



Terry Evans, *Petcoke Piles in Southeast Chicago at Koch Industries Site Along Calumet River*, November 2014

PETCOKE

TRACING DIRTY ENERGY

July 21 - October 9, 2016

Participating Artists

Marissa Lee Benedict and David Rueter

Rozalinda Borcilă

Terry Evans

Geissler/Sann

Brian Holmes

Claire Pentecost

Steve Rowell

Victoria Sambunaris

From 2009 until early 2016, piles of dark, gritty dust loomed five stories high along the banks of the Calumet River on the Southeast Side of Chicago. Tar sands oil operations at the BP plant in nearby Whiting, Indiana, were piling up petroleum coke, or petcoke, a cheap and dirty energy source produced out of their waste. At a KCBX storage facility—a subsidiary of Koch Industries—hills of petcoke the size and scale of the area's bygone factories had long supplanted thriving industry. The mounds lay so close to South Side neighborhoods, in fact, that residents said on windy days airborne particulates from the site drifted into their yards, coating their homes with a black dust.

The world's largest oil companies/corporations—often referred to collectively as Big Oil—had turned the area into a local dumping ground for their operations. The community mobilized, with residents, activists and organizers joining forces to educate and inform, protest, and ultimately move the needle on legislation. Today, although the mounds are gone due to hard-won legal battles, the activists' fight continues. The production, temporary storage, and transfer of petcoke still occurs in and around the Southeast Side of Chicago next to neighborhoods including Hegewisch, the East Side, South Deering, and Calumet Heights. A carbon compound, petcoke dust is laden with sulfur and toxic heavy metals, and can cause serious health problems.¹ Oil production poses numerous additional hazards. Pipelines are old and fragile, imperiling the environment with the ever-present danger of potential leakage. Trains crossing through Chicago that traverse the United States are full of highly explosive toxic crude, which would likely kill thousands of people if one were to detonate en route. Millions of gallons are transported



Geissler/Sann,
Prevailing Winds and Relative Distances, 2016

every day through highly populated cities on a rail system that was not engineered to accommodate oil trains or to prevent such accidents.

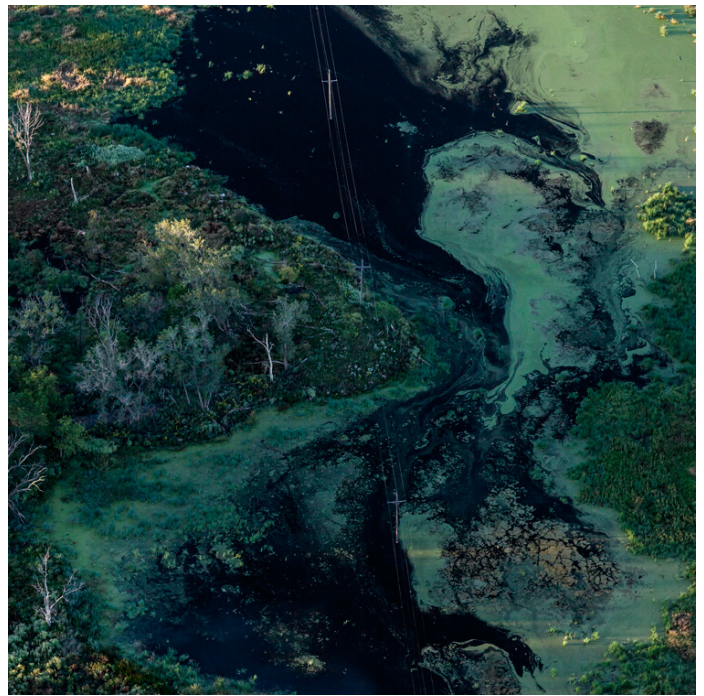
Petcoke: Tracing Dirty Energy grew out of our desire to bring attention to the devastating environmental and public health impact of petcoke, and by extension the oil industry as a whole. The Museum of Contemporary Photography is located a mere twelve miles from the KCBX sites in southeast Chicago. Yet even we were not aware of the extent of the problem here at home or adequately informed of its increasingly global ramifications. Thousands of residents and properties in Chicago have been harmed over the past few years. But petcoke does not long remain in expensive storage. A waste product, it is “priced to move” to fuel markets worldwide. In

2012 alone, the United States exported 184 million barrels of petcoke to China and other developing countries, used as an industrial fuel in parts of the world with lax (or nearly nonexistent) environmental regulations.²

On the Southeast Side, grassroots organizers mounted an urgent, community-wide response to the crisis: the Southeast Chicago Coalition to Ban Petcoke. We have partnered with the Southeast Environmental Task Force (SETF) and Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC) to produce *Petcoke: Tracing Dirty Energy*. Planning this exhibition has been a collaborative partnership from the start. We commissioned new works from eight artists/artist teams who share our interests in environmental, land, and urban issues, meeting bimonthly as a group over the course of a year. Some we knew well from past projects; others we only recently discovered through research leading up to the exhibition. But all were up to the challenge we proposed.

In time, our bimonthly working group became its own supportive community of artists and activists, with the cross-pollination of ideas and strategies informing the development of individual projects. The result is an exhibition that encompasses vastly different material investigations and media, from photography to video installation, sculpture to walking tours and interactive maps.

Terry Evans's (United States, b. 1944) longstanding interest in ecology and the effects of land use on midwestern populations sparked her initial inquiries into petcoke production in Chicago and beyond. Evans pairs aerial photographs of the BP oil refinery in Whiting and petcoke storage sites in the Calumet region with portraits



Terry Evans,
From *Grassroots vs. Petcoke*, 2014 - 2016



Claire Pentecost,
A Library of Tears, 2016

and testimonials from activists and community members. Her documentary approach augments **Claire Pentecost's** (United States, b. 1956) conceptual examination of the emotions motivating the environmental justice movement. Pentecost's tear-shaped glass sculptures contain various materials, both natural and human-made, including the noxious substance of petcoke itself, an apt metaphor for the public health impact of the oil industry's operations.



Victoria Sambunaris,
From Industrial Shipping Vessels, Houston Ship Channel, Texas, 2015 -2016



Steve Rowell,
Aerial Still From Midstream at Twilight, 2016

Tracing the global routes of that industry through its transportation systems is at the core of work by artists **Brian Holmes** (United States, b. 1959), **Steve Rowell** (United States, b. 1969), and **Victoria Sambunaris** (United States, b. 1964). Sambunaris's grid of ships passing through the fifty-two-mile access route that connects the largest US petroleum port to the Gulf of Mexico expose the often invisible global economic flow of petrochemicals. Rowell, meanwhile, has traveled to Alberta, Canada, photographing the Athabasca tar sands, the largest expanse of heavy crude oil deposit in the world at 50,000 square miles and a leading exporter to refineries in the United States. In his video installation *Midstream at Twilight*, he maps the transport of toxic substances in pipelines and surveys the power centers of Koch Industries and the brothers' private residences.

Brian Holmes's interactive map *Petropolis* tracks the intricate transport network of the oil industry, demarking refineries, industrial installations, power plants, ports, railroads and pipelines, as well as sites where activists have successfully halted pipeline construction. **Rozalinda Borcilă's** (Romania/ United States, b. 1971) concerns are similar, but



Rozalinda Borcilă,
Experience the Culture: Day-tripping the Petrocapitol, 2016

her method is more tactile and immediate. Borcilă is leading a series of participatory walks along the petroleum supply chain in the Chicago metropolitan region. Materials and video footage from these walks will be added to the artist's evolving archive of evidence of the forces around us that foster widespread oil consumption.

Our dependence on oil is further explored by artist duo **Geissler/Sann** (German, b. 1970 and 1968) in their photograph of methadone, a synthetic opioid used to treat heroin addiction. With this gesture, Geissler/Sann hint at our collective dependence on petroleum and probe the possibilities of corrective solutions—while simultaneously exposing such

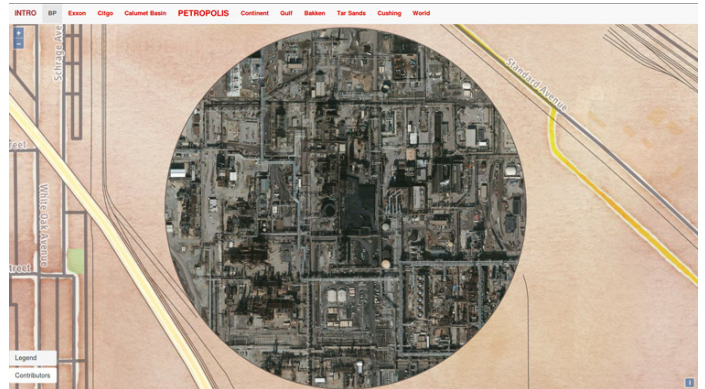
responses as far from curative. A shift to carbon trading, for instance, thus emerges as a kind of conciliation. In another gallery, they exhibit a small sample of petcoke sealed in a Plexiglas case, underscoring the fact that the substance is so toxic that the viewing public would be outraged if confronted with the material directly, an ironic stance considering that people on the Southeast Side of Chicago were never asked, much less told, that petcoke was piling up just beyond their backyards.

And finally, artist team **Marissa Lee Benedict and David Rueter** (United States, b. 1985 and 1978) take a different tack, tracing energy through its residue: dust. Their science fiction-inspired multichannel video examines the byproducts of carbon-based fuels as they enter the atmosphere as dust, and considers a future where undetectable particulates might be used to carry information. Benedict and Rueter document dust blowing upward and outward, from deserts and industrial sites to places all over the globe. In the process they suggest a strange world where particulates can convey both mysterious uses and caustic effects.

With more than two trillion barrels of the world's oil deposits submerged in tar sands,³ the production of dirty crude is expected to triple over the next two decades. The harms of extraction, refinement, and transportation of this sludgy, carbon-dense petroleum have been well documented. It is a process that emits up to three times more greenhouse gas pollution than the production of an equivalent volume of conventional oil.⁴ *Petcoke: Tracing Dirty Energy* is a call to action at the intersection of art



Marissa Lee Benedict and David Rueter,
Production Still from *I Can Only See Shadows*, 2016



Brian Holmes
From *Map/Archive Petropolis*, 2016

and activism.

We would like to thank the activists, artists, and essayists for their insightful and heartfelt contributions to this project and to the broader fight for environmental justice. This exhibition and publication would not have been possible without the generous primary funding of the Lannan Foundation, and support from the Comer Family Foundation and the Elizabeth F. Cheney Foundation.

Natasha Egan, Executive Director

Karen Irvine, Curator and Associate Director

Museum of Contemporary Photography
at Columbia College Chicago, mocc.org

1 Gary Kopycinsky, "Koch Brothers in Court Over Chicago's Petcoke Piles", eNews Park Forest, April 29, 2015, <http://enewspark.com/2014/04/29/koch-brothers-in-court-over-chicago-s-petcoke-piles/>.

2 "What Is Petcoke?" about news, November 2, 2015, <http://environment.about.com/od/fossilfuels/f/What-is-Petcoke.htm>.

3 "About Tar Sands," Oil Shale and Tar Sands Programmatic EIS Information Center, <http://ostseis.anl.gov/guide/tarsands/>.

4 Ibid



This exhibition was produced in partnership with the Natural Resource Defense Council and the Southeast Environmental Task Force and made possible by the Lannan Foundation with additional support by the Elizabeth F. Cheney Foundation and the Comer Family Foundation.