
PETCOKE

TRACING DIRTY ENERGY

July 21 - October 9, 2016

mocp.org

MoCP

Columbia
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Viewer's Guide



Steve Rowell, Video still from *Midstream at Twilight*, 2016

This guide serves as a viewer's supplement to the exhibition *Petcoke: Tracing Dirty Energy* and contains information about the works on view, questions for looking and discussion, and suggested readings. You may download this guide from the museum's website at mocp.org/education/resources-for-educators.php.

To schedule a free docent-led tour, please complete the form [here](http://mocp.org/education/tours-and-print-viewings.php).

mocp.org/education/tours-and-print-viewings.php.



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.

**Marissa Lee Benedict
and David Rueter**

Rozalinda Borcilă

Terry Evans

Geissler/Sann

Brian Holmes

Claire Pentecost

Steve Rowell

Victoria Sambunaris

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Introduction

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—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. Some trains that cross through Chicago carry highly explosive toxic crude, enough to kill thousands of people if any one of them were to detonate en route. Millions of gallons are transported 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. 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. 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 crosspollination 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.

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 and activism.

Natasha Egan, Executive Director

Karen Irvine, Curator and Associate Director

Museum of Contemporary Photography
at Columbia College Chicago

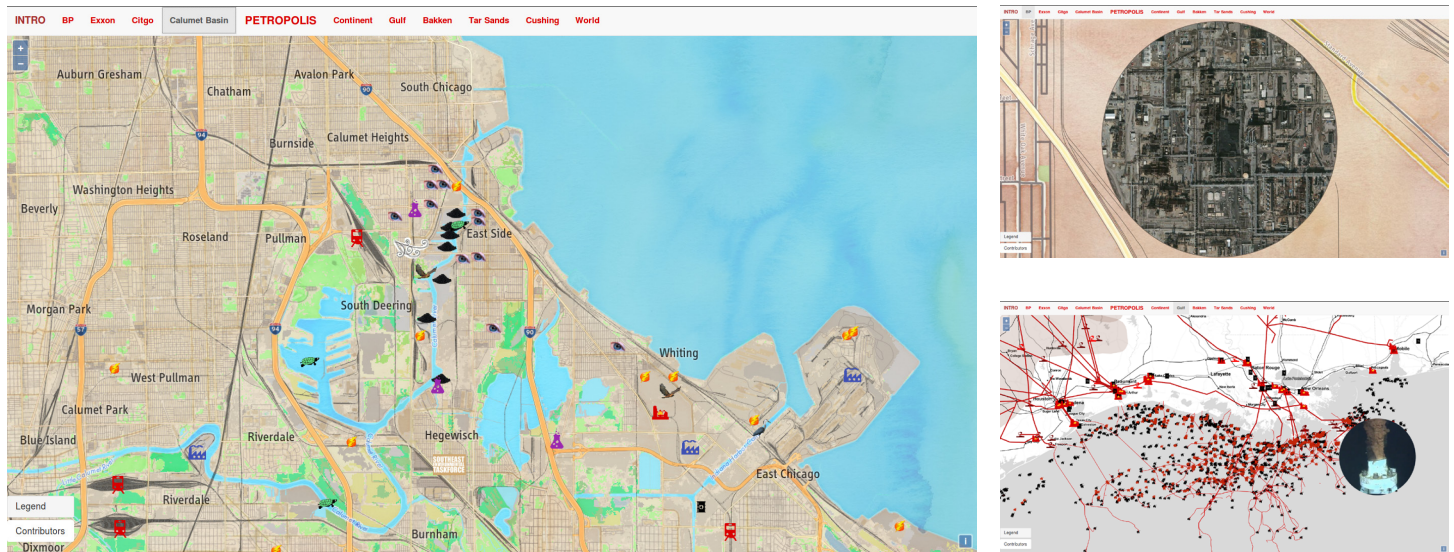
1 Gary Kopycinsky, "Koch Brothers in Court Over Chicago's Petcoke Piles," eNews Park Forest, April 29, 2015, <http://enewspf.com/2014/04/29/koch-brothers-in-court-over-chicagos-petcoke-piles/>

2 "What Is Petcoke?" about news, November 2, 2015, <http://environment.about.com/od/fossilfuels/fl/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.

West Gallery



Brian Holmes from Map/Archive *Petropolis*, 2016

Begin by looking at the large map produced by **Brian Holmes** (United States, b. 1959) near the museum's entryway. Holmes created it after learning that trains move millions of gallons of highly explosive crude across the United States on a rail system that was not engineered to accommodate oil trains. If the cargo were to detonate en route, it would likely kill thousands of people. How, he wondered, could oil companies justify the threat of one of these train cars exploding in a major metropolitan area?

Digging further, he uncovered a complex industry that exists mostly outside of public scrutiny and places lives at risk as it refines and moves petrochemicals across the globe. Joining activists, Holmes began to speak out against unsafe industry practices, joined a coalition working to abolish petcoke, and began to work on oil issues with the Southeast Environmental Task Force. He created the mural and interactive map on display to chart the opaque systems of the petroleum industry for activists, educators, and citizens.

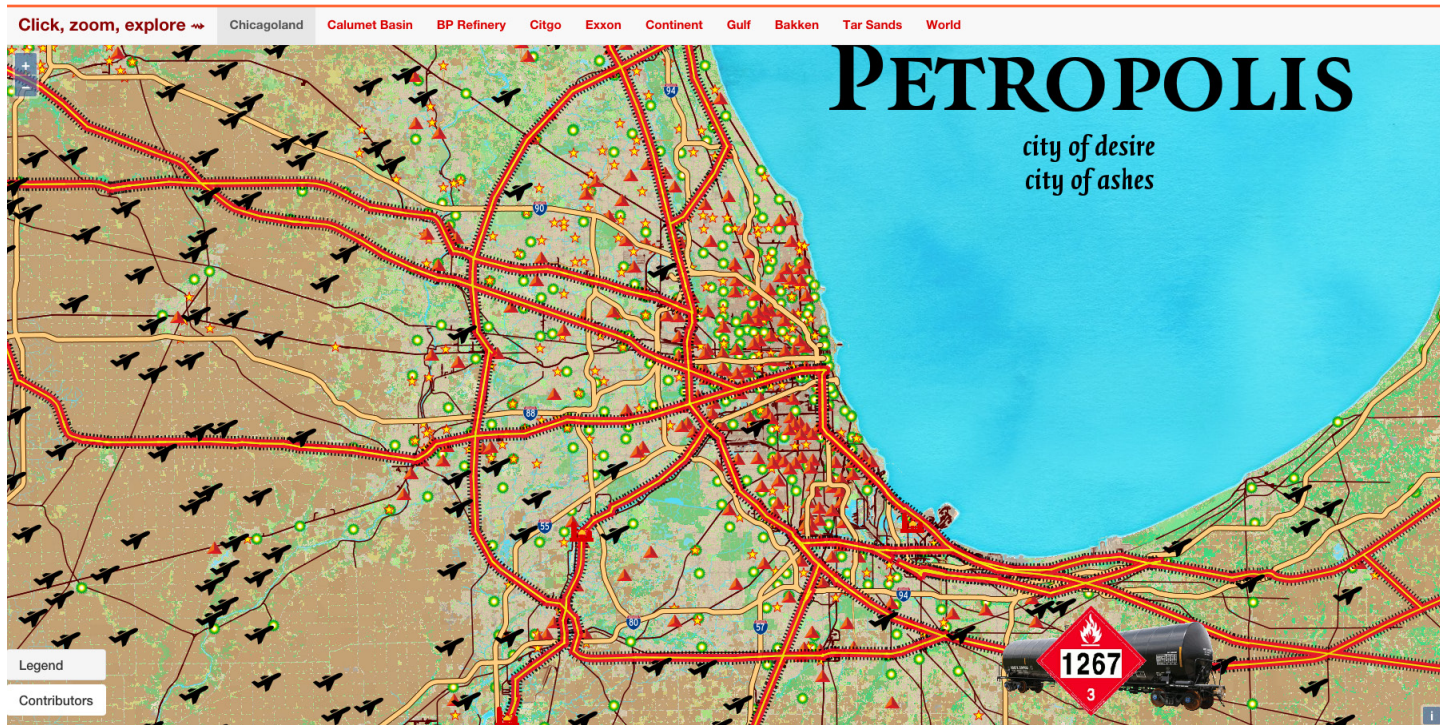
QUESTIONS FOR LOOKING & DISCUSSING

Like photographs, most maps are static two-dimensional, geometrically accurate representations of three-dimensional space. What is the benefit of being able to interact with Holmes' map?

What type of information is included in the map? What geographic space is depicted? Is there information missing from the map?

Notable items on the map:

- Holmes has pinpointed every oil refinery and petrochemical site on the continent.
- The map also marks key sites including the Gulf of Mexico, where BP's oil rig Deepwater Horizon sank; the Bakken region, where explosive crude is put on poorly maintained trains; the boreal forests of Northern Alberta, Canada, where tar sand bitumen is mined; and finally Cushing, Oklahoma, which is the largest oil storage depot on the planet.



This interactive map can be accessed remotely at the following link:
<http://environmentalobservatory.net/Petropolis/map.html>

Brian Holmes from Map/Archive Petropolis, 2016

IN GALLERY ACTIVITY

Ask students to describe their sense of the scale and impact of the industrial activities outlined in Holmes' interactive map.

- What were they aware of before seeing the map?
- What surprises them?

Holmes has also integrated narratives and creative responses from individuals impacted by the oil trade into his map. Find a few and read them together.

- What perspectives do these voices illuminate?
- Is anyone's voice missing?

Planned pipeline construction that has been halted by activists is also outlined, as are sites where successful protests have occurred.

- How do these additions shape the map's meaning?

Terry Evans British Petroleum refinery, Whiting, Indiana, April 2015

COMPARE & CONTRAST

BRIAN HOLMES and TERRY EVANS

Now turn to artist **Terry Evans** artwork.

- Ask students to look closely at Evans' photographs. What do students notice? Ask students to describe the color, composition, and scale. What else comes to mind when they look at the works? List words or phrases.
- Compare and contrast the representation of the Calumet region's landscape in the works of Brian Holmes and Terry Evans. How does the data from *Petropolis* influence how you view the photographs? How do Holmes and Evans express borders differently?



Terry Evans' (United States, b. 1944) photographs provide an aerial view of the vast operations that surround a BP refinery and Koch Industries' KCBX petcoke storage facility, including where the substance is manufactured as well as how it is transported. Some of her images also depict the piles of petcoke that were stored next to Southeast Side neighborhoods until just this past spring.



Terry Evans, Left to right: *Big Marsh, Southeast Chicago*, 2015; *Chicago Salt Storage on Calumet River*, 2015; *Loading Petcoke onto a Barge on Calumet River*, 2015.

QUESTIONS FOR LOOKING & DISCUSSING

- Why do you think Evans made photographs from above as opposed to photographs taken on the ground?
- How does this view differ from how you typically experience looking at the landscape?
- How has Evans portrayed the impact of petcoke on the landscape and communities?



Terry Evans, *Ban Petcoke March, 100th Street, Southeast Chicago*, November 3, 2015

- Evans considers herself to be an environmental activist. What impact do you think these images have in the fight to remove petcoke piles from communities?
- Can you sense her motivation for making this project by just looking at the works?
- Do the images feel impartial or biased?

Look together at **Claire Pentecost's** (United States, b. 1956) sculptural installation in which meaning, process, and materials are intertwined. What materials do students notice first? Are there any unfamiliar substances in Pentecost's work? What do you guess those are?

IN GALLERY ACTIVITY

Read the list of materials on the wall label aloud. For reference, the materials list can be viewed in the orange block at the bottom of this page. Does the list change students' impressions of the piece? How do you think this piece was made? What might the artist be trying to communicate through her choices?

Pentecost's teardrops are hand blown glass. The artist's method of using human breath and the teardrop form become a metaphor for the effects of petcoke and other oil industry pollutants on living bodies.

- **What do students think** of Pentecost's incorporating waste products into art objects?

- **Is the experience of seeing** an artwork with real petcoke and other industrial byproducts different from seeing those materials represented in **Terry Evans'** aerial photographs?

- **Ask students to think about** Pentecost's artistic process—why might she have chosen to create hand-blown glass sculpture in the shape of teardrops?
- **What is the relationship** among the materials she uses, human breath, and tears?
- **Where did Pentecost gather her materials?** What significance do the various locations visited play in your sense of its meaning?



Claire Pentecost, *A Library of Tears*, 2016

List of Materials in Claire Pentecost's *A Library of Tears*

Petcoke, South Dakota crude, Texas sweet crude, Alberta tar sands, Athabaskan River mud, Calumet-Saganashkee Canal algae, sulfur, copper, zinc, mercury, asphalt, aluminum, clay, paper, glass, wire, gauze, glue, string, feathers, fur, snakeskin, egg shells, honey bees, seeds, shredded US currency, wallpaper designed and hand-drawn for the artist by Alix Pentecost-Farren, miscellaneous

North Gallery



Geissler/Sann, *Prevailing Winds and Relative Distances*, 2016
Courtesy of taubert contemporary, Berlin.

Artist team **Geissler/Sann** (Germany, b. 1970 and 1968) have installed petcoke in the North Gallery—you will note that it is sealed in a Plexiglas cube, as the museum space and ventilation system cannot be exposed to the toxic substance in the open. Ask students to explore the space and then return to discuss their initial impressions as a group.

In order to bring petcoke into the museum, Geissler/Sann had to encapsulate it. Airborne petcoke would violate the museum's institutional policy, which prohibits hazardous materials from being located on the premises. Geissler/Sann went to great trouble to photograph petcoke in the gallery. To do so, they sealed off the ventilation system, doorway to the North Gallery, and adjoining office space. They poured a pile of dust on the floor after hours, when no visitors were in the space, photographed it, and cleaned up immediately thereafter. Yet massive amounts of petcoke are routinely stored and transported in neighborhoods on Chicago's Southeast Side, just a mere 12 miles from the museum.

1. What do students think about this contradiction?

What is it like to be confronted with the byproducts of the oil industry in person? What effect does this have on you as a viewer? What might Geissler/Sann be suggesting about industry and environmental regulations through their installation? How would students feel if they were confronted by openly exposed petcoke in the gallery space? What might it be like to live with petcoke dust in their own neighborhoods?

2. Discuss environmental justice and environmental racism with students and have them read some of the legal documents Geissler/Sann have included in the installation. Why might the artists have chosen to include these texts?

3. Why do students think it is such a challenge for activists to rid their neighborhoods of petcoke? Why do they think those neighborhoods were chosen as the site for petcoke storage facilities? How do policy and the law work (or not work) in their struggle?

4. How do students interpret Geissler/Sann's process of photographing petcoke in the gallery space and exhibiting the images alongside the same petcoke sealed in a cube? What are the artists trying to convey to viewers through this presentation?

East Gallery

Ask students to watch **Marissa Lee Benedict and David Rueter's** (United States, b. 1985 and 1978) video *I Can Only See Shadows* and write down their impressions, focusing on the storyline, use of color, composition, scale, movement, and audio. What stood out? What are students' initial reactions? Is the film a documentary? Is it fiction?



Marissa Lee Benedict and David Rueter, Video stills from *I Can Only See Shadows*, 2016

The film is a fictional alternate reality based on the real-life production and export of petcoke. Benedict and Reuter researched the history of airborne dust as a pollutant and energy source, then traveled along the same path that petcoke takes as it moves from its origin in Canada's Athabasca oil sands; through Chicago's Southeast Side where it is processed and stored; and finally overseas to northern China where environmental regulation is more lax and the substance is burned as an alternative to coal. The artist team then cut and altered the material to create an imagined, parallel world where liquid fossil fuel has been replaced by a new, dominant global energy source—untethered carbon particulate. The petcoke-like substance transmits both energy and data, doubling as a medium for communication.

- **Are students familiar with other alternate reality stories?** How is Benedict and Rueter's video similar to parallel universe stories, movies, or televisions shows students have encountered elsewhere? How is their work unique?

- **Are you able to identify** any recurring visual motifs throughout the film?

Benedict and Rueter wanted the alternative world in their video to move at a slow, hypnotic pace. This methodical progression mirrors the artists sense of what a world slowed by pervasive dust might look like.

1. What visual effects emphasize pace and movement?
2. How does audio enhance or detract from the pacing and visuals?

- **Though this film contains imaginary elements, it is based on extensive research** conducted by Benedict and Reuter on the history and impact of toxic dust. What role does research have in works of fiction? Is the film more powerful because it draws on real-world science and observation? Can you think of other works of fiction that similarly incorporate aspects of reality?

Steve Rowell's (United States, b. 1969) *Midstream at Twilight* surveys the industry and wildlife connected to the Athabasca tar sands in Alberta, Canada. **Ask students to watch the film**, paying special attention to color, scale, narrative progression, and sound. What observations do they have? Are there locations that they recognize? How vast is the area filmed? How does this video illuminate the scale and impact of industry on the landscape?

The piece moves over portions of the 50,000 square mile heavy crude oil deposits in Alberta, Canada, the largest in the world and a key source for export to refineries in the United States. Rowell also follows a labyrinth of pipelines that flow out from this source. Students will notice clear-cut tracts of land that follow the path of underground pipelines as they snake through forested areas and neighborhoods.

- **Can students tell** if Rowell is an insider or outsider to the oil industry? What visual or audio clues led them to their answer?

Audio about a trespasser that was intercepted by Rowell from a radio signal and the video's surveillance-style footage are two aspects of the video that suggest that Rowell is attempting to penetrate territories that he does not have full access to.



Steve Rowell, Video stills from *Midstream at Twilight*, 2016



Steve Rowell, Video still from *Midstream at Twilight* over KCBX Koch Industries' petcoke facility, 2016

Scenes taken at Koch Industries Headquarters can also be seen in the piece. Koch Industries is the second largest American multinational corporation and the biggest exporter of Canadian tar sands oil.

- **Have students heard of Koch Industries?** Why do they think Rowell wanted to connect the source of tar sands oil with a corporation that refines and disseminates it?

Rowell also filmed the Koch family's private residences using a drone. His video highlights the role of two specific and very powerful people in the global oil trade. Charles and David Koch are among the wealthiest Americans and wield a great deal of political and economic sway.

- **What does footage of their homes add to the video?** Is this a violation of their privacy? To what extent do you think a person's personal life, political views, business, and finances are entwined?
- **Do students think** individuals should be afforded different rights to privacy and public scrutiny than corporations? Why?

Mezzanine



Geissler/Sann
Methadone, 2016
Courtesy of taubert contemporary,
Berlin

Artists **Geissler/Sann** (Germany, b. 1970 and 1968) made this piece in response to the global addiction to oil. The artist team photographed methadone in order to ponder the concept of overcoming oil dependency. The synthetic opioid drug is used to suppress withdrawal symptoms for heroin users.

Look closely at *Methadone*. What do students notice? Ask students to describe the color, composition, and scale. Could students tell what is pictured before reading the label? Why do students think the artists chose to photograph methadone so close up?

- Geissler/Sann consider methadone an interesting metaphor for cap and trade programs designed to lower emissions over time. Discuss cap and trade in more depth.
- Methadone is taken in decreasing amounts over several years while a patient recovers from addiction. However, many people never fully wean from the therapeutic drug and must continue taking the medicine throughout their life or risk relapse. Similarly, Geissler/Sann's photograph suggests that a path towards carbon neutrality through cap and trade schemes may be an elusive goal.

FURTHER DISCUSSION

- How much do you depend on oil or other fossil fuels every day?
- What else may Geissler/Sann's photograph suggest?

Now turn to the works by **Terry Evans** (United States, b. 1944) that appear on the museum's **mezzanine level**. Students looked at Evans' aerial pictures on the first floor. How do these images differ? Describe framing, scale, subject matter, and the gaze of Evans' subjects. List words and phrases.



Terry Evans, Left to right: *Olga Bautista, activist, 2016; Alberto Rincon, activist, 2016; Kate Koval, activist, 2016*

Evans considers herself an activist and has marched in protests, campaigned for a local alderwoman, and stood alongside community organizations and individuals united to ban petcoke. Here she displays portraits of many of these community advocates together with quotes drawn from extensive interviews she conducted with them.

Evans' artwork is one of the many ways she speaks out in solidarity with the people she has photographed.

"These photographs are not [only] my stories, rather they are the stories of activists on the Southeast Side of Chicago, stories of resistance to corporate control of the landscape, stories of change and the awakening of a community to its own power and self-determination about what happens for its inhabitants."

- Terry Evans

What strategies has Evans and other petcoke activists used to shape environmental policy? What other ways can artists be activists or create change in the world?

Complete interviews for this project can be found at
<http://www.mocp.org/exhibitions/2016/07/petcoke-extended-resource-guide.php>.

FURTHER DISCUSSION

- How do these images shape your impression of the role of petcoke in the lives of everyday people?
- Ask students to find a quote in the portrait texts. How do the images and texts work together? How would students' impressions differ if the texts and images were experienced independent of one another? Would they be more or less powerful?

3rd Floor / Print Study Room



Victoria Sambunaris
From *Industrial Shipping Vessels, Houston Ship Channel, Texas*
2015-2016, Courtesy of Yancey Richardson Gallery, New York

The ships pictured are traveling along the 52-mile Houston Ship Channel carrying industrial cargo to the largest port in the United States. Sambunaris wanted the 45 images in her piece to reflect the diverse types of vessels traveling through the area.

The systematic organization of her photos is often referred to as a **typology**, and was popularized by artists Bernd and Hilla Becher in the second half of the twentieth century. The method attempts to order and catalogue types within a vast system. What does a typology imply? What similarities and differences do students notice between Sambunaris's grid and the Becher's work?



Bernd and Hilla Becher, *Framework Houses*, 1959-73,
21 silver gelatin prints, each 16 1/4 x 12"

Look closely at **Victoria Sambunaris'** (United States, b. 1964) photographs. What do students notice? Ask students to describe the color, composition, and scale. What else comes to mind when they look at the works? List words or phrases.

Students may notice that each image is composed similarly. What impact does framing have on their sense of the images?

QUESTIONS FOR LOOKING & DISCUSSING

- Can students tell where the ships are from and where they are going?

While it may be impossible to tell where some ships are from or going, students should be able to make out logos and text on the vessels from across the globe.

In fact, Sambunaris was interested in photographing this waterway because its history traces the expansion of global markets and the intensification of fossil fuel consumption worldwide. The channel was originally a naturally occurring waterway, however it has been extensively dredged over time to serve Houston's petrochemical complex and other freight.

- Do students feel that Sambunaris is a neutral observer? What commentary, if any, is she trying to make here?

All of Sambunaris photographs were taken on public land alongside the waterway. The shipping ports along the Houston Ship Channel are privately owned and Sambunaris was not granted permission to enter and photograph. What information can Sambunaris access from public space? What is concealed?



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

Comparably, during the run of this exhibition **Rozalinda Borcilă** (Romania/United States, b. 1971) is leading walks to publicly accessible locations where aspects of the history and operations of Chicago's petroleum industry can be seen. Several workshops about the petrochemical industry will be held as well.

QUESTIONS FOR LOOKING & DISCUSSING

- **Why do students think** these artists must peer into private operations from public space? What can be seen? What is missing? What motivation do corporations have to limit access? What does visibility provide the public? How do we know a place differently when we see it in photographs or in person?
- **Ask students to browse the archive.** What impact does it have? Which materials stand out? How is the meaning of Borcilă's museum display altered by the inclusion of items produced by others? Is it enhanced? Do the items distract? What forms of knowledge do you think her walks create? What is the power of an event-based art practice?

Borcilă's art practice is participatory and always evolving. *Experience the Culture: Day-tripping the Petrocapital* is executed with participants who together discover myriad ways that Chicago's topography and public spaces reflect the past, present, and future of the sprawling global oil economy. Documents from each trip are added to an evolving archive on display in the museum.

- **Borcilă's artworks are never completed.** Rather, they are by design, always evolving. Ask students to react to this approach to artmaking. Why might an artist choose to work this way? How do students feel knowing that this installation looked different before they visited MoCP and will change further after they leave?

PETCOKE

TRACING DIRTY ENERGY

Marissa Lee Benedict and David Rueter
Rozalinda Borcilă
Terry Evans
Geissler/Sann
Brian Holmes
Claire Pentecost
Steve Howell
Victoria Sambunaris

July 21 - October 9, 2016

Further Engagement

Activity

The MoCP invites students to participate in our cornerstone window project. We are collecting photographs showing how petcoke has affected you or your neighborhood. Send submissions to 872.903.DUST* or mocp.petcoke@gmail.com. Images might be chosen to be included in the *Petcoke: Tracing Dirty Energy* exhibition.

*Standard rates apply

Suggested Resources and Reading List

MoCP resource webpage

<http://www.mocp.org/exhibitions/2016/07/petcoke-extended-resource-guide.php>

NRDC website: <https://www.nrdc.org/midwest>

SETF Petcoke webpage: <http://setaskforce.org/>

Keller Easterling. *Extrastatecraft: The Power of Infrastructure Space*. New York: Verso, 2014.

Christine J. Walley. *Exit Zero: Family and Class in Postindustrial Chicago*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013.

Museum of Contemporary Photography

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Thursday 10am-8pm
Sunday 12-5pm

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