

SPILLS, CURRENTS, FLOWS: DISRUPTING THE HEGEMONY OF PETROCAPITALISM WITH WATER

Agnieszka Wodzińska

Shapeshifting Seashells

A shy shell in Yokohama on the coast of Japan ends up in Marcus Samuel's pocket and travels all the way back to the United Kingdom. It follows the lines of trade of Samuel's father's company between the East and West, first trading seashell-decorated items and other ornaments and later petrochemicals. As more oil reserves are identified across the world and the business grows, Samuel's company merges with the company Royal Dutch to form Shell at the start of the twentieth century.

Japanese conceptual artist Rumiko Hagiwara retraces the journey of the seashell and its subsequent transformations alongside the acceleration of petroculturalism — a globalized economy based and reliant on the extraction, distribution, and use of petroleum. Responding to the same socio-economic context, Polish artist Agnieszka Brzeźńska creates photomontages that place images of fauna and flora in conversation with visuals of human cultures and man-made disasters, allowing for new understandings of co-existence in environmental crises. I will first engage with Hagiwara's video and explore how it approaches and investigates themes of capital accumulation, migration, and trade in relation to the water that facilitates all the above exchanges. Then, I will analyze Brzeźńska's work to interrogate if and how it disrupts the visual language that helps to uphold petroculturalism.

Hagiwara's 2019 "I want to be a shell" installation includes a multi-faceted 30-minute work that explores different stages of the shell's transformation from an anonymous part of an ecosystem to a reproducible, brightly coloured corporate signifier of extraction and accumulation. In one section of Hagiwara's video, humorously titled "Shell Dreams," promises of sustainability from the company are set against picturesque travel-guide footage of beaches and seafronts. The text appears on screen in the form of karaoke lyrics and speaks of corporate ambitions and future-oriented policies, changing gradually from white to yellow as new phrases come on screen; viewers are singing along, or are at least expected to do so. This implied participation mirrors the compulsory dependency of the current social fabric on fossil fuels, forcedly upbeat and celebratory. In the exhibition space of Framer Framed in Amsterdam, a few microphones are connected to the monitor.¹ Regardless of the viewers' choice to use them, the 'lyrics' do not wait, and the video continues.

If the imagery of oceans and beaches throughout the work was not suggestive enough, the line "Our upstream business will continue to generate strong cash flow" directly

¹ Rumiko Hagiwara, "I want to be a shell," single-channel video installation, 2019.

addresses the parallels between the contemporary language of capital, and terms related to aquatic systems.² Environmental studies scholar Janine MacLeod explores how the language of neoliberalism and capital relates to water:

We talk about flows of capital, the circulation of wealth [...] I freeze my assets and look for liquidity. [...] Some of the central metaphors of neoliberalism are water metaphors: the trickle-down effect and the rising tide that was supposed to lift all boats that never came. Capital is figured as water in everyday speech.³

Following MacLeod, this type of language is concerning. Since so much of human development, both social and physical, relies on water, and capital is (or pretends to be) like water, then we begin to identify with capital and valorize it above all else. We express our intrinsic connection to water using phrases and metaphors that reflect this affinity. MacLeod notes that "human beings have always gathered around water, people would gather around an oasis, civilizations gathered around river valleys. Collectivity has been convened by water in many ways."⁴ Water is collective, all-encompassing, adaptable. However, this absorption of aquatic systems into the language of capitalism produces commodified and measurable versions of water in the collective imagination; this water can be owned and exploited. Hagiwara explores this linguistic phenomenon in "I want to be a shell" also with tongue-in-cheek hashtags and phrases that relate to this watery language of capital: #Waves of Change, #Shell Results, "cash flow." This approach serves as a critique of Shell's greenwashing and gives a nod to the watery identity of the seashell that intrigued Marcus Samuel on the shore of Japan at the turn of the nineteenth century.

Water spilling into capital

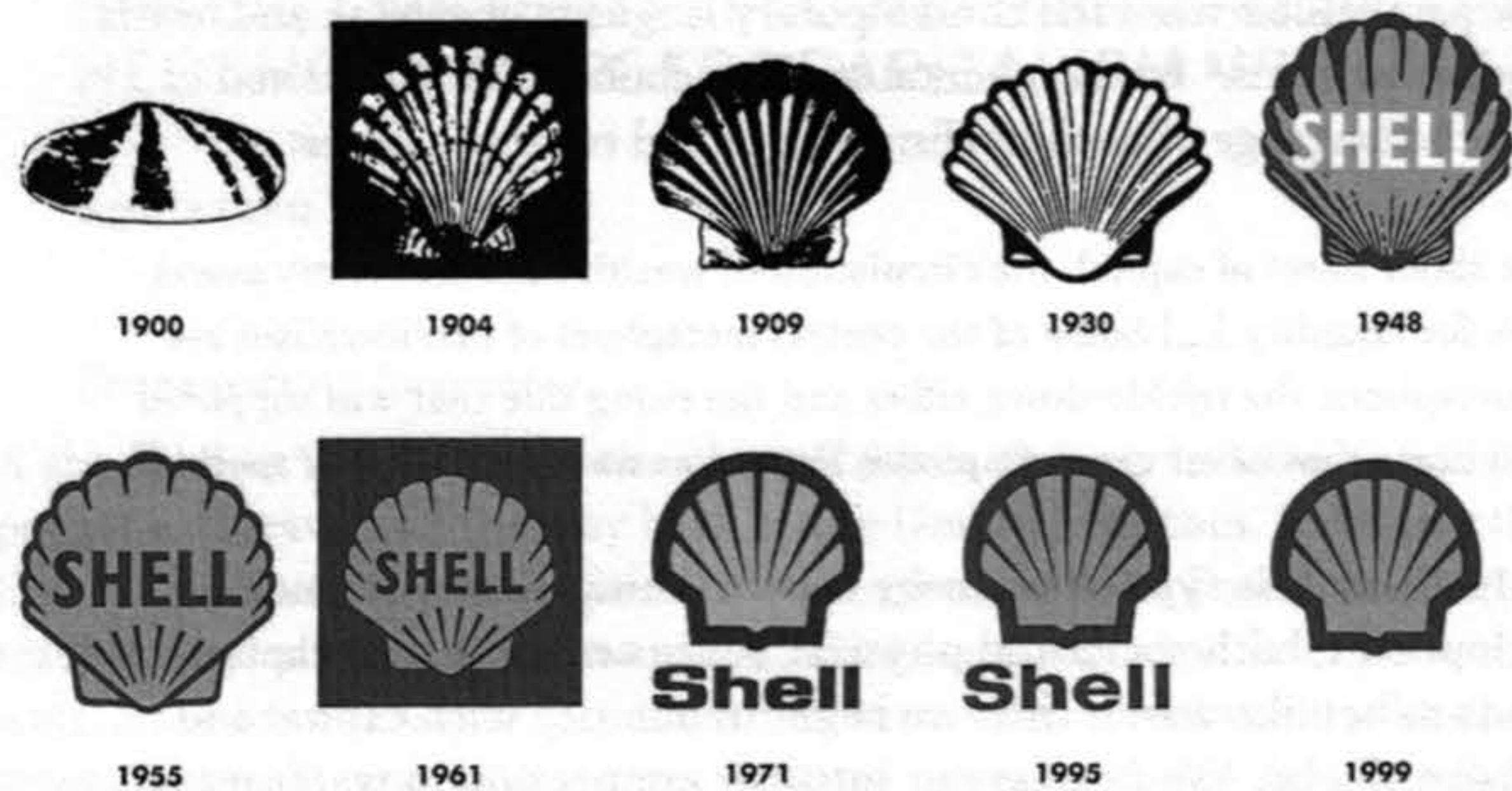
The imagery of oil spills in oceans and seas holds space in a collective consciousness, but through calculated corporate PR campaigns, the consequences of the devastation are not deemed worthy of prolonged attention or legislative change. This capitalist narrative, which takes hold of every resource on the planet and makes it into a commodity, allows for oil-related accidents to happen occasionally in the name of capital accumulation, profit, and a forced, continued dependence of communities on fossil fuels. Art historian and cultural critic T. J. Demos critiques the visual culture of the Anthropocene by interrogating how images of oil spills are used in mass media to sanitize the image of transnational petrochemical corporations, diffuse responsibility and thus strip the visuals of their potential to mobilize communities. Demos goes as far as to say that "when market-based financial flows are used to interpret and determine biochemical ones, in a system run by geocrats, we confront the contemporary approximation of what Andre Gorz once called *eco-fascism*."⁵ The once hydrophilic language that expressed humankind's dependence

² Ibid.

³ Janine MacLeod, "Hydrologies of Transformation" lecture at the Simon Fraser University, 10 April 2018.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ T. J. Demos, *Against the Anthropocene: Visual Culture and Environment Today* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2017), 35.



← fig.1&2 Rumiko Hagiwara, "I want to be a shell," still from video, 2019. Courtesy of the artist.

By losing the shadow, my shell has lost its volume and has become flattened.



on and appreciation of water now functions to uphold its commodification. Mirroring this shift, images of oil spills justify and contain their ecological consequences, powering the machine of capital accumulation.

The borrowed and appropriated language of water, now flowing through neoliberal narratives, divides and isolates social relations that are based on capital. Hagiwara identifies this development and interrogates it using a personal narrative and gentle associations with the origins of Shell's logo ("I decided it would be *my* shell").⁶ Even though the image itself may spark anger and frustration, Hagiwara claims ownership over it, and spends the entirety of the work attempting to rebuild a bond with the shell, fighting against alienation and separation.

In "I want to be a shell," Hagiwara makes it her mission to return the shell's shadow back, as over time, the logo

⁶ Hagiwara, "I want to be a shell."

flattened and became more abstracted from the original object of interest. She relates this to the Dutch-Japanese trade since the 1700s, and the exchange of painterly techniques. Traditionally, Western painting would pride itself on depicting three-dimensional scenes. In contrast, traditional Japanese style was purposefully flat and not as brightly coloured. According to Hagiwara, Japanese artists began to paint shadows after encountering Dutch and other Western European styles through the trading relationships, while Western artists drew inspiration from Japanese styles over time.⁷

As the corporation grows and expands, Shell's logo flattens and becomes more 'stiff.' It loses its shadow. In the video, Hagiwara says: "For me, the latest popular design [of the logo] gives the impression of stiffness and heartlessness. I see that my shell is no more alive, it has become a dead thing."⁸ Hagiwara cannot return its shadow back to the shell. When its image went through adjustments and transformations, migrating from East to West, and spreading across the world with continuing waves of globalization and expansion of petroculturalism, it became unreachable and untraceable along the way.

The journey of the seashell in Hagiwara's "I want to be a shell" reflects the socio-industrial developments of the last two hundred years. The promise of international trade and exchange tainted by slavery, exploitation, ecological devastation, and destruction of Indigenous cultures. The image of a shell, once 'shy' and 'anonymous,' belonging to a wider ecosystem, now the most recognizable signifier of petroculturalism. Untouchable. Just as natural resources become commodities that operate as capital, Hagiwara's shell turns into a copy of a copy of an image once belonging to water, now heartless and stiff. The shell moves too far away from its original image, just as other non-human beings move away from a tangible, ecological collective imaginary into representational, abstracted logos and signifiers of products, brands, and costly experiences. Waves of migration caused by war and ecological devastation follow a promise of capital obtained in the same industrialized states that inflict the most environmental violence. Against this backdrop, Hagiwara offers a chance to connect back to the seashell, to recognize the language of capital accumulation, and to reignite awareness of the damaged relationship between earthlings and water.

Circulating images of devastation

The photomontages made by Polish artist Agnieszka Brzezańska's interrogate the visual language of ecological devastation in a more direct way than Hagiwara's installation. The series of untitled works in the 2016 "Matrix-Sratrix" exhibition combine familiar images to produce unsettling clashes and confrontations.⁹ These photomontages consist of photographs, posters, paintings, and 3D renderings, each work made from two original visuals to create a sort of parallel world constructed from

⁷ The power relations in this "exchange" were by no means balanced, as with the expansion of the Netherlands' trading ambitions in the 1700s came colonisation and the slave trade. Traditions of non-Western people were subsequently commodified or suppressed for the purpose of capital accumulation by the West.

⁸ Hagiwara, "I want to be a shell."

⁹ Agnieszka Brzezańska, "Matrix-Sratrix" exhibition, Kasia Michalski Gallery, 2016.

familiar elements, yet somewhat unrecognizable, uncanny. The works evoke a post-internet globalized aesthetic in which photographic evidence of war and catastrophe no longer carry shock value or stimulate desynthesized minds. Visual cultures scholar Łukasz Zaremba writes: "These are parallel realms. If the internet were a universal mind whose operations take on a visual form, Brzeżańska's work is... an invitation to explore the global visual unconscious."¹⁰ This invitation allows viewers to assume a more active response to the images.

One montage overlaps a photograph of the Gulf of Mexico BP oil spill with a black-and-white photograph of three deer standing in water. Animals from a different environment now share a space with a man-made oceanic hazard. This proximity seems to function as a critique of sanitized images that distance oil spills from their very real environmental consequences on the surrounding fauna, flora, and connected systems. Brzeżańska places the deer in the centre of the work, covering up what we assume to be the largest source of the fumes in the oceanic image. They are somewhat shielding the viewer from seeing 'the worst of it,' or perhaps denying the satisfaction of seeing, and therefore starting to comprehend, the source of the smoke. The animals are at once vulnerable in this uneven exchange, and somehow resilient, interrogating viewers with a direct gaze and towering over the much smaller boats which rush to contain the spill. Brzeżańska embraces these contradictory relations in her ambiguous work. The presence of water sews the images together, inquiring about the consequences of these new encounters.

It is not coincidental that this dichotomy — vulnerability and strength — mimics the qualities of water itself. Depending on the socio-cultural context, water acts as the giver of life, a gentle, healing, patient force, or a deadly and destructive power. Politicizing water and looking at it through an anti-capitalist lens mirrors the actions of Indigenous communities, who fight against colonial settlements' commodification, contamination, and privatization of water on ancestral land. Brzeżańska acknowledges and builds on these non-hegemonic knowledge systems in her work, activating an awareness of the relation between natural elements, the social fabric, and a larger collective consciousness disregarded by the current global socio-political order.

Confronting petro-nostalgia

Another Brzeżańska photomontage shows a pipeline in a lush green forest that covers the face of a nude male figure sitting outdoors in a lawn chair. The figure is holding a gun in a way that covers the crotch. Like all images from this series, the source and original context of these photographs are unclear. We encounter them in a new context and observe their relation to other images in the exhibition which collide themes of body, nature, and Indigenous cultures with violence, catastrophe, and images that evoke a sense of imminent danger.

Like in the previous montage discussed, the natural landscape merges with the original photographs. The

¹⁰ Łukasz Zaremba, *Matrix-Sratrix* (Warsaw: Kasia Michalski Gallery, 2016).



← fig. 3 Agnieszka Brzeżańska, untitled, from "Matrix-Sratrix" series, 2016, 26 × 31 cm. Courtesy of Galeria BWA Warszawa, Warsaw, Poland.

phallic copper pipes disrupting the lush forest correspond to the industrialized, hyper-masculine fig leaf — the gold pistol. The figure firmly holds this weapon of violence and control, exuding his power in the photomontage, and over the viewer. Clinging desperately to hardness, but denying the importance of softness; water, leaves, even the

properties of the oil he desires. This androcentric affect facilitates a new understanding of the blocks that build and maintain petrocultures: normative and pervasive everyday cultures that rely on (and cannot exist without) oil.¹¹

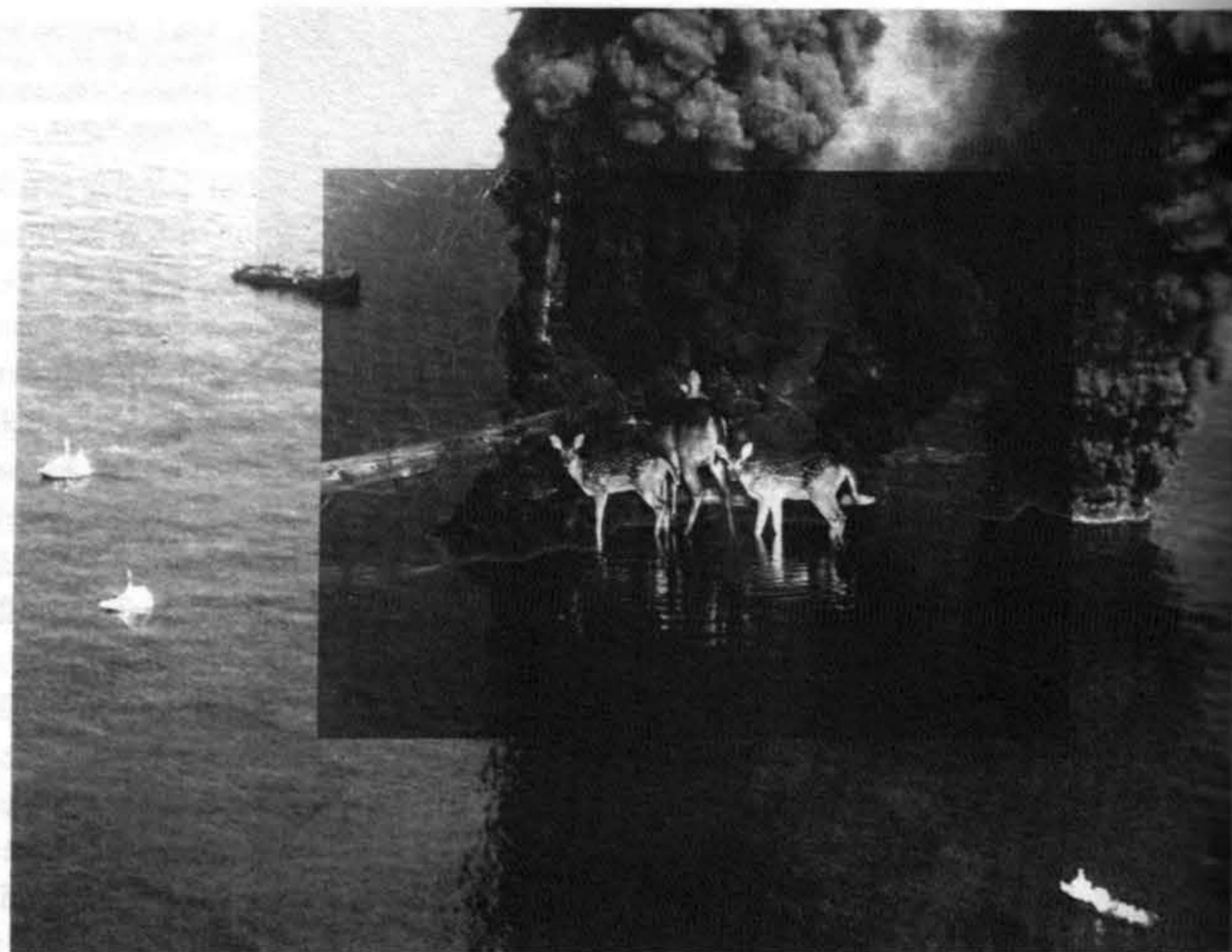
Feminist political ecology researcher Cara Daggett explores the link between fossil fuels and petro-masculinity, alluding to the power of the latter to uphold the desire for the former through authoritarian leanings. Daggett connects the rise of petroculturalism to the establishing and strengthening of patriarchal structures:

While misogyny and climate denial are often treated as separate dimensions of new authoritarian movements, a focus on petro-masculinity shows them to be mutually constituted, with gender anxiety slithering alongside climate anxiety, and misogynist violence sometimes exploding as fossil violence.¹²

¹¹ Environmental studies scholar Stephanie LeMenager investigates the pervasiveness of petrocultures — petroleum cultures — in *Living Oil: Petroleum Culture in the American Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014). LeMenager notes the inseparability of oil and the modern hegemonic American lifestyle.

¹² Cara Daggett, "Petro-masculinity: Fossil Fuels and Authoritarian Desire," *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 47, no. 1 (2018): 28.

→ fig. 4 Agnieszka Brzeżańska, untitled, from "Matrix-Sratix" series, 2016, 26 × 31 cm. Courtesy of Galeria BWA Warszawa, Warsaw, Poland.



In her analysis, Daggett affirms the bonds between colonialism, capitalism, white supremacy, and patriarchy. She proposes that regulating and mitigating the extraction of fossil fuels threatens the perceived white masculine order that benefits from petroculturalism. Fossil authoritarianism works in the favour of a select few; belonging to a perceived 'other' means belonging to the commodifiable, profitable, and powerless. In this context, Brzeżańska's photomontage urges viewers to identify and critique the monopoly of petroculturalism from this non-hegemonic angle.

In her image, pipes occupy the space where the man's head would be, indicating his focus on ownership over oil and the related profits. But he loses sight of context in this tunnel-vision approach. While not explicitly present in the collage, water permeates through the lush green flora. It makes up most of the man's body, yet he seems unaware of its indispensability and omnipresence. MacLeod writes: "Many of the products and by-products of human engagement with fossil fuels are chemically hydrophobic: they are repelled by water."¹³ Water represents everything that petroculturalism actively discourages — spilling over, redistributing, diffusing, refusing to be contained. Oil may share some of these properties with water, but as it goes through the organizational levels of extraction, processing, and distribution, it is robbed from its context, independence, and relationality. "Even in the midst of their coding as impermanent and disposable, petrochemicals can still evoke stasis and immortality. And they do so by promising to bring us with them

¹³ Janine MacLeod, "Holding Water in Time: Hydrophobia," in *Petrocultures: Oil, Politics, Cultures*, eds. Sheena Wilson, Adam Carlson, Imre Sheman (Montréal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2017): 265.

into a place of perfect containment."¹⁴ Losing fossil fantasies means losing fantasies of containment and control over subjugated peoples, creatures, and materials. Holding space for collectivity and context becomes an antonym of petro-masculine ambition.

Towards a fluid togetherness

Hagiwara and Brzeżańska both use and engage with images connected to petrochemical influences. Through their artistic processes, they shed light on the links between petrocultures and aquatic systems, which are the foundation of life on Earth and of human civilizations. Hagiwara's installation interrogates changing meanings of the Japanese seashell, tracing the development of petroculturalism and the subsequent drainage of life from her shell, and from every human and non-human actant affected by fossil fuel violence. Like Hagiwara, Brzeżańska also explores the interconnectedness of all life systems through water, creating dream-like photomontages that illustrate the discomfort of confronting planetary suffering. She facilitates a realization that collectivity — the merging of seemingly disjointed parts/images — opposes and dismantles the capitalist desire to divide, isolate, and control.

Petrocapitalism relies on water to stage and guard the oil that corporations extract, process, and sell. Aquatic metaphors which describe capital function to justify the commodification of natural resources and encourage us to feel the same primordial connection to capital as we do towards water. What is more, water is already the topic of political negotiations and neo-colonial violations of Indigenous communities. It is not immune to commodification; some corporations and governments already own, measure, monitor it, and sell it in bottles.

The artworks discussed in this text demonstrate that the logic of petroculturalism is partially rooted in hydrophobic neoliberal individualism, a by-product of relatively recent industrialized socio-political configurations. Engaging with water as an antidote to capital accumulation offers a new perspective on collectivity that spills into relations with other beings who are also affected by oil extraction, and who also rely on water to live and survive. In this ongoing petroculturalist landscape, water is the "most exemplary political substance; it is an intimately and continuously shared matter..."¹⁵ If we recognize it as such, we can reconfigure our position in water and towards it as we face the tides of planetary change.

¹⁴ Ibid.: 277.

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Cecilia Chen, Janine MacLeod, Astrida Neimanis, *Thinking with Water* (Montréal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2013), 6.

Agnieszka Wodzińska holds a MA in Contemporary Art History at Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam (cum laude) and an undergraduate degree in Comparative Literature and History of Art obtained at the University of Glasgow. Her research interests include embodiment in new media art, environmentalism, and queer theory.