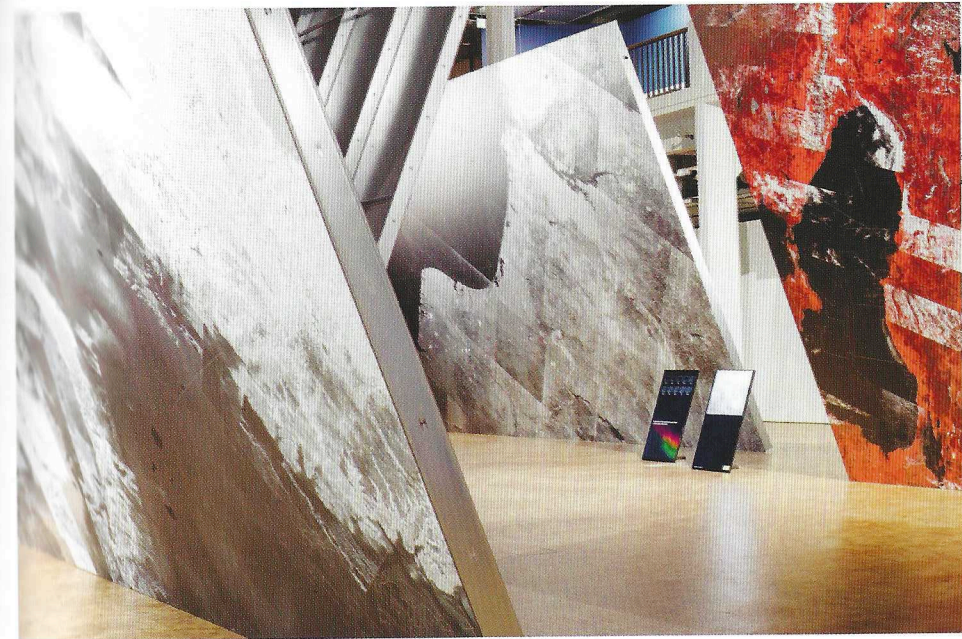


## Chapter 3 Crude Oil

Since the first hard-rock drilling operation struck oil in Pennsylvania in 1859, the exploitation of petroleum has set in motion economic and infrastructural transformations that have defined the modern world. By tapping into reserves of ancient sunshine amassed over millions of years of photosynthesis and fixed in subterranean deposits of coal, oil and gas, industrialized societies have been able to take advantage of an unprecedented energy windfall. Oil reconfigured the geopolitical order, propelling the United States and Soviet Union to superpower status during the Cold War and generating conflict over the control of petroleum-rich regions, to the extent that, as Timothy Mitchell discussed in *Carbon Democracy*, wealth in natural resources became an 'oil curse' associated with oppressive and autocratic politics. Fossil fuel capitalism, and the swift economic growth it facilitated, made possible the rise of a global economic system in which petroleum-powered shipping, road and air transport accelerated international trade, while reinforcing structural inequalities and historical patterns of social exclusion. The correlation between economic globalization and global warming is underlined by David Wallace-Wells's observation in *The Uninhabitable Earth* in 2019 that 'more than half of the carbon exhaled into the atmosphere by the burning of fossil fuels has been emitted in just the last three decades'. Despite the fact that oil exploitation has left a trail of destruction in the natural environment through leaks, spills and fires, the petroleum industry has redoubled its efforts to obstruct the decarbonizing of economy, society and culture.

15 Conceiving their *Museum of Oil* (2016) as an institution in the making, London-based duo Territorial Agency (John Palmesino and Ann-Sofi Rönnskog) envisaged a climate scenario in



15 Territorial Agency (John Palmesino and Ann-Sofi Rönnskog), *Museum of Oil*, 2016

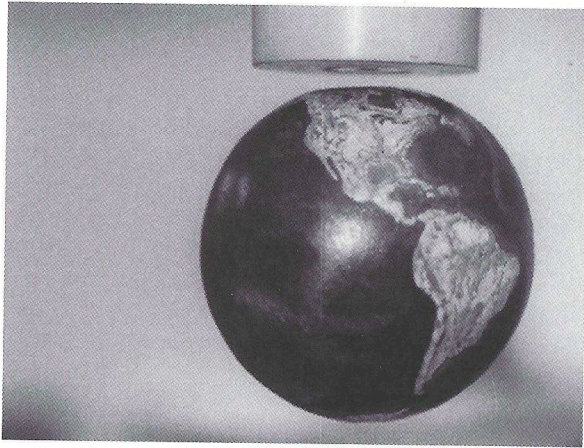
which petroleum stocks are left safely in the ground, while the destructive mechanisms of the oil industry are turned into historical artefacts. Consisting of large slanting panels, the museum display included satellite images, documentary footage and streams of data that disclosed the planetary imprint of oil drilling, pipelines and refineries, rendering tangible the sheer scale of such operations. This research detailed the damage inflicted by oil power on the natural world, from deforestation in Brazil and Peru to the regular oil leaks from rusting Soviet-era pipelines in Siberia and the upswing in fossil fuel prospecting in the Arctic as the ice melts. Equally, the artists drew attention to the destabilizing economic effects of oil investments, with companies driven to undertake ever more complicated and risky explorations by the constant need to secure new reserves as current fields are depleted. Oil power is revealed as operating behind the scenes, infiltrating legal, political, cultural and environmental realms, framing discussions of ecological disasters and intervening in climate policy agendas. The fact that the industry is never explicitly named in climate change agreements, which refer more neutrally to carbon emissions, was for Territorial Agency another reason to expose oil to public scrutiny in the museum.



16

In the five-channel video installation *Karikpo Pipeline* (2015) by Nigerian-born artist Zina Saro-Wiwa, the camera glides through the low-lying expanses of the Niger Delta, showing palm trees and greenery occasionally intersected by corroded metal oil pipes or decommissioned flow stations. Every now and then ghostly apparitions of traditional Karikpo dancers wearing wooden antelope masks with horns emerge in the landscape. Their appearance and disappearance from view hint at what is hiding beneath the surface, namely the underground network of pipelines that have transformed the land and life of the inhabitants since oil was discovered there by Royal Dutch Shell in 1965. The harrowing environmental devastation of

Ogoniland that followed is close to the artist's heart, since her father, activist Ken Saro-Wiwa, who established the Movement for Survival of Ogoni People to fight against the ecological destruction of the Niger Delta, was tragically executed by the military authorities in 1995. The use of drone footage in the film is suggestive of the surveillance techniques of the petroleum companies, but it also refers to the invisible spiritual forces that are believed to populate the scorched land of the Delta. In that sense, the work reaches beyond the violent, corrupting and toxic oil exploitation to uncover the hidden, rich culture of the Ogoni people and their unbreakable relationship with the land.



17 Kinotron Group, *Data Is the New Gas*, 2019

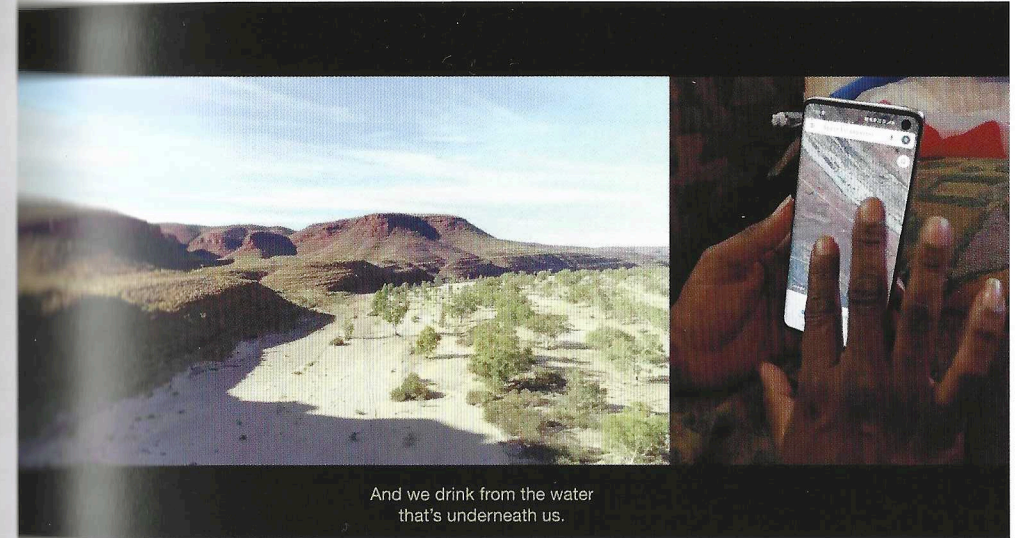
Taking the form of the research essay *Is Data the New Gas?* (2020), Ukrainian artist Oleksiy Radynski's inquiry into the structural interdependence of authoritarian politics and fossil fuel extraction investigated the controversy over the laying of the Nord Stream II (NSII) gas pipeline between Russia and Germany in the Baltic Sea. For Radynski, the biggest problem is not the fact that the undersea pipeline will deprive Ukraine of transit revenues and provide 'the Russian autocratic elite with another powerful tool to subvert European politics', but that the new infrastructure 'undermines the future of planet Earth by bringing the irreversibility of climate change one large step closer'. The artist traced the origins of German-Russian cooperation for the extraction of Siberian gas back to the signing in 1970 of the 'gas for pipes' deal, which enabled the building of the *Bratstvo* or Brotherhood pipeline to connect the largest gas reserves on the planet to the European energy market. While supplying hard currency to prop up the Soviet regime, this Faustian bargain laid the ground for the emergence in Russia in the post-communist period of an 'autocratic system based on a ruthless extractivist attitude to the Earth's resources'. Working also as a member of the Kinotron film collective, Radynski has investigated the role played by visionary cybernetician and inventor of the Soviet internet Viktor Glushkov in computerizing the world's longest network of pipelines. While publicly proclaiming the ability of computers to balance economic needs and environmental preservation, Glushkov warned in closed meetings of the future exhaustion of fossil fuel reserves.

Faced with the depletion of easily accessible oil reserves, the industry has resorted to unconventional methods such as pumping toxic chemicals into the lithosphere and using vast quantities of water to force the Earth to release hydrocarbons from shale rock. The technology of fracking is described by environmental theorists Sandro Mezzadra and Brett Neilson, authors of *The Politics of Operations: Excavating Contemporary Capitalism*, as the 'cutting edge of extraction' in that it allows it to 'continue beyond the point at which the gases it seeks to remove from the Earth have been otherwise depleted'. In *The Gas Imaginary* (since 2013), settler Australian artist Rachel O'Reilly investigated the profound social and environmental ramifications of the rapid expansion of new forms of fossil fuel extraction from the port of her hometown of Gladstone in the unceded territory of the Gooreng Gooreng people into new frontier spaces across the country. Through poetry, collaborative drawing, animation and performative lectures, as well as the feature-length documentary film

*Infractions* (2019), she traced the environmental devastation caused by unconventional gas fracking, vividly illustrated by the proliferation of shimmering ponds of toxic wastewater across the landscape of western Queensland. While *Infractions* platformed the current struggles of First Nations artists and theorists to protect water, earlier works addressed the continuation of colonial power brought about by unconventional mining, which is extending the ongoing indigenous experience of the environmental devastation of homelands and the technocratic usurpation of basic rights by the historically privileged settler population. Australia's climate-shaming status as the world's largest exporter of fossil gas has come at the risk of poisoning and depleting the underground aquifer systems of a country already facing extreme water shortages as a result of intensive agriculture and global warming.

Two distant geographies, the boreal forest in northern Canada and the coastal floodplains of Bangladesh, were set in dynamic correlation in Swiss artist Ursula Biemann's *Deep Weather* (2013) to underscore the profound changes in planetary ecology brought about by anthropogenic climate disruption. Aerial footage of the devastation caused by the open-cast mining and steam processing of the Alberta tar sands, turning the forest ecosystem and territory of First Nation peoples into a petro-capitalist sacrifice zone, is paired with scenes of the community effort to build protective mud embankments to hold back the flood waters of the Bangladesh Delta, swelled by melting Himalayan permafrost, rising sea levels and extreme weather. Biemann contrasted the hi-tech apparel of the Canadian miners tapping unconventional oil for delivery around the world, including to refineries on the US Gulf Coast through the disputed Keystone XL pipeline project, with the bare hands with which precarious communities in the global South desperately try to hold back the catastrophic local impacts of climate change. This work demonstrated the extent to which, in the interconnected Earth system, environmental devastation experienced in particular localities is inseparable from extractivist excesses taking place on the other side of the world.

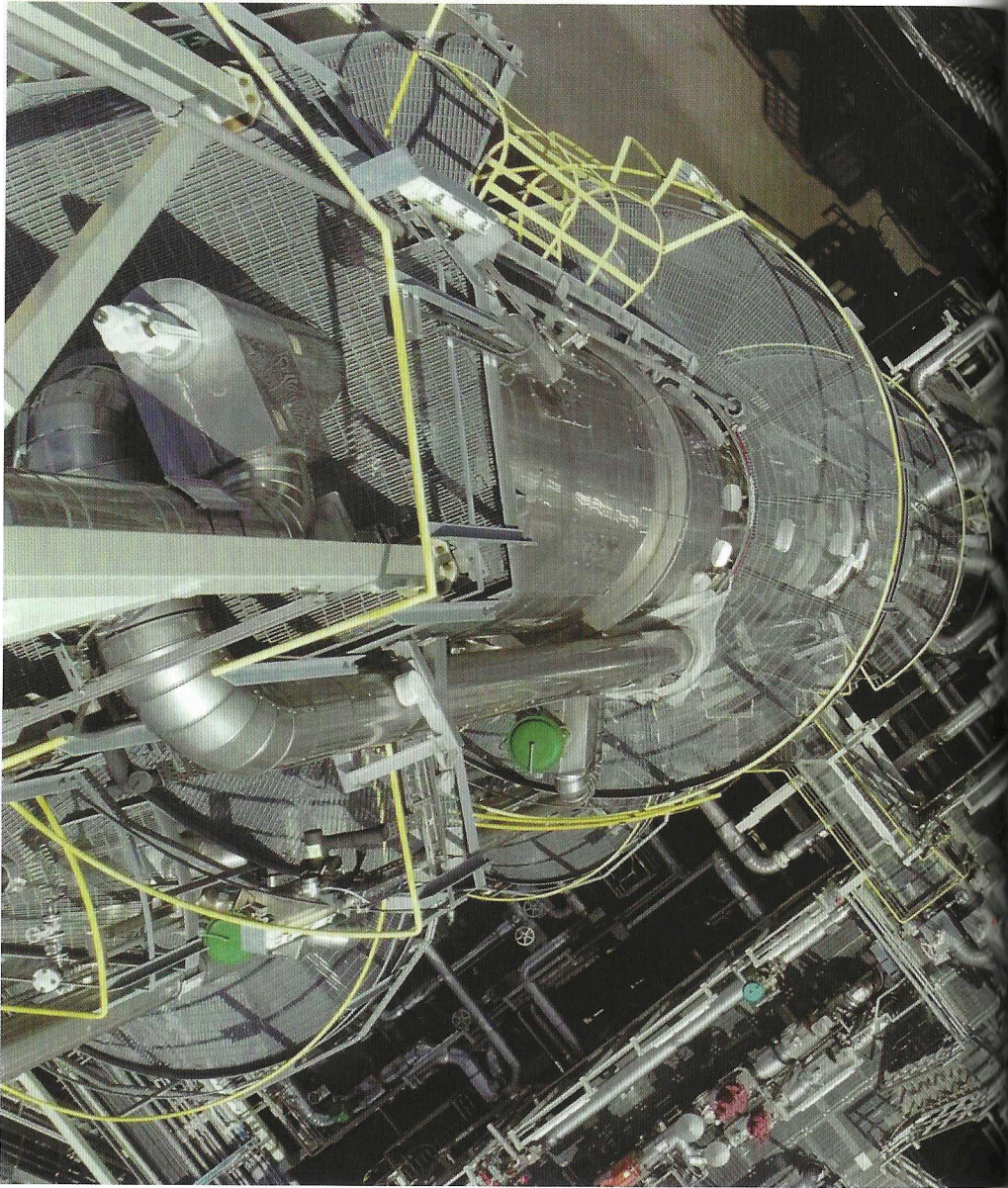
With the warmest years on record, an unprecedented rate of melting ice and wildfires raging even in the Arctic Circle, the reality of climate disruption is becoming increasingly apparent, despite the efforts of a well-funded science of climate change denial to relativize the evidence. This was the starting point for Austrian artist Oliver Ressler's project *Carbon and Captivity* (2020), which set out to investigate how oil corporations are forging alliances in their efforts to develop sustainable technological solutions for continuing oil extraction. One



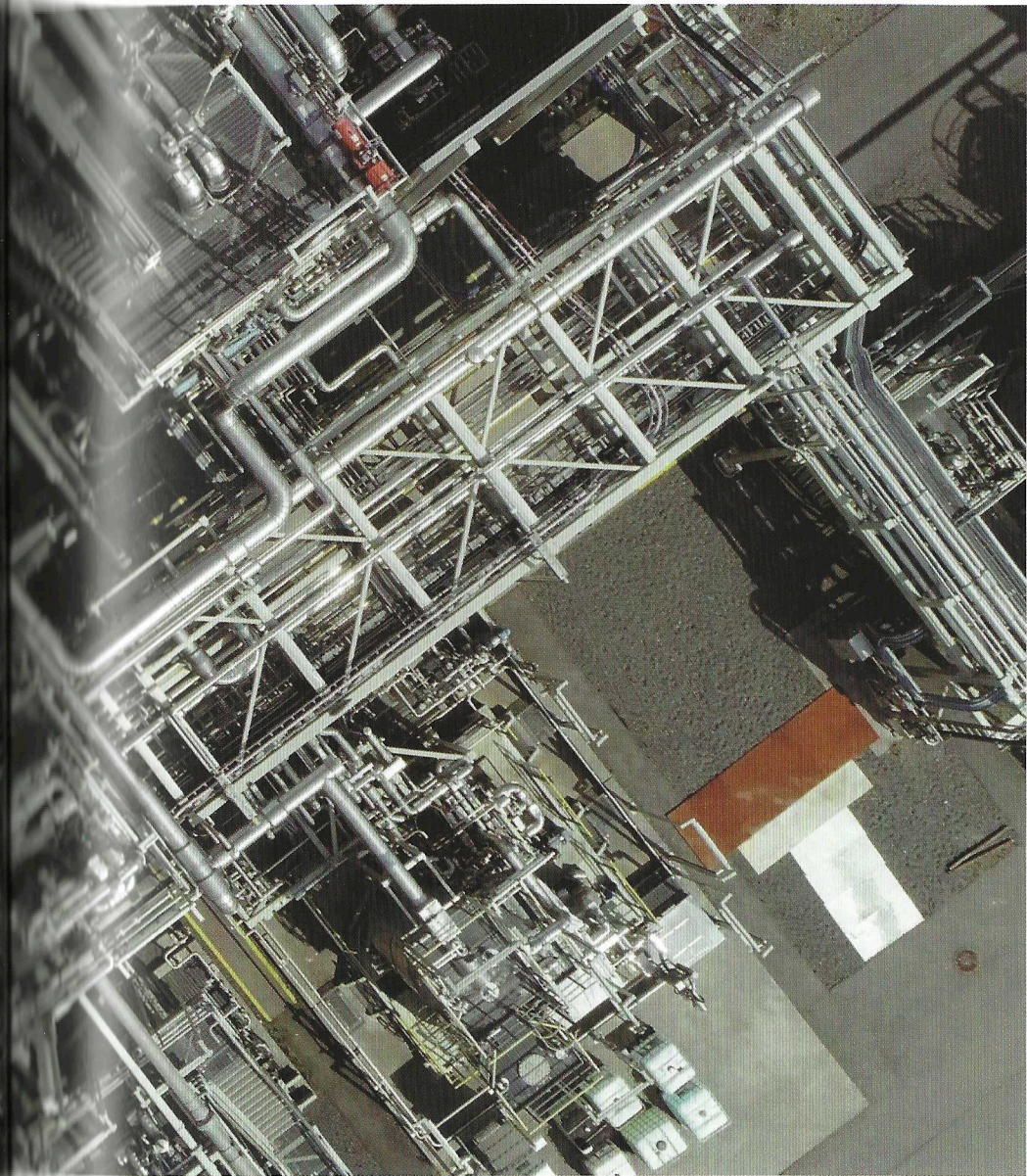
18 Rachel O'Reilly, *Infractions*, 2019

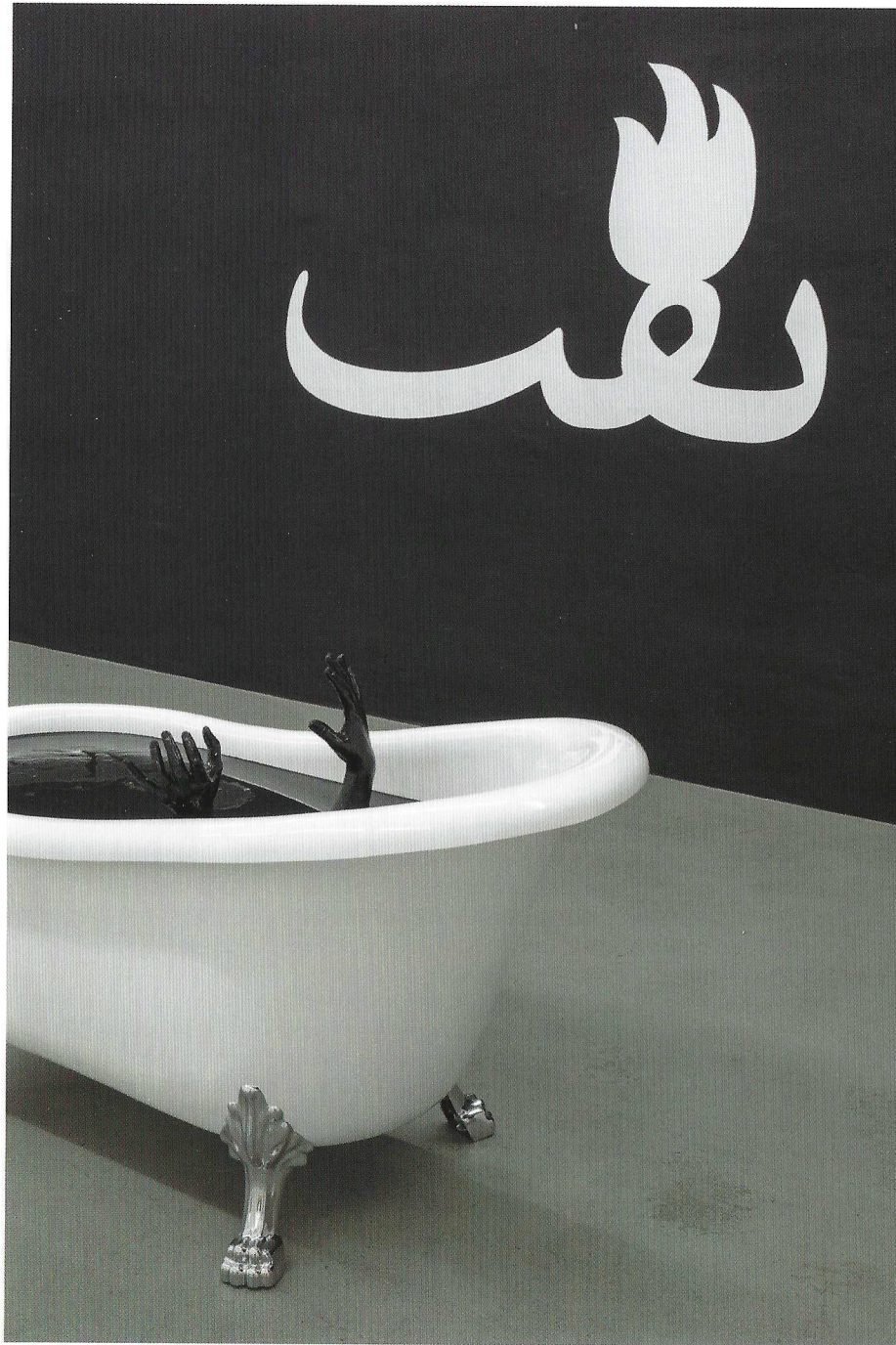
chapter of the film follows a guided tour of the world's largest facility for testing carbon capture technologies on an industrial scale at the Technology Centre Mongstad in Norway, with an industry representative laying out the prospects of carbon sequestration and storage on the seafloor. Such an approach mirrors the advocacy of technological solutions by signatories to the Ecomodernist Manifesto, who saw an opportunity for a 'good Anthropocene' to emerge in which geoengineering could be used to stabilize the climate. However, Clive Hamilton in his *Earthmasters: The Dawn of Climate Engineering* warns that we should be wary of 'any technology that claims to have found a way to immobilise for centuries huge quantities of carbon somewhere in the Earth system where it does not belong'. Also drawing attention to the unreliable premises of the technofix, Ressler insists on the environmental hazards posed by risky procedures to sink carbon into the Earth, the lure of subsidies for industry and the continuing global dependence on fossil fuel energy. 'Captivity' in his title stands not only for the technological system of carbon capture, but also for the state of humanity, kept in imprisonment by an oil industry determined to indefinitely postpone the post-fossil future.

Questioning its centrality as the fossil fuel of modern times, Kuwaiti artist Monira Al Qadiri pointed to the alternative histories of oil usage in her sculpture *Deep Float* (2017). Consisting of a free-standing bathtub filled to the brim with velvety black



19 Oliver Ressler, *Carbon and Captivity*, 2020





crude oil from which only a pair of outstretched hands emerge, the work is positioned in front of a black wall with a white calligraphic sign. In a reference to the Gulf States' economic dependence on oil, she appropriated the old Persian word *nft* – meaning oil – by adding flames to the cursive script. More specifically, the artist alluded to the city of Naftalan in Azerbaijan, where a centuries-old medicinal treatment involves bathing in a petroleum spa, a therapy that medieval traveller Marco Polo described as a 'magical solution to treat skin diseases'. This cure reached the height of its popularity during Soviet times when tens of thousands immersed themselves in the miraculous liquid that distilled the energy of ancient sunlight. *Deep Float* not only refers to the pre-history of the ruthless exploitation of petroleum, but also holds out the prospect of a post-carbon future in which oil's curative qualities eclipse its energetic power. One is left wondering whether the submerged figure is drowning or resurfacing, expressing the unease of a time in the planet's history when everything is at stake.

The environmental impact of oil drilling on natural environments and its contribution to carbon emissions have been addressed by artists in this chapter, who also expose the industry's attempts to evade scrutiny and the corrupting role of oil wealth in destabilizing democracies and propping up autocracies. As climate change and new technologies make ever more remote areas of land and sea accessible to exploitation, the threat posed by unconventional methods of oil and gas extraction, and the inevitable spills and accidents that accompany them, has only increased, while the industry promotes the pipedream of carbon capture to perpetuate fossil fuel dependency. By suggesting alternative ways to see, feel and understand the materiality of oil and its entwined geological and social histories, artists have also sketched the hazy outlines of a post-petroleum world.

20 OPPOSITE Monira Al Qadiri, *Deep Float*, 2017