleum*

*That's how it goes*

*Boom, boom, ba-ba-ba-boom*

*And if I knew how to control it*

*If I knew how to control it*

*If I knew how to control it, I would<sup>150</sup>*

The words above illustrate the infiltration of petroleum in our ways of thinking: figuratively being the fuel that drives us human beings, but simultaneously having lost control of it.

One way of regaining control over our current situation in the dark depths of the climate crisis, is practicing critical reflection. The circumstances of the climate crisis ask for heightened sensitivity towards all kinds of factors contributing to this crisis. One fundamental factor is our consumption of crude oil: extending from the kerosene in airplanes' engines, to the asphalt that is used for highways, and from fertilizer used in the agricultural industry, to the polyester fabrics used for our clothes. As the discipline of energy humanities points out, our social imaginaries, values and belief systems also need to be reconsidered, because ultimately these have been drenched in petroleum. The research collective *Beauty of Oil* underscores this sentiment and has the ambition with their research output on *petrocultures* to contribute to the reimagining of a more sustainable future.

This reconsideration is an affair to be carried out by the whole of society. Therefore, cultural institutions, having stated that these are powerful societal partners, ought to engage explicitly with this debate for the broader public. But how and to what extent such cultural institutions choose to implement the topic of the climate crisis, with regard to the use and impact of petroleum in society, can differ of course. To provide insight in these practices, I have investigated two cultural institutions in Wolfsburg and Rotterdam.

First, I have highlighted the importance of local contexts, by treating concepts introduced by scholars active in the interdisciplinary field of energy studies. For example, Hein's concept of the *petroleumscape*, with its industrial, infrastructural, ancillary and philanthropic components, has proven to be of great relevance for the cases of Rotterdam, with its renowned petroleum harbor, and Wolfsburg, being a city with Volkswagen as the backbone of its existence. Researching local particularities with regional consciousness

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<sup>150</sup> Lyrics from the song *Petroleum* by Yard Act from their album *Where's my Utopia?* (2024).

proves to be valuable in the context of this research, as these particularities have direct influence on the character of the exhibition spaces and the visitor's experience due to their prior knowledge and prejudices, for example. Moreover, regional sites are where the global narratives come to the light.

With this context established, I have investigated two case studies in a qualitative manner. As for the case of Wolfsburg, the local context with the Volkswagen car factory on the north side of the train station, serving as the backdrop for the town, both literally and figuratively, has given us valuable insights in how petroleum has shaped the urban spaces.

Thus, Wolfsburg is a particular suitable place for reflecting on *petro-modernity*. The exhibition *Oil: Beauty and Horror in the Petrol Age* presents an impressive overview of artworks highlighting both the beautiful and horrific aspects of oil. The curatorial effort to exhibit 100 years of art dealing with petroleum has been executed well. The Kunstmuseum has chosen to implement the topic of the climate crisis more so in the additional material published alongside the exhibition, than in the exhibition itself, providing there more informative background on *petrocultures* and the ecological impact on the environment.

It has become clear that critical visitors were not very appreciative of these practices and choices. With the lack of a self-critical attitude, Kunstmuseum Wolfsburg being financially supported by Volkswagen, for example, and not participating as a more pro-active social player, visitors left the exhibition uncertain what to do with the overload of information. Like McGhie presents in his museum guide, visitors should feel empowered after visiting an exhibition engaging with topics related to sustainability and the climate crisis. Moreover, the characteristics or encouraged practices of the 'liquid museum', discussed by Fiona Cameron, to effectuate at least a level of empowerment are not so applicable in the Kunstmuseum.

Critical reflection was much more present in the exhibition presented in the Brutus exhibition space in Rotterdam. The curators treated the topic of *petro-modernity* in a different manner in the exhibition *Petromelancholia*. The concept of *petromelancholia* was the main point of departure for the curators. The redevelopment of the former port warehouse already has to do with *petromelancholia* in a practical sense: it is a fine example of productive grieving of oil, because the raw character of the Rotterdam port is fostered in the building. These past activities remain part of the biography of the building and still takes part in the new narratives told and created in the space. Moreover, with the acknowledgement of the Rotterdam port area and active inclusion of the landscape within the exhibition, the organization has broadened its horizon and extended the exhibition space fully. Thus, Brutus can be considered to be a cultural institution, part of society, with a self-aware perspective on the local area.

With a more playful, unconventional approach to exhibiting art, the visitor is encouraged to think more outside of the box about the topics presented in the art exhibitions by Brutus. The robust yet inviting exhibition spaces in Rotterdam were perhaps more accommodating to aspects like uncertainty and future-thinking, than the more traditional white cube atmosphere in Kunstmuseum Wolfsburg. For further research, it would be interesting to see if lasting impact of these exhibitions can be traced. In that way, the fact that these exhibitions have already taken place some time ago, could be considered an asset for investigating lasting impact.

To conclude, this research underscores the imperative for cultural institutions like museums to engage actively and consciously with the pressing matter of the climate crisis. The topic of *petrocultures* needs to be treated by social institutions to make the bigger public aware of this aspect of the climate crisis, in order to accelerate the energy transition. It is key that these cultural institutions are aware of and ultimately embrace their position in society in order to encourage reimagining alternative futures. If these institutions work together with their audience, for example by showing a self-critical attitude and providing tools to the visitor do creative thinking, they are considered a valuable addition to the bigger discussions on climate change and sustainability. In that way they can actually contribute to a broader societal and behavioral shift, which the disciplines of environmental and energy humanities advocate for. Because ultimately, even though I can appreciate the *petroleumscape* next to the A15-highway, I sincerely hope that the future generation grows up watching a more sustainable landscape on the horizon of Rotterdam.

## APPENDIX OF IMAGES

### SECTION 1: IMPRESSION OF WOLFSBURG, CITY & MUSEUM

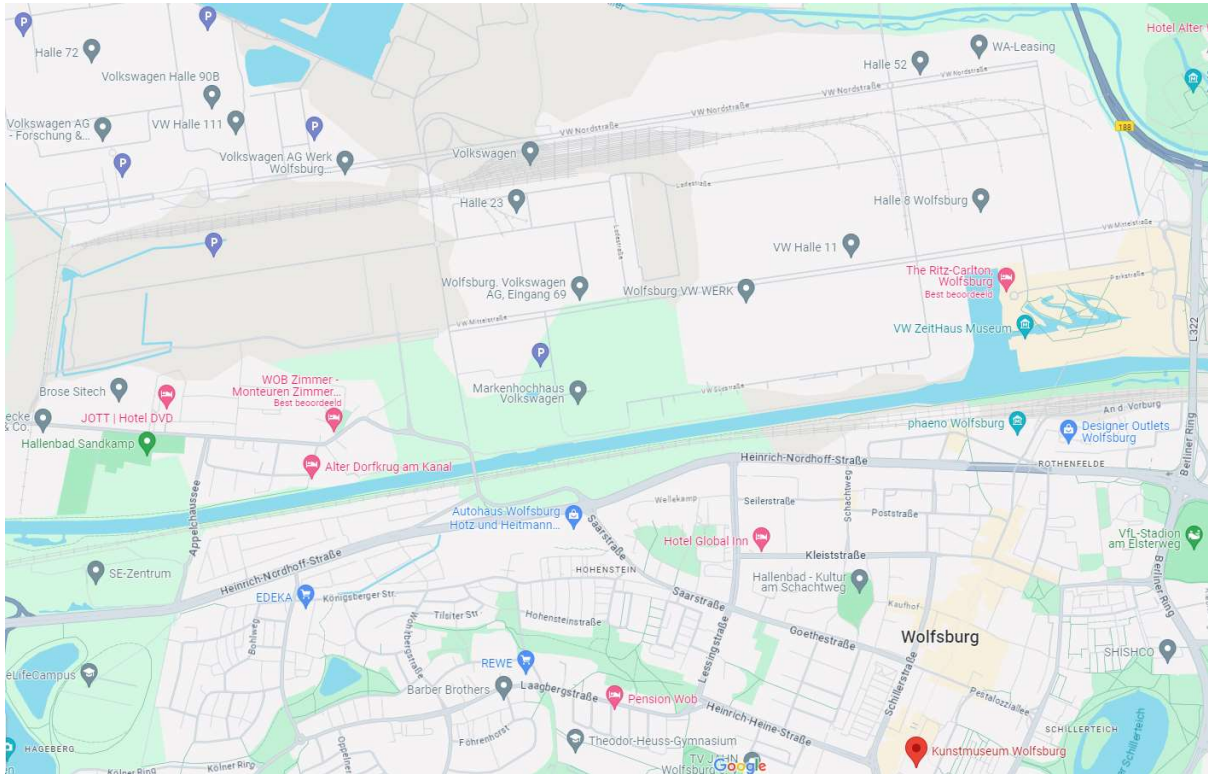


Image 1: *Map of the city of Wolfsburg, Germany, with focus on the great terrestrial impact of the Volkswagen car factory. The location of Kunstmuseum Wolfsburg is pinned in the right corner below.*

Google Maps. *Selection of the map of Wolfsburg.* Accessed on June 14, 2024.

< <https://maps.app.goo.gl/s8A3s7PUnmpe84Y58> >.



Image 2: *Impression of the museum building of Kunstmuseum Wolfsburg.*

Photo: Marek Kruszewski. Image taken from: Kunstmuseum Wolfsburg, „About us”, <<https://www.kunstmuseum.de/en/about-us/>>.

**SECTION 2: IMPRESSION OF EXHIBITION *OIL: BEAUTY AND HORROR IN THE PETROL AGE* IN KUNSTMUSEUM WOLFSBURG**

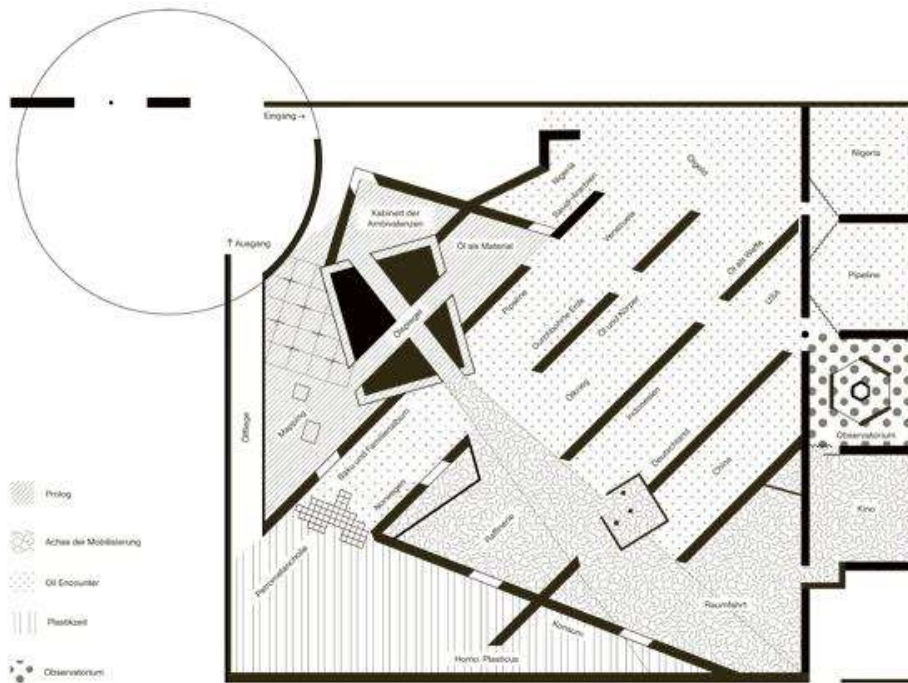
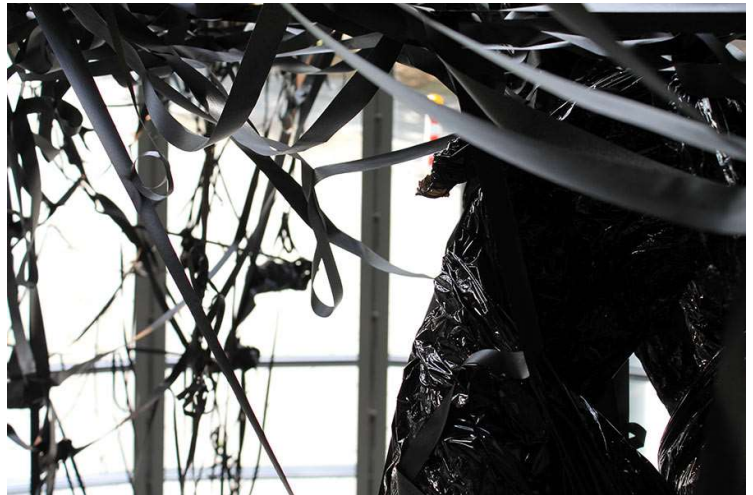
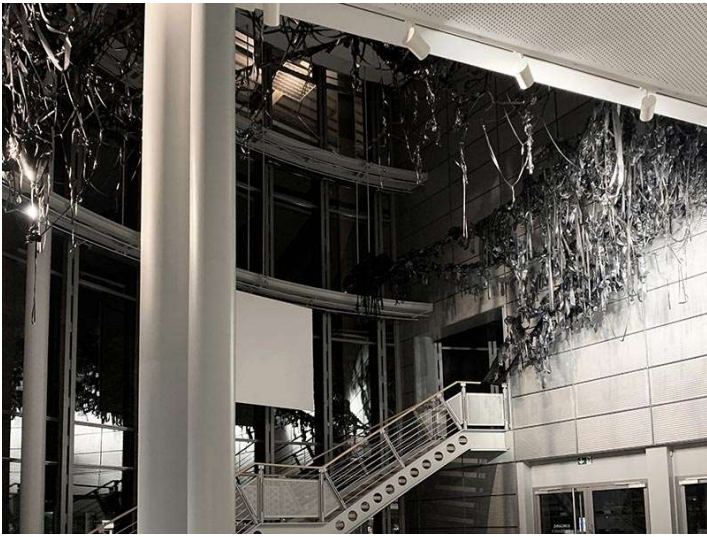


Image 3: *Floorplan of exhibition: Oil: Beauty and Horror in the Petrol Age in Kunstmuseum Wolfsburg.*

Kunstmuseum Wolfsburg. *Exhibition floorplan.* Accessed via exhibition review by Christian Götter.



Images 4-7: *Impression of Raumzeichnung (Bass), with images of the artwork in the exhibition space and close-ups of the material used for the installation.*

Photos taken from: Kunstmuseum Wolfsburg. *Oil. Schönheit und Schrecken des Erdölzeitalters*, 4. 9. 2021 – 9. 1. 2022. Wolfsburg: Kunstmuseum Wolfsburg, 2021.



Image 8: *Overview of the main exhibition space in Kunstmuseum Wolfsburg.*

Photo taken from webpage: Kunstmuseum, "Oil: Schönheit und Schrecken des Erdölzeitalters".

<https://www.kunstmuseum.de/ausstellung/oil-schoenheit-und-schrecken-des-erdoelzeitalters/>.





Image 9: *The dismantling of the art installation Ölspiegel, pumping and cleaning the vessels of oil.*

Photo: Engelbrechter, Elena. Published in article: Benjamin Steininger, "»Oil« has left the building – im übertragenen und im sehr materiellen Sinn. Die Wolfsburger Ausstellung »Oil. Schönheit und Schrecken des Erdölzeitalters« hat ihre Tore geschlossen".



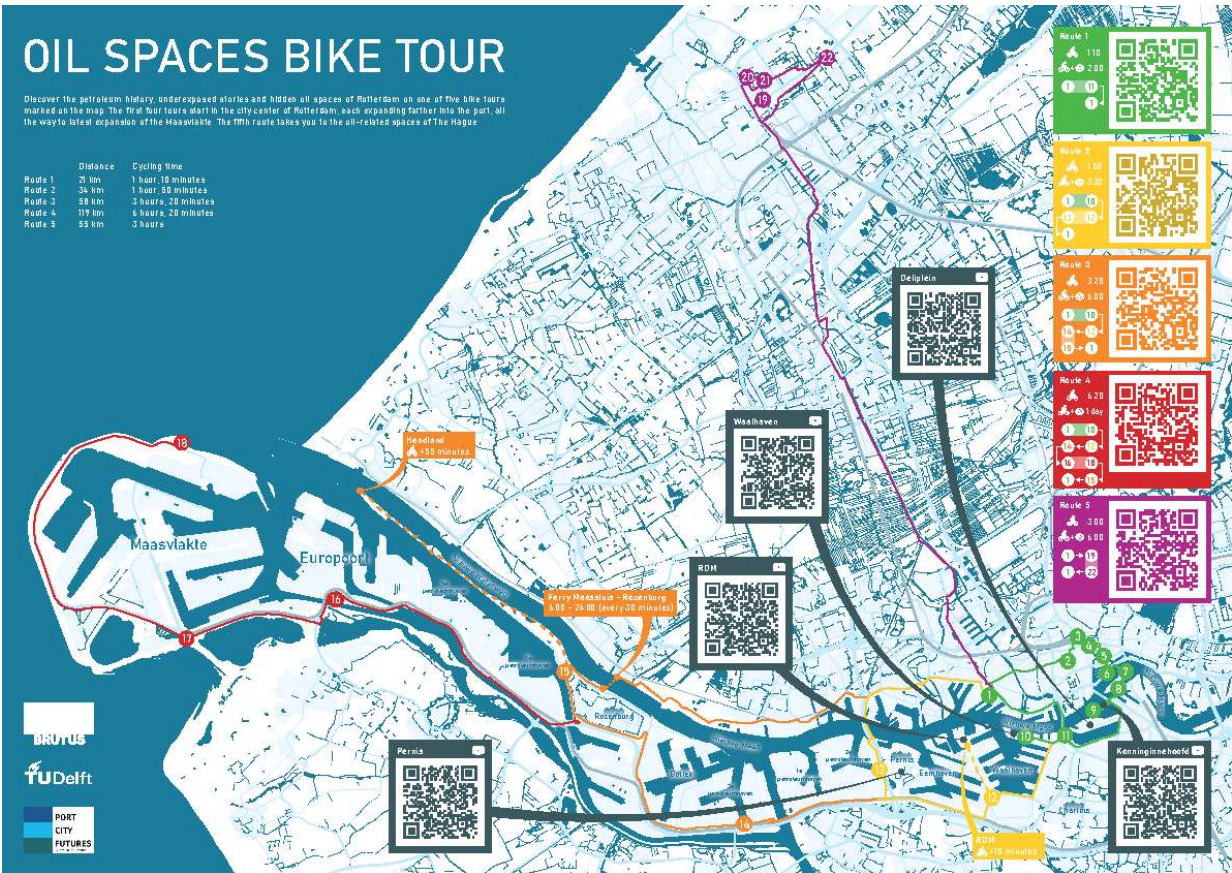
Image 10 (left): Joep van Lieshout, *Naphta Cracker*, 2012.



Image 11 (right): Tony Cragg, *Menschenmenge*, 1984.

Photo: Kruszewski, Marek. Published: Kunstmuseum Wolfsburg, "So startete unsere Oil-Ausstellung", <<https://www.kunstmuseum.de/2021/09/so-startete-unsere-oil-ausstellung/>>.

## SECTION 3: OIL SPACE BIKE TOUR



### ROUTE

- 1 BRUTUS (Starting point)
- 2 Boethe-Instituut
- 3 Blikfabriek
- 4 Headquarters Shell Rotterdam
- 5 Centrale Bibliotheek Rotterdam
- 6 De Boompjes
- 7 Willemshbrug
- 8 Koninginnebrug
- 9 Port of Rotterdam
- 10 Waalhaven (Sluisjesdijk)
- 11 Maastunnel
- 12 Eemhaven (Heijplaat)
- 13 2e Petroleumhaven
- 14 3e Petroleumhaven
- 15 7e Petroleumhaven
- 16 BP Rafinaderij
- 17 Onstvoorpe & Slufter
- 18 Havenmonding Maasvlakte
- 19 Headquarters ESSO
- 20 Headquarters Shell Den Haag
- 21 Headquarters Bataafse Import Maatschappij
- 22 Louwman Museum

- 1 Maritime Museum
- 2 De Zeemeew
- 3 RDM

### LEGEND

- Water
- Built-up land
- Road
- Train line
- Metro line

The map is based on research by Carole Heij, see a website: Carole Heij, Oil Spaces: The global petroleum maps in the Port of Rotterdam area, Journal of Urban History 2018, 45(1-3) 887-929.

Visualized by Deuwe de Jager, TU Delft



Images 12-13.

Hein, Carola, and Douwe de Jager. *Oil Space Bikes Tour*, 2021.

Published: Brutus Space, "*Oil Space Bikes Tour: Discover the Petroleum History*", 02.09-2023.

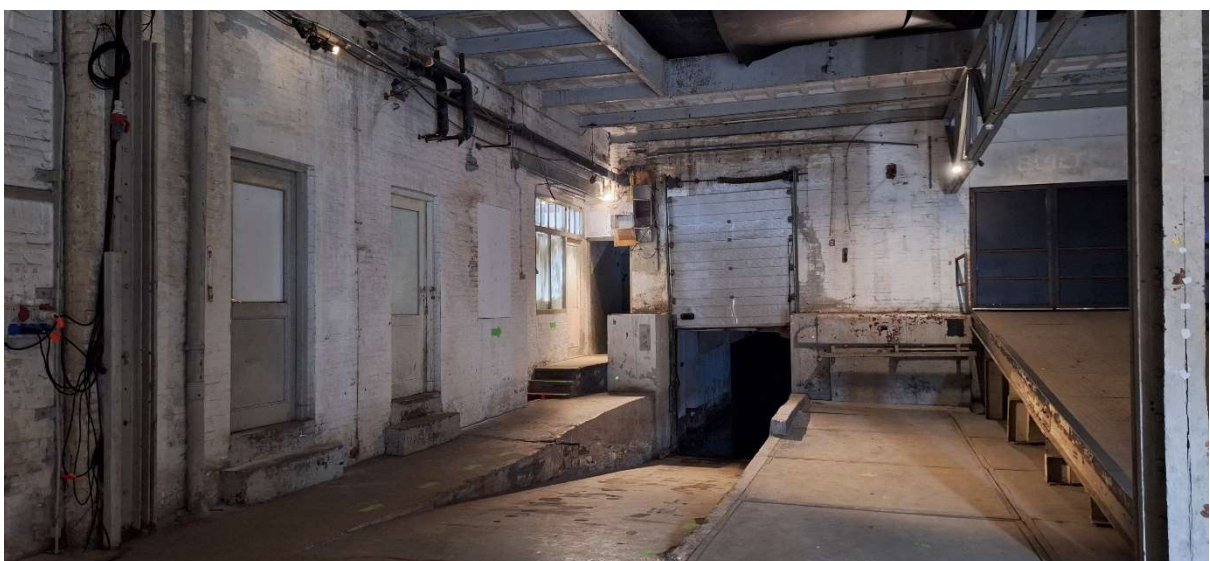
< <https://brutus.nl/en/programme/current/oil+spaces+bike+tour/> >.



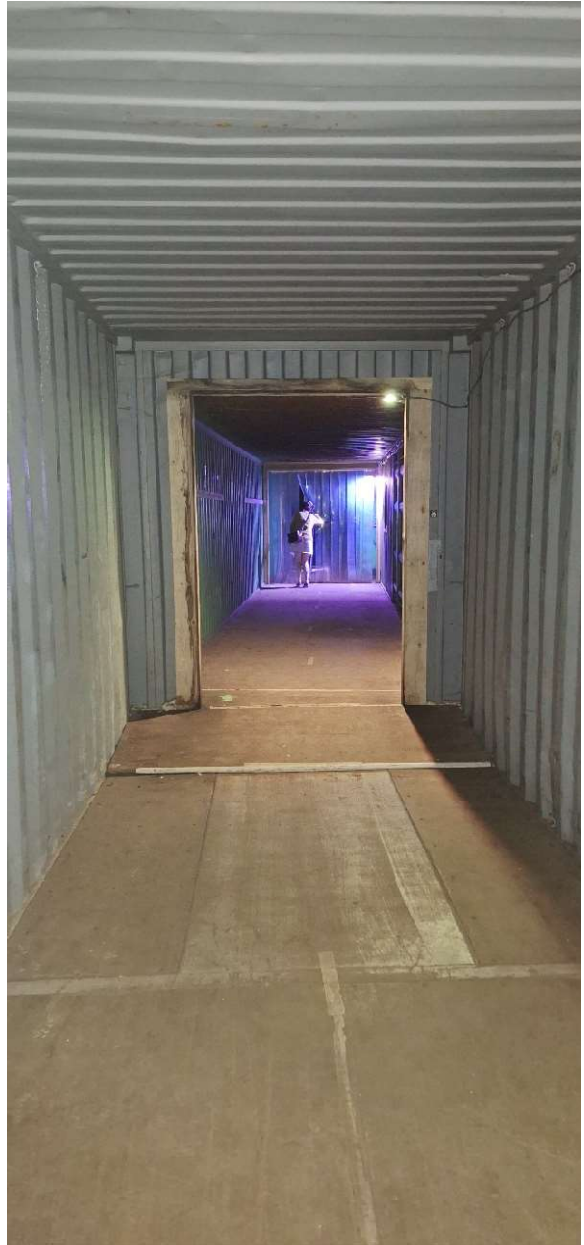


Images 14-17: Collage of images taken along the route of the *Oil Spaces Biking Tour* on 6 June, 2024. Photos: author.

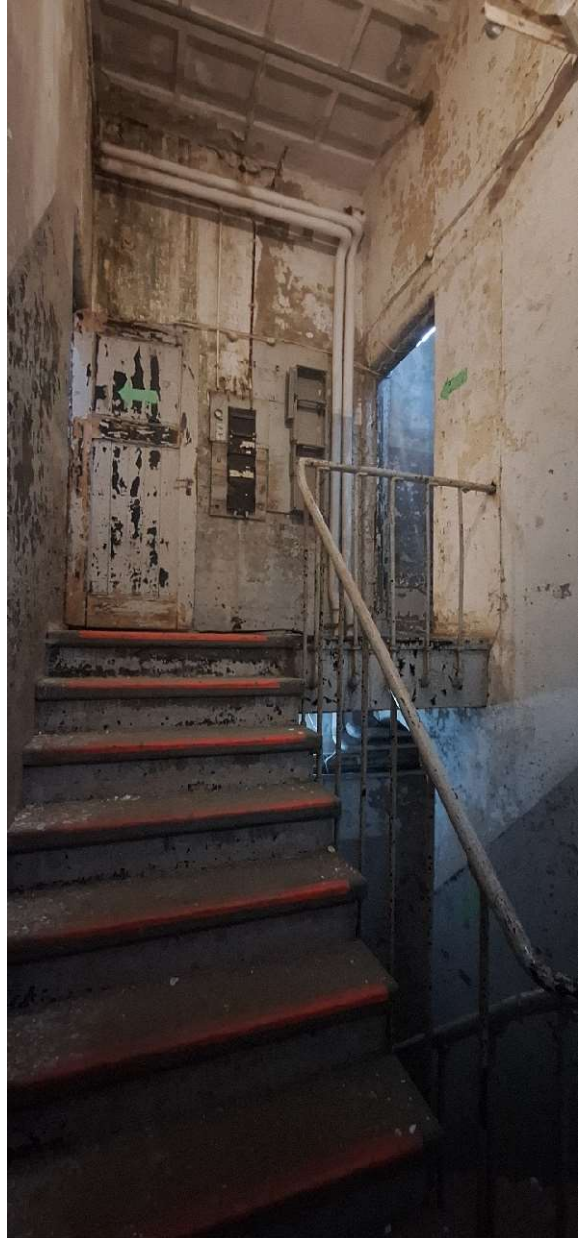
SECTION 4: EXHIBITION *PETROMELANCHOLIA* IN BRUTUS, ROTTERDAM













Images 18-30.: Collage of images taken at Brutus. Photos: author.

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