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Coming off fossil fuels: Visual recollection of fossil fuel dependency

NIINA UUSITALO 

As participants of the global capitalist system, we have rich and lifelong experiences of living with fossil fuels. However, these experiences are often implicit in our everyday lives, and rarely formulated explicitly. Coming off Fossil Fuels is a project that visualises and collects personal experiences of fossil fuel dependencies. Experiences can include memories, current attachments and future dreams connected to fossil fuels. This article is a methodological account of collecting fossil fuel experiences through two modes of visual recollection: (1) an autobiographical video piece visualising the author's own dependencies on fossil fuels and (2) gallery visitors' fossil fuel experiences. The article utilises a participatory arts-based approach in which gallery visitors were able to react to the video in recorded responses. The video was presented as part of the 2022 LOOK Climate Lab thinking space in Open Eye Gallery, Liverpool, where video responses were collected. The article also discusses possibilities for developing a method of visual recollection by considering temporal and spatial dimensions of fossil fuel dependency.

INTRODUCTION: THE HIDDEN KNOWLEDGE OF FOSSIL FUEL DEPENDENCY

Climate change is a crisis of cultural imagination: it requires human societies to transition from fossil fuel-energised structures and practices to new orders of society and being. Part of the issue is that humans are not fully recognising their fossil fuel dependency. Fossil fuels refer to coal, oil and natural gas, which are used for heating and energy production as well as refined into different substances, such as gasoline, plastic and polyester. Fossil fuels are such a natural part of capitalist, consumption-oriented, societies and they have shaped the ways we live and imagine our lives. However, the energy source fuelling modern fantasies of subjectivity, mobility, progress, productivity, freedom, work, politics, masculinity, economics and personhood has been revealed to be unsustainable, which calls into question

an entire way of life (Orpana 2021, 152). The oil economy, in particular, has created hierarchical social structures, accumulation of wealth for the few and alienation from experiencing energy (Salminen and Vadén 2013).

Fossil fuel-based economies have their own social imaginaries of endless economic growth, abundant energy and progress. Ideals of autonomy, mobility and perpetual growth, for instance, are strongly linked to the historical conditions of a fossil fuel society (Wilson, Szeman, and Carlson 2017, 3; Petrocultures Research Group 2016, 10). Fossil fuels also seem to create social forms: common public space is organised around roads and cars, but we experience these spaces in private and insulated ways. This creates severely restricted forms of sociality, in which we communicate from our bubbles with flashing lights, horns and the occasional hand gesture (Orpana 2021, 5). The same description seems to be true of restricted communication forms such as social media, also enabled through fossil fuels.

Wilson, Szeman, and Carlson (2017, 4) write that the most significant challenges involved in moving away from fossil fuels are less matters of technology or public policy than social and cultural problems. The constitutive nature of fossil fuels for modern experience means that detaching from them will happen simultaneously on different levels: from conceptual to experiential, everyday to historical, practical to metaphysical and epistemological to ontological (Salminen and Vadén 2013). In practice, this would require an overall detachment from cheap energy by adapting to higher energy prices or using alternative fuels for heating and driving. It would also require questioning many taken-for-granted social practices and ideals, such as free mobility.

Identifying fossil fuel dependencies is difficult, especially when the surrounding settings seamlessly support fossil fuel ways of life. As long as fossil fuels remain available,

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This article has been corrected with minor changes. These changes do not impact the academic content of the article.

practices connected to these energy forms seem normal, smooth and even non-existent. It is in the case of fossil fuels being cut off, that people come to recognise their dependencies. This has been the case with the UK petrol shortages in the aftermath of Brexit.¹ Car owners queueing for petrol² make visible both the practical dependency on petrol but also the affective repercussions of petrol shortage: people fear being cut off. Most recently, the war in Ukraine has pushed fossil fuel dependency into the public realm in a new way, as EU countries, the UK and the US aim to end energy dependency on Russian oil and gas.^{3,4}

It is undeniable that fossil fuel dependency is a prevalent form of societal, cultural and personal addiction (see Corner 2013). Our dependency on fossil fuel is not only all-pervasive but also often concealed from human senses and perception. For instance, we only perceive the visible part of gas stations' pumps and lights, but the black mass of the iceberg remains under the surface, unseen and unrecognised (Salminen and Vadén 2013, 60). LeMenager (2014, 68) writes that oil and the love of petroleum imbued the American culture in the mid-twentieth century: it was expressed through different media forms but at the same time hidden in plain sight.

Part of the work of the transition from fossil fuels is to make visible our social, material and affective attachments to oil: to its role in the social and cultural formation of our everyday lives, to its infrastructures and institutions that enable social interconnectedness, and to its global networks of relations (Petrocultures Research Group 2016, 15). Making an issue like fossil fuel dependency visible is an epistemic practice of creating a representation of the unseen (see Uusitalo 2020). This means bringing naturalised but rejected knowledge to the forefront of consciousness so that, in a moment of recognition, a prior awareness flashes before us, effecting a moment of change in our understanding (Ghosh 2016, 4–5).

In this article, the human connection to fossil fuels is considered in relation to visibility. The way the world is organised through visual representations and practices also affects the way we perceive the world and ourselves in it. Visual forms can make something visible and make the unconscious conscious so that we can grasp it and perceive it (Bleiker 2018; Niemelä-Nyrhinen and Uusitalo 2021; Petrocultures Research Group 2016). Images frame or reframe the political, either by entrenching existing configurations of seeing, sensing and thinking, or by challenging them (Bleiker 2018, 33). This connects to the Rancierian view on aesthetics which considers how the experience of a common-sensible world is constructed and who are able to share this experience (see Ranci re 2019; Ranci re and Gage 2019).

USING VIDEO AS A VISUAL METHOD OF RECOLLECTION

Video is widely used in participatory research in which approaches vary from using video as a method of documenting research material to participatory methods and video ethnography (Pink 2013; Pink, Mackley, and Moroşanu 2015; Pink and Mackley 2012; Mitchell, De Lange, and Moletsane 2018). As this article and the accompanied video piece were produced for and in collaboration with Open Eye Gallery's LOOK Climate Lab, it is appropriate that my approach utilises participatory arts-based methods. Art is a 'way of knowing, problem-solving, healing and transformation' that can be used as a vehicle for research (McNiff 2013). I consider my stance close to a/r/tography, meaning work at the intersections of 'art' and 'research'. A/r/tography merges images and text in order to open up and create new meanings and imaginings (Leavy 2019). I have charted the territory of fossil fuel dependency by reading, writing, filming videos, selecting and editing, with all these processes being intersected and intertwined.

Art photography or art video is an epistemological practice of deconstructing knowledge of the world but simultaneously enabling new epistemic constructs (see Uusitalo 2021; Rainio 2019, 246). Art does not promise to work in any specific way, it does not have rules for epistemic interventions, and its rearrangements of knowledge and feeling are unexpected and sometimes chaotic. Art changes the world through transforming the 'sensible' reality of the senses, which may change ideas, understanding and insight (Varto 2014). Art can create a cultural base for new ideas and open views into different worlds, possibilities and experiential levels. Art can also create spaces where people can encounter issues such as climate change or fossil fuel dependency through their emotions and senses and even share these experiences with others (see Rainio 2019).

In this article, video is used both as a medium of autobiographical exploration of my own fossil fuel dependencies and as a way to invite gallery visitors to share their own experiences and emotions connected to using fossil fuels. Charlotte Bates writes that video exceeds the visual realm. It can be thought of as a sensory method, by blending what we see with what we hear, but also because it evokes a sense of feeling for the spaces and people, the animals, things, relationships and practices that we seek to understand through our research. The inclusion of non-linguistic dimensions in research, which rely on other expressive possibilities, may allow access and representation of different levels of experience (Bates 2014, 1).

Personal memories and experiences can induce others to remember. Sarah Pink and collaborators write that viewing a video invites us to sense the atmospheres of other people's worlds by bringing their sensory, emotional and affective qualities and affordances empathetically close (Pink, Mackley, and Moroşanu 2015, 364). Pink et al. also use video as an ethnographic method of inquiry for studying atmospheres as something mundane and always present. In this project, the video was used as a stimulus to recognise the mundane, ever-present existence of fossil dependency. The *Coming off Fossil Fuels* project continues my previous work on visualising climate change effects and fossil fuel dependency.⁵

THE COMING OFF FOSSIL FUELS VIDEO

In order to recollect my personal fossil fuel dependencies, I created an autobiographical video. The piece uses the critical practice of *transilluminating* fossil fuel dependency as a lived and experienced affective relationship to highlight everyday fossil fuel dependencies in my personal history (Uusitalo 2020, 2021). Transillumination as a critical climate practice refers to material acts that situate individuals in relation to climate change, and, by doing so, necessarily resituate people in relation to the logics of global capitalism and market ideology (Uusitalo 2020; Taylor 2019, 3). In a sense, the video illuminates my personal responsibility for ecological harm as an individual. In Timothy Morton's words, 'I'm the detective and the criminal' (Morton 2016). By transilluminating personal fossil fuel ties, I inevitably come to an ecological awareness where I am partly the culprit of ecological destruction.

In the first phase, I started writing personal experiences and memories of mostly fossil fuel-based transportation and the affective ties I had to these energy forms and activities. I wrote through a six-month period, and my personal dependencies often came to mind in everyday experiences of driving a car, getting gas from a gas station and boarding a plane. Mostly, the emotional experiences of using fossil fuels were positive. Negative emotions usually only came up when my fossil fuel dependency was somehow contested: in a situation where my car stopped working, where I felt flight shame in planning a work trip abroad or felt self-conscious about buying books on Amazon, which were transported to me using fossil fuels.

My experience of using fossil fuels in transportation is one of ease: of stepping into the mainstream, a sensory experience of being in the flow. Fossil fuels ease my everyday life, make transitions smoother and quicker, make trips individualised and enable movement according to my personal will. Fossil fuels have enabled the construction of many happy memories from family trips (Figure 1).

In Finland it's a national pastime to go on cruises to Sweden. It was also a favourite holiday activity in our family. The feeling of the cruise ship leaving the port was exciting. We watched the departure on deck or through the small cabin window. Then we went to the tax-free shop to buy huge bags of candy. There's something magical about a ship the size of an apartment building floating through the sea. I have fossil fuels to thank for that experience.
(transcription of video narration)

I started to recognise how driving, especially, supported many social practices: seeing family members, talking to



FIGURE 1. Cruise. Screen shot from video *Coming off Fossil Fuels*.

children during a long drive and taking my kids to school and hobbies, and thus also facilitating their social life. Mimi Sheller (2004) writes that car consumption is not only about rational economic choices, but is as much about aesthetic, emotional and sensory responses to driving, as well as patterns of kinship, sociability, habitation and work. In the West, the automobile has been established as a normal and necessary tool for personal independence and successful management of family life (Wilson, Szeman, and Carlson 2017, 9) (Figure 2).

I enjoy driving in the Finnish summer nights when the sun barely sets and its light out until midnight. In my childhood we used to do these long road trips to Lapland to visit my grandparents. I also like to drive in the rain. I feel safe and unattached at the same time. I often drive my kids around and that's our moment together listening to music and talking. If I'm running out of gasoline I immediately recognize a sense of fear and unease. That's the pain of withdrawal. (transcription of video narration)

Whilst taking part in fossil fuel-dependent activities, I noted emotions that somehow felt natural and unquestioned in relation to these activities: the justifiable use of a car to do grocery shopping, the pleasure of taking a cruise with my family during the school autumn break or the excitement of travelling abroad. The natural feeling of taking part in fossil fuel-dependent activities is obviously upheld culturally. In industrial societies we have been socialised to use fossil fuels and the social structure is based on the use and development of fossil fuels. Fossil fuels are easy *not* to think about, because they have been hidden in plain sight both structurally

(reduced to oil pipes and gas pumps) but also on an aesthetic representational level (Wilson, Szeman, and Carlson 2017). Wilson, Szeman, and Carlson (2017, 15) note that oil and its outcomes: speed, plastics and the luxuries of capitalism have lubricated our relationship to one another and the environment for the entire twentieth century. Mark Simpson uses the term lubricity to describe the texture and mood requisite to the operations of neoliberal petroculture; lubricity offers smoothness a cultural common sense, promoting the fantasy of a frictionless world reliant on the continued and intensified use of petrocarbons (Simpson 2017, 289).

In writing travel experiences, I started to transilluminate other areas of my life: the food I eat, the clothes I wear, even the thoughts I think. I began to think about my personal experiences, social relationships, my identity and life history as a by-product of using fossil fuels. In fact, our Western individual identities would not exist if it were not for the structures and metanarratives built on fossil fuels. Simon Orpana writes in his graphic novel that oil is not just an energy source or raw material but a set of practices, habits, institutions, beliefs and histories: we are *petro-subjects*. 'Petroculture structures how we relate to ourselves, each other, the larger environment and the future' (Orpana 2021, 16).

This realisation went against everything I had implicitly been taught about being a human being: 'my thoughts are my own, born out of my individual mind, and fossil fuels have nothing to do with the individual *me*'. The essence of Western humanity is in individuality. We are taught that our thoughts, dreams and experiences are individual expressions of our humanity, when in fact, we as humans are fruits of our fossil fuel history and a civilisation built on fossil fuels (Figure 3).



FIGURE 2. Drive. Screen shot from video *Coming off Fossil Fuels*.



FIGURE 3. *Energy*. Screen shot from video *Coming off Fossil Fuels*.

As a child I learned that oil spills were bad. Birds covered in black goo were shown on newscasts. In the television series Dallas, the Ewing empire was built on oil. We used to watch the show together at home. Coal was something ancient belonging to the Industrial Revolution or an outdated source of heating in other parts of the world. I had always thought fossil fuels existed outside my skin. In fact, they are in every part of me: giving me energy, expanding my views, helping me dream bigger and move faster. (transcription of video narration)

THE SECOND PHASE OF RECOLLECTION: VIDEO RESPONSES

The second phase of visual recollection entailed collecting responses from gallery visitors to the video *Coming off Fossil Fuels*. The intent of the video was to introduce ways of recognising fossil fuel dependency, a concept which may at first seem abstract. David MacDougall writes about the interdependency between meaning and perception. Meaning shapes perception, but perception may also refigure meaning, and this process may alter perception once again (McDougall 2005, 2). The goal of the *Coming off Fossil Fuels* video was, thus, to redirect meaning-making through perception in order for viewers to recognise where fossil dependency actually lies in their everyday structures, practices and feelings. Once perceived, fossil dependency also becomes a possible sphere of reflection and action.

The video was presented as part of the LOOK Climate Lab in Liverpool, where it was projected on the wall and played at the gallery from 8 January to 20 March 2022.⁶

In response to the video, participants were encouraged to recollect their own experiences connected to oil, coal, cars, flying and their affective ties to fossil fuel-based energy forms and activities. The gallery staff conducted four video response interviews during the LOOK Climate Lab 2022 exhibition.

The interviewees were invited to participate after a private gallery visit and a group discussion with Clickmore, a local, socially engaged photography collective. After visiting the exhibition, the gallery staff and visitors had a group conversation exchanging thoughts about their individual impact on the climate crisis and the limits of agency for creating change. They talked about the anxiety of contributing to ecological damage, the complexity of finding alternatives and the drastic change of climate awareness in the last few years.⁷

This transitioned well into the questions the ‘fossil fuel memories’ interviews explored, so the visitors were invited to participate after the discussion ended. Two participants volunteered to be interviewed and two other staff members involved in the previous discussion also joined.

The participants had viewed and discussed the video before the interview. They were invited to sit down with two gallery staff members to answer questions. Before the interview, the gallery staff had a short conversation with the participants to talk through the definition of ‘fossil fuels’ and to clarify any misconceptions, such as electricity and heating also being a source of fossil fuel consumption. The gallery staff shared the following statistic with participants: ‘Most of the UK’s electricity is produced by burning fossil fuels, mainly natural gas (42% in 2016) and coal (9% in 2016)’.⁸

Interviewees filled out a printed consent form at the gallery, approving the use of the videos for specified purposes. The participants were informed that parts of the collected experiences could be included and edited into further video pieces or displayed on the @fossilfuelrecollect Instagram account. The collected experiences may also be used as empirical data for further research on fossil fuel ties. Two Open Eye staff members conducted the interviews. They alternated between introducing the topic while signing consent forms and asking the interview questions. The participants were asked their names, ages and places of residence, along with the following questions on their fossil fuel experiences:

- (1) Would you like to share an experience from your life which was enabled by fossil fuels?
- (2) What kinds of feelings are connected to the experience?
- (3) Which fossil fuel experience would be hardest to let go of? Why do you think that is?

The interviews were filmed in front of the gallery window for better access to natural light. Participants were filmed with a camera on a tripod and their voices were recorded on a Zoom recorder held by one of the gallery staff members. The collected responses included a variety of different fossil fuel experiences, including heating, travel and buying products online. Excerpts and screenshots from the video responses are published with the permission of interviewees (Figures 4–7).

‘It was great fun to build the fire. I would do it with my cousin; we would be about 7, 8, 9, 10, and we’d be completely mucky getting shovels out of the coal shed down the alleyway. It was

exciting because it was fire and we were in charge of it.’

‘When we were younger our only form of heat was coal. ... What we were doing was going into next door to get warm because this fire was dampening down. So, they alternated, and I think that the parents were doing it between them all. ... Maybe community-wise it was better, there was more of a community mix within the families.’

‘You’re thinking about it maybe that day when you’re out: That thing is going to get to my house today. Then you get home and there’s something waiting for you. It’s very gratifying in the short term. ... It’s a positive feeling, it doesn’t really last that long, but it’s positive and gratifying.’

‘Every time that I think of a memory of being reunited with my family in the past few years, planes and that fossil fuel implication is part of that memory. ... I always feel emotional in the moment of landing and in the moment of taking flight. ... There is a lot of positive emotions and excitement in the use of fossil fuels in that way.’

The empirical analysis of the collected video responses is not within the scope of this article, but further data collection would enable the qualitative analysis of different kinds of fossil fuel experiences and their emotional dimensions. The collected experiences broadened my initial views of fossil fuel dependency to include coal memories, a form of fossil energy I haven’t been in contact with because it hasn’t been a significant source of heating in Finnish homes, even though coal is used in power plants. The experiences of flying and buying things online were, however, very relatable and familiar. Even these four interviews illuminated how



FIGURE 4. Honour on the experience of being in charge of a coal fire. Screenshot from video response.

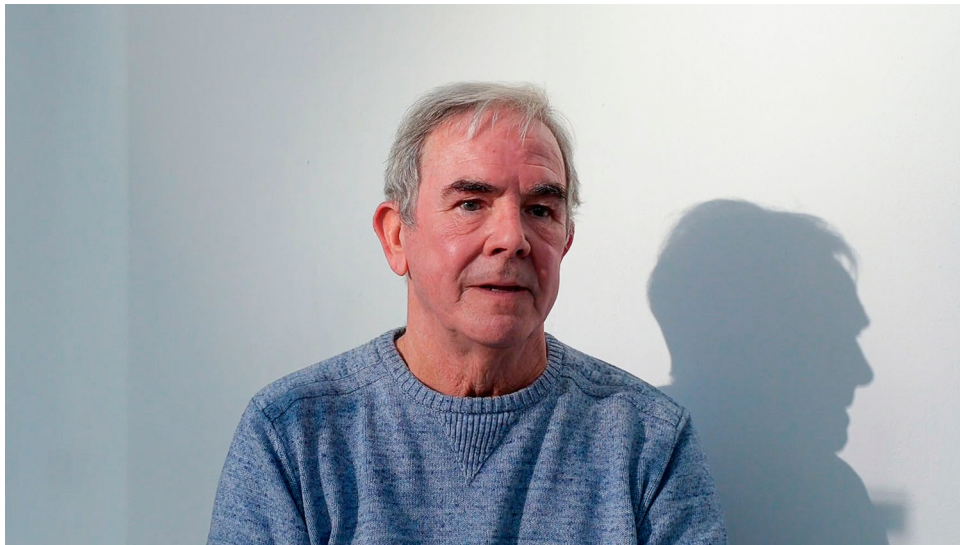


FIGURE 5. Paul on the experience of community connected to coal heating. Screenshot from video response.

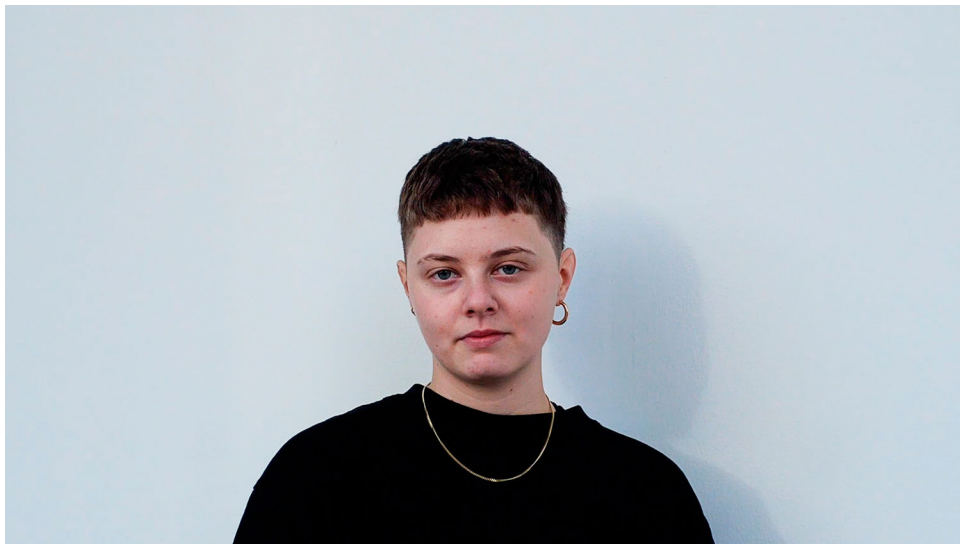


FIGURE 6. Browyn on the experience of buying things online. Screenshot from video response.



FIGURE 7. Núria on connecting with family by flying. Screenshot from video response.

fossil fuels are inscribed into the energy structures of societies in different ways as well as into our individual experiences, emotions and expectations.

DISCUSSION: THE SPACE AND TIME OF FOSSIL FUEL EXPERIENCES

It is fitting to consider fossil fuel dependencies from the dimensions of space and time. Imre Szeman writes in the foreword to *Gasoline dreams*, that in high-energy petrocultures, time is stretched in improbable ways. Our high-tech societies actually depend on the energies of millions of years of solar energy absorbed by ancient fossilised plants. An estimate says that one U.S. gallon of gasoline (around four litres) is produced of ninety-eight tons of prehistoric plant matter (Szeman 2021, viii). This high-energy petroleum enables us to move faster through our jam-packed everyday lives and also travel across thousands of kilometres in a matter of hours. This means that we are burning through time at an accelerated speed. In fact, modernity's future-oriented, linear, and accelerating temporality is enabled and sustained by fossil resources (Folkers 2021, 224).

Gasoline has also altered our sense of space. We can access locations, goods and services and even cities on the other side of the planet. This collapse in distance speeds up experience (Szeman 2021, ix). It has become normal to expect changing experiences: the average, everyday drudgery is expected to be interrupted by travel, change of scenery or the experience of different cultures. We are hungry for stimulating experiences of travel and continuous consumption, which are, in fact, all fuelled with fossil energy forms.

This article has presented a visual method of recollecting fossil fuel experiences through an arts-based participatory approach. The video responses offer the valuable experience of using video as a method of visual recollection and will inform the use of the video piece in future research settings. The visual recollection method worked well and could be used in other contexts, such as universities, schools and public libraries. It is noteworthy that a contemplation of the different manifestations of fossil fuel may need to take place before the interviews, as the video piece itself concentrated on travel. To broaden the array of fossil fuel experiences, I plan to edit the recorded interviews into a response video, which may in turn entice further fossil fuel experiences.

The methods of visual recollection used in this project could be further developed by utilising the sensory and participatory potential of video; for instance, participants could be asked to document everyday fossil fuel dependencies in their homes or record a road trip from

the point of view of studying fossil fuel dependency. One could also include the dimensions of space and time into collecting fossil fuel experiences. If one includes the dimension of space, this process could involve thinking of the places and distances our life stories inhabit and the transitions of shifting from one place to another. The dimension of time could be explored by thinking of the ways fossil fuels have compressed our sense of time, giving us more experiences in shorter time spans. This could also mean thinking of narratives or even entire life histories that involve a knotting of fossil fuel-related experiences into sequences.

NOTES

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- [6] The video is available through the virtual reality version of LOOK Climate Lab 2022. <https://openeye.org.uk/whatson/vr-look-climate-lab-2022/>
- [7] E-mail interview with Open Eye Gallery staff member, 5 May 2022.
- [8] E-mail interview with Open Eye Gallery staff member, 5 May 2022.

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