

Petrocontemporary Assemblages: On Plastics in Jelena Micić's Artworks



Petrosuvremeni asamblaži:
o plastici u umjetničkim
djelima Jelene Micić



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SAŽETAK

Rad se sastoji od dva dijela. Prvi je dio posvećen analizi *Crvene analize* (2022.), a u drugom se dijelu analiziraju *Bojna polja* (2016./2017.), *Plastik ist Plastisch* (2019.–2023.) i *Wattestäbchen* (2021.–2023.). Svi su radovi djela Jelene Micić, a fokus je analize, utemeljene na studijama naftnih kultura, upotreba plastike. Kroz uključivanje najlona i plastičnih predmeta za jednokratnu upotrebu, radovi Jelene Micić podrtavaju društveno-političku i ekološku promjenu od socijalističke petromodernosti (eng. *petromodernity*) ka postsocijalističkoj petrosuvremenosti. Kompleksan odnos povijesnih procesa i društveno-ekonomskih praksi koji u svojem središtu ima ekstrakciju i upotrebu fosilnih goriva, uvezivanje (ne) živih tijela, (ne)organske tvari i više-od-ljudskih okruženja jest ono što materijalno-semiotički bitno određuje postsocijalističku petrosuvremenost. Umjetnička praksa Jelene Micić stoga poziva na novo čitanje lokalnih i regionalnih povijesti umjetnosti kroz okvire naftnih kultura, s posebno se usredotočujući na odlučujuću ulogu nafte u oblikovanju modernih i suvremenih kultura diljem svijeta. Kritička analiza sklopa, kao osnovna metodologija kojom se pristupa radovima Jelene Micić, otkriva gust odnos između materijalnih i semiotičkih dimenzija plastike: od povijesti globalnih i lokalnih naftnih kultura do upotrebe plastike u povijesti umjetnosti, utjelovljenih efekata ove antropogene tvari na individualna tijela, regionalnih više-od-ljudskih okruženja i planetarne ekologije.

KLJUČNE RIJEČI

asamblaž, naftne kulture, petrosuvremenost, petromodernost, plastika

ABSTRACT

Grounded in a critical assemblage analysis informed by the study of oil cultures, this article examines the use of plastics in Jelena Micić's works. By incorporating nylon sheets and single-use plastics into their assemblages, Micić's artworks highlight a sociopolitical and environmental shift from socialist petromodernity to postsocialist petrocontemporaneity. The relational complexity of historical processes and socioeconomic practices centered on the extraction and exploitation of fossil fuels, entangling (non-)living bodies, (in-)organic matter, and more-than-human environments, emerges as a defining material-semiotic feature of postsocialist petrocontemporaneity. Micić's practice, therefore, calls for a re-reading of local and regional art and social histories through the lens of oil cultures, attentive to the defining role of oil in shaping modern and contemporary cultures worldwide.

KEYWORDS

assemblage, oil cultures, petrocontemporaneity, petromodernity, plastics

Andrija Filipović

INTRODUCTION

In 2021, Jelena Micić received the "Dimitrije Bašičević Mangelos" award — an important annual recognition for art workers in Serbia — for *Twisting by the Pool*. The installation consists of a white tiled object resembling a small pool, filled with *Betazid Rosso*, a pale pink cleaning chemical. Produced by the Austrian company Systemhygiene GmbH, *Betazid Rosso* is classified as GHS05 under the global chemical hazard system. It is dangerous to human health and it is often used without adequate warning to cleaners, many of whom are migrants lacking proper health protection or insurance. *Twisting by the Pool* follows the same critical logic as other works by Micić: exposing the material-semiotic entanglements of anthropogenic matter, environments, bodies, and socioeconomic systems. While this engagement with toxic anthropogenic substances recurs in Micić's practice, a much larger part of their work revolves around a different anthropogenic material: plastics. Micić's use of plastics spans their career, including *Color/Battle Fields (Bojna polja, 2016–2017)*, the series *Plastik ist plastisch (2019–2023)*, *Wattestäbchen (2021–2023)*, and *Red Analysis (Crvena analiza, 2022)*. Their use of synthetic polymers in installations and other artworks reveals the embeddedness of plastics in historically produced material-semiotic environments, much like the use of *Betazid Rosso* in *Twisting by the Pool*. Both index complex temporal and spatial dimensions.¹

Temporally, plastics reference the histories of their production and use in postsocialist Serbia, socialist Yugoslavia, and across the globe. In Yugoslavia, high levels of pollution resulted from fossil fuel extraction, industrial production, and mass consumption and waste. On a planetary scale, these processes have contributed to global warming, air pollution, and environmental devastation — phenomena that scholars describe as the Anthropocene, a new geological epoch shaped by human activity.² Plastics in Micić's art thus speak to the interconnectedness of socialist, postsocialist, and contemporary periods. At the same time, a synchronous dimension underscores the contemporary ubiquity of plastics and the urgency of addressing plastic pollution. By incorporating nylon sheets and single-use plastics into their assemblages, Micić critically highlights the socioeconomic and environmental shift from socialist petromodernity to postsocialist petrocontemporaneity.³ Spatially, plastics in their works scale across contexts: from the local (indexing the village of Radinac in *Red Analysis*), to the regional (works titled in German), to the planetary (the geopolitics of plastics as such).

How, then, should we understand the use of plastics and their pluritemporal and multimaterial roles in Micić's art? How might we approach the material-semiotic spatiotemporal multiplicity that plastics constitute? The framework grounding this article is critical assemblage analysis, which attends to both the material and discursive dimensions of plastics. Drawing on Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's notion of assemblage, Sari Pietikäinen develops critical assemblage analysis as an approach that entails "starting from the

middle and taking into account all the 'stuff' that can be found, both material and symbolic, here and there, now and then."⁴ She illustrates this with examples ranging from analyzing the historical unfolding of capitalism and colonialism through a mining assemblage, to considering the nutritional value of a berry, or the embodied experience of a long car drive on a cold Arctic night while searching for the Auroras. More broadly, it involves "accounting for not only the stories, meanings, and signs but also material objects, embodied practices, affect, spatial organizations, and temporalities" — an approach that emphasizes the processes of production rather than mere representation.⁵ Applied to Micić's practice, critical assemblage analysis reveals the dense relationality between the material and semiotic dimensions of plastics: from the histories of global and local oil cultures, to the uses of plastics in art history, to the embodied effects of this anthropogenic substance on individual bodies, regional more-than-human environments, and planetary ecologies.

RED ANALYSIS
(2022)

The relational complexity — comprising heterogeneous historical processes, socioeconomic practices, (non-)human bodies, and more-than-human environments — is materially and semiotically embedded in Jelena Micić's works. According to curator Dejan Vasić, *Red Analysis (Crvena analiza, 2022)* (Fig. 1) is an accumulative installation that "is a result of the months-long collection of dispersed chemical elements from the earth, air and water in the village of Radinac near Smederevo, and reveals their further connection through the collection of data and objects, as well as the production of a situation [that] questions the potential of ecological-aesthetic representation in the field of sociality."⁶ The installation consists of eleven objects, including ceramic tiles, nylon sheets, slag, series of documentary photographs of local landscapes, gauze, pigments made from dried material from the bottom of the Jezava canal, data on air, soil, and water quality, as well as watermelons and cherry juice from Radinac. In this work, Micić engages directly with the material traces of production at the Smederevo Steelworks. All found objects in *Red Analysis* underwent chemical analysis, which revealed the presence of numerous toxic and potentially toxic elements, including arsenic, lead, chromium, copper, zinc, cadmium, cobalt, manganese, and barium.

The significance of *Red Analysis* becomes clearer when considered in the context of oil cultures — particularly when the nylon sheets are placed at the center of a critical assemblage analysis. Oil cultures consist of a multiplicity of assemblages and invite precisely the kind of analytical approach developed by Pietikäinen. The term oil cultures is critically deployed by Ross Barrett and Daniel Worden in the introduction to their edited volume *Oil Culture* to define "cultural forms of oil capitalism."⁷ More precisely, they describe oil culture as "a dynamic field of representations and symbolic practices that have infused, affirmed, and sustained the

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For various approaches to plastics see Rubin, *Synthetic Socialism*; Gabrys, Hawkins and Michael, *Accumulation*; Boetzkes, *Plastic Capitalism*; Lambert, *Provocative Plastics*; Irr, *Life in Plastic*; Davis, *Plastic Matter*; Filipović, "Jugoplastika."
2
See Zalasiewicz et al. (eds.), *The Anthropocene as a Geological Time Unit*.
3
I coined the term petrocontemporaneity in dialogue with art-historical debates on the categories of modern, postmodern, and contemporary art, while also extending these debates into the field of oil cultures. If petromodernity designates the modern era shaped by the rise of fossil fuels and petrochemical infrastructures, then petrocontemporaneity marks the present condition in which the legacies of petromodernity intersect with postsocialist transformations and global petrochemical dependency (see Smit, *Savremena umetnost i savremenost*). In Serbia, the relations between socioeconomic, cultural, and artistic contemporaneity, postsocialism, and petrocontemporaneity unfold in a distinctive manner, as elaborated later in the article.
4
Pietikäinen, *Cold Rush*, 229.
5
Ibid.
6
Vasić, "Jelena Micić."
7
Barrett and Worden, "Introduction," xxi.



Fig. / Sl. 1 Jelena Micić, *Red Analysis*, 2022, exhibition view, ULUS Gallery, Belgrade. PHOTO: Ivan Zupanc. / Jelena Micić, *Crvena analiza*, 2022., postav izložbe, Galerija ULUS, Beograd. FOTO: Ivan Zupanc.
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material armatures of the oil economy *and* helped to produce the particular modes of everyday life that have developed around oil use in North America and Europe since the nineteenth century (and that have since become global).”⁸ Alongside oil cultures, some scholars employ the concept of petromodernity. As Laura Hindelang explains, petromodernity characterizes “a world in which petroleum and petroleum-derived products (and the set of practices associated with prospecting for, discovering, controlling, producing, and refining petroleum) have infiltrated ways of living, beliefs, and especially images and aesthetics through which we experience and negotiate the world.”⁹

The nylon sheets illuminate the socioeconomic and art-historical relations between socialist petromodernity and post-socialist petrocontemporaneity, including their respective engagements with fossil fuels and petroproducts, as well as the forms of sociality these engagements entail. In terms of art history *Red Analysis* evokes, there are several examples of Yugoslav neo-avant-garde artworks in which synthetic polymers played a constitutive role. Such materials were particularly significant in defining the “newness” of the New Art Practice within the broader progressiveness of socialist (petro)modernity. Among the first to use nylon sheets specifically was Slavko Matković, the founder of the Bosch+Bosch group, in his body art performance *Breakthrough — Entering the Student Cultural Center (Prodor — Ulaz u Studentski kulturni centar*, 1974). As Nebojša Milenković notes, the piece “questions the role of the artist as both subject and object of his art. The artist’s body becomes a mediator — the cause of the antagonism between different materials and the physical-chemical means used in the antagonism.”¹⁰ Matković explored “the effect of fire and heat on plastic sheeting spread over the entrance to the Gallery of the Student Cultural Center in Belgrade, on which the artist intervenes by melting it and burning it with a blowtorch, releasing huge amounts of smoke and unpleasant odors.”¹¹ Noxious fumes notwithstanding, Matković’s intention was not to produce an environmental or eco-art work. As a conceptual artist, he was primarily concerned with the relationship between the visual and the linguistic. Yet even if the plastic material itself was not his focus, its use exemplifies socialist petromodernity: the plastic was materially ignored but fully exploited semiotically, signaling the cutting-edge position of this body art action within contemporary practice.

In contrast, Micić’s petrocontemporary *Red Analysis* has no conceptual or performative concern with the nature of representation in art. Instead, the nylon sheets and other elements of the accumulative installation are productive in the sense articulated by critical assemblage analysis: they point to connections that gather heterogeneous multiplicities into petrocontemporary assemblages. Here, plastic is anything but ignored, both materially and semiotically. The nylon sheets in *Red Analysis*, found in the backyard of the Stojanović family in Radinac, bear material traces of steelworks production. Their use highlights two aspects of petrocontemporaneity in Serbia. The first concerns the unregulated



emissions of the Smederevo Steelworks, which exemplify a transitional, postsocialist delayed contemporaneity. The plant was acquired by the Chinese company HBIS (Hebei Iron and Steel Group) in 2016 after several failed privatization attempts. Since then, numerous NGOs and locals have reported a lack of oversight. The second aspect linking the Smederevo Steelworks to petrocontemporaneity lies in its energy source: the plant relies on coal and coke for smelting, making it a fossil-fuel-dependent industry and a major source of pollution.

The second aspect concerns the mass use of nylon sheets in everyday life, with a genealogy stretching back to the 1990s and consumer infrastructures established even earlier. Fossil fuels and petrochemicals were as central to post-Second World War reconstruction in socialist Yugoslavia as they were to production and consumption in the 1990s and beyond. From the perspective of oil cultures, this period can be described as one of socialist petromodernity. Yugoslav socialist petromodernity effectively began in 1945, when the Oil Exploration and Production Company commenced operations in Zrenjanin. In 1949 it became Naftagas, headquartered in Novi Sad. A wave of oil refineries, pipelines, and related infrastructure for extraction, production, and consumption soon followed: Jugopetrol in Kotor, Montenegro (1947); Modriča in Bosnia and Herzegovina (1954); and INA in Zagreb, Croatia (1964). These developments were accompanied by factories dependent on oil and petrochemical inputs, such as Jugovinil (1949) and Jugoplastika (1952). Fossil fuels and petrochemicals quickly became central to Yugoslav modernity, enabling energy production (coal-fired power plants), mobility of people and goods (gasoline), construction (bitumen), and mass consumption (plastics).

As Marko Stojanović and Miloš Matić observe, during the period of international isolation in the 1990s “the peasantry has developed a specific dualistic relationship with cheap plastics. On the one hand, as a culture of high practicality and resourcefulness, it readily gives plastic products a ‘second life’ through secondary use, assigning them new functions; on the other hand, through the mass use of plastic products, the peasantry reveals its displacement from self-sufficiency to the market economy, pointing to a shift in its own way of thinking from purely utilitarian to consumerist.”¹² The use of plastics and other fossil-fuel derivatives in Serbia during the 1990s, although altered by international sanctions (with cheap imports from China replacing European sources), followed patterns established in socialist Yugoslavia.

A critical assemblage analysis of plastics in Micić’s work highlights how the experiences of petromodernity and petrocontemporaneity have not unfolded uniformly across continents. Yugoslavia and its successor states illustrate this unevenness. The civil war that shattered socialist Yugoslavia gave rise to independent republics with distinctly post-socialist socioeconomic structures. In Serbia, the 1990s were marked by Slobodan Milošević’s rule, international sanctions and isolation, the Kosovo War, and the NATO bombing

Fig. / Sl. 2 Jelena Micić, *Battle Fields/NO-YELLOW*, 2016–2018, exhibition view, *Exercises in a Collection*, +MSUM, Ljubljana. PHOTO: Jelena Micić / Jelena Micić, *Bojna polja/NO-YELLOW*, 2016.–2018., postav izložbe, *Exercises in a Collection*, +MSUM, Ljubljana. FOTO: Jelena Micić.

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⁸ *Ibid.*, xxiv [italics in original].
⁹ Hindelang, *Iridescent Kuwait*, 26–27.
¹⁰ Milenković, *Ich bin Künstler Slavko Matković*, 20, [author’s translation].
¹¹ *Ibid.*
¹² Stojanović; Matić, *Plastične devedesete*, 37, [author’s translation].



Fig. / Sl. 3 Jelena Micić, *Man of Sorrows*, 2020. FOTO: Jelena Micić / Jelena Micić, *Man of Sorrows*, 2020. PHOTO: Jelena Micić.

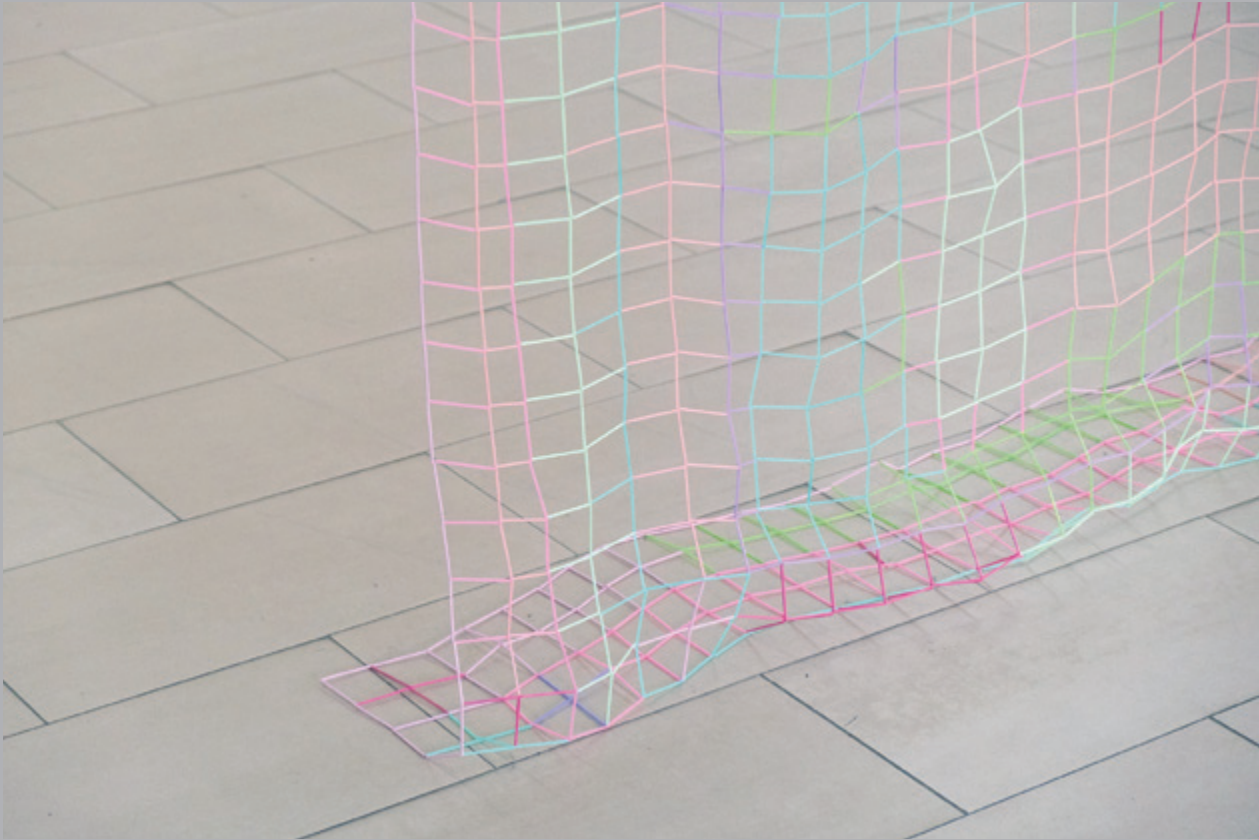


Fig. / Sl. 4 Jelena Micić, *Untitled*, from the series *Plastik ist plastisch*, 2019, exhibition view, *XX Pančevo Biennial — rafinerijamanastir*, GSU, Pančevo. PHOTO: Jelena Micić / Jelena Micić, *Untitled*, iz serije *Plastik ist plastisch*, 2019., postav izložbe, *20. Bijenale umjetnosti u Pančevu — rafinerijamanastir*, GSU, Pančevo. PHOTO: Jelena Micić



campaign. After the fall of Milošević’s dictatorship, the state opened to international markets and began restructuring toward a (neo)liberal economy, accompanied by reforms aimed at parliamentary democracy. Since 2001, these transformations have been closely tied to the privatization of formerly state-owned enterprises — a process that continues to date. These “transitional” decades demonstrate that the experience of contemporaneity in postsocialist Serbia diverged significantly from that of Western Europe and from the trajectories of the former Eastern Bloc. In socioeconomic terms, contemporaneity in the European sense was delayed. Petrocontemporaneity, by contrast, advanced rapidly, especially through intensified extraction and use of fossil fuels and their derivatives. In Serbia, its critical dimensions have been visible both in art and in society more broadly, even as the underlying material infrastructure has changed very little.

COLOR/BATTLE FIELDS (2016–2017) ,
PLASTIK IST PLASTISCH (2019–2023) ,
WATTESTÄBCHEN (2021–2023)

The plastic nets in *Color/Battle Fields* (*Bojna polja*, 2016–2017) (Fig. 2), the plastic garbage bags in the *Plastik ist plastisch* series (2019–2023) (Fig. 3), and the cotton swabs in the *Wattestäbchen* series (2021–2023) (Fig. 4) trace an additional genealogy — one that points not only to the present state of fossil fuel-based socioeconomic life but also to contemporary environmental conditions. While the most immediate references for *Color/Battle Fields* and works in *Plastik ist plastisch* can be found in critical feminist art employing weaving, knitting, and other forms of production traditionally associated with craft,¹³ I want to shift the focus away from questions of form, technique, and representation, toward the material constitution of the concrete assemblage and what it produces. This is not to suggest that the production and consumption of fossil fuels, their derivatives, and the objects made from them are not deeply gendered — and racialized processes. Rather, such issues fall beyond the scope of this article.¹⁴

Micić describes *Color/Battle Fields* as “a spatial installation consisting of collected and structured porous plastic nets with different characteristics and colors”. “Nets that envelop and limit a certain portion of fruit/vegetable appear in a specific, industry-defined color system and size from which arises a set of hand-bonded spatial compositions limited by features of the selected/rejected material. Playful spatial paintings in the form of translucent color walls, structure the space of the gallery, directing and limiting visitors’ movement. Works are repeatedly adjusted to the dimensions of the space and carry visible traces of adaptation(s).”¹⁵ The *Plastik ist plastisch* series consists of pieces sewn from colorful plastic garbage bags in the form of classical paintings of various dimensions, such as *Dogs-hit Rainbow* (2023), *Heavy Colors* (2022), *Heart is on the Left* (2021/2022), *Hommage an Hommage* (2021), and *Man of Sorrows* (2021), among others. The series also includes

the installation *Navigation through an Encompassing Vertigo* (*Navigacija kroz sveobuhvatnu vrtoglavicu*, 2022), created with Vera Klimentyeva, in which square panels of sewn plastic bags are suspended in the air throughout the gallery space. The *Wattestäbchen* series includes an untitled installation for the XX Pančevo Biennial (2022) as well as untitled works from 2021, 2020, and 2019, made from cotton swabs, nylon thread, and other materials.¹⁶

Following critical assemblage analysis, the use of plastic nets, plastic garbage bags, and cotton swabs in these works highlights a multiplicity of material and semiotic dimensions. One is art-historical. Plastics entered artistic practice in socialist Yugoslavia almost as soon as they became available to consumers. Early examples include Koloman Novak’s neo-constructivist *Luminokinetička kugla* (*Luminokinetic Ball*, 1969) and Miroljub Todorović’s signalist *Objekt poezija* (*Object Poetry*, 1969). From that point onward, synthetic polymers became a recurring material in performances and actions associated with the New Art Practice. Indeed, they were present from its very beginnings. In September 1970, for instance, Bogdanka Poznanović staged *Akcija srce-predmet* (*Action Heart-Object*) in Novi Sad, in which participants carried through the city a large Styrofoam heart wrapped in shiny red polyvinyl foil. A month later, on October 18, 1970, Grupa KÔD (CODE Group) presented their first public performance, *Javni čas umetnosti* (*Public Art Class*), on the banks of the Danube in Belgrade, releasing large polystyrene letters spelling out D-U-N-A-V (Danube) into the river.¹⁷

In addition to the art-historical dimension, these works also foreground a social one: the absence of a robust legal framework for the production and use of plastics, as well as the lack of enforcement of existing legislation and recycling infrastructure in contemporary Serbia. While some measures exist to curb single-use plastics — such as charging for plastic bags in markets and stores — regulation of their production remains limited compared to other European countries. It is in this context that Micić’s artworks acquire critical force, highlighting the disjuncture between EU member states and countries like Serbia in terms of plastic production and consumption. The contrast is particularly stark in the case of plastic cotton swabs, which are being phased out in the EU to reduce plastic pollution but continue to be produced and consumed in Serbia on a massive scale.

All these modes of using fossil fuels and their derivatives intensified over the decades, leading not only to the omnipresence of oil but also to transformations on a planetary scale. Fossil fuel dependence since the end of the Second World War can itself be historicized, with petromodernity designating the period up to the early twenty-first century. The historical shift from petromodernity to petrocontemporaneity signals a new phase in the evolution of this dependence. The key difference lies in a growing awareness of the role of fossil fuel exploitation in planetary-scale environmental degradation — global warming, pollution, and the proliferation of micro- and nanoplastics. Whereas petromodernity

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See Michna, “Knitting, Weaving, Embroidery, and Quilting.”
¹⁴
See Daggett, “Petro-masculinity.”
¹⁵
Micić, “Bojna polja.”
¹⁶
See Micić, “Wattestäbchen.”
¹⁷
See also Fowkes, *The Green Bloc*.

was characterized by an optimistic faith in endless economic growth fueled by fossil resources, petrocontemporaneity is defined by contradiction. As Andreas Malm observes, "widespread awareness of the catastrophic implications of global warming essentially belongs to the twenty-first century, and since the year 2000, the rate of growth in CO₂ emissions has been triple that of the 1990s."¹⁸ Petrocontemporaneity is therefore marked not only by acute awareness of the catastrophic consequences of fossil fuel use but also by simultaneous and opposing dynamics: practical efforts to remove fossil fuels from social life and mitigate their effects on the one hand, and the continuing — indeed, intensifying — reliance on them, on the other. These contradictions firmly situate petrocontemporaneity within the first two decades of the twenty-first century.

Color/Battle Fields, along with the *Plastik ist plastisch* and *Wattestäbchen* series, intertwines environmental concerns with historical and socioeconomic processes that are locally and regionally out of sync. The temporality of postsocialist transitional society and its form of petrocontemporaneity is presented in these works as clearly misaligned with European (petro)contemporaneity. This disjointedness is, moreover, one of the essential conditions sustaining existing exploitative socioeconomic and environmentally devastating relations.

CONCLUSION

Andreas Malm concludes his book *Fossil Capital* by quoting Walter Benjamin on organized pessimism and revolutionary melancholia, asking what can be done about the seemingly unbreakable bond between capitalism and fossil fuels. Critical assemblage analysis, by attending closely to the entanglements of heterogeneous elements, shows that present relations within oil cultures are decisively shaped by fossil fuels and their derivatives, and that future relations will be even more determined by them through the effects of global warming and plastic pollution. In this sense, Jelena Micić's installations *Red Analysis* and *Color/Battle Fields*, as well as works in the *Plastik ist plastisch* and *Wattestäbchen* series, offer a form of critical petropedagogy. By centering oil cultures, Micić's works illuminate art-historical and socioeconomic trajectories that are out of joint, as well as the differential effects produced by such disjointedness.

Socialist petromodernity, postsocialist petrocontemporaneity, and planetary contemporaneity intersect in these works to generate entanglements that challenge taken-for-granted historical narratives. Micić's practice therefore calls for a re-reading of local and regional art histories in relation to oil cultures, emphasizing the defining role of oil in modern and contemporary societies worldwide. On a more geopolitical level, rather than the inexorable progress toward a bright capitalist future promised by socioeconomic transition, the opposite has occurred: the postsocialist present is mired in multiple forms of pollution resulting from asymmetrical

economic relations. Finally, a critical assemblage analysis of Micić's works positions the petrocontemporary assemblage as a key concept for understanding today's experience not only of socioeconomic transition but — perhaps more importantly — of more-than-human environmental devastation.

¹⁸ Malm, *Fossil Capital*, chapter 14.

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