

# THE BLOSSOMS OF GREENPOINT

## PSYCHOGEOLOGY OF NORTH BROOKLYN

A GUIDE TO THE GREENPOINT OIL SPILL  
AND RELATED ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT

PREPARED BY:  
DAVID KENNEDY CUTLER  
MAY 2010

# ART 13

# ISTS &

# ACTIV

# ISTS

This pamphlet is the thirteenth of the Artists & Activists series, published by Printed Matter, Inc., New York City, 2011. Printed Matter's Artists & Activists series is made possible by generous funding from the Gesso Foundation.

David Kennedy Cutler, 2011  
Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 3.0 United States License

ISBN 978-0-89439-055-5

www.printedmatter.org

Series design: Garrick Gott

## GREENPOINT

BROOKLYN, NY  
POPULATION: 39,360  
SCALE 1" = 200 feet

Annotated Map of The Greenpoint Oil Spill and Vicinity

### SITE HISTORY

Petroleum refining began within the Greenpoint area in 1866. More than 50 refineries had been established along Newtown Creek by 1870. Refinery operations ceased in 1966, and petroleum bulk storage discontinued in 1993 on the ExxonMobil-owned properties of the former refinery parcels. British Petroleum began operation of a bulk fuel storage terminal in 1969, which continues to operate today.

On September 2, 1978, the U.S. Coast Guard discovered an oil spill entering the Newtown Creek from Meeker Avenue. In 1979, an investigation of the spill beneath the Greenpoint area determined the release to be approximately 52 acres, with the total spill volume consisting of approximately 17 million gallons of petroleum products.

An EPA study of the site in 2007 estimated the size of the spill was potentially much larger than the original estimate. Perhaps well over 30 million gallons comprised the "free product" plume underneath Greenpoint. Comparatively, the size of the Exxon Valdez oil spill of 1989 (considered one of the worst spills in U.S. history) was estimated at 10.9 million gallons.

Since 1979, subsurface petroleum product remediation has occurred at multiple sites in Greenpoint. As of 2006, approximately 9.5 million gallons of product had been recovered from the plume area.

Additional studies of the plume have revealed that its reach goes deeper into residential neighborhoods than previously believed. Further complicating matters, a May 2009 study of the area discovered residual toxic pollution from dozens of former and current businesses, including dry cleaners, manufacturers, metal works, and storage facilities.

**SITES** (Numbers Correspond To Annotated Numbers On Map)

- 1 On September 2, 1978 the U.S. Coast Guard noticed an oil slick coating the Newtown Creek at the northeastern end of Meeker Avenue. A subsequent investigation revealed that a 52 acre area of spilled oil was leaking into Newtown Creek, a nearly still waterway that connects to the East River.
- 2 British Petroleum Storage Facility. The last operational fuel storage over the spill.
- 3 Site of ExxonMobil Remediation Effort. High security, cast concrete wall surrounds the site, so it makes it nearly impossible to look in.
- 4 Poland Spring Water storage / distribution (Note its proximity to the site of ExxonMobil's oil pumping activities).
- 5 Original 1979 size-assessment of the oil spill (blue topographical lines). The lines indicate a subsurface liquid topography of "product thickness". The product thickness of the main spill varied from a "trace" amount to 5 feet and averaged at 2.8 feet. Below the current BP site the product thickness reached 10 feet; in the Kingsland Avenue area (see site #3), product accumulation was 20 feet.
- 6 A reproduction of the estimated oil spill blob in the mid-2000s. The spill's size had grown larger, but there were differing assessments made by environmental groups and environmental consultants hired by ExxonMobil.
- 7 Representation of areas where "free product" was discovered in the "Meeker Avenue Plume Track-down" report published by the EPA in May 2009.
- 8 649 Morgan Avenue. Also known as the Morgan Fine Arts Building. Once a factory, this building is now comprised of hundreds of workspaces, mostly rented by artists. I rent a studio on the 2nd floor of this building. When I first began traveling to and from my studio in December 2005, I was unaware of the slumbering hydrocarbons that infused the aquifer below. Out of economic necessity I had moved to what felt like the end of the Earth. Amongst heavy industry, nowhere near Subways and totally devoid of decent food or coffee, I sometimes felt sequestered... marginalized... On rainy days, traversing the streets of Greenpoint, blooming oil rainbows appeared underfoot. I began to photograph the oil spills every day it rained. I had heard of the Greenpoint Oil Spill, and like many with a perverse sense of pride, I boasted of living above some ominous abstraction. After consulting maps of the spill, I discovered most people in Greenpoint did not spend most of their time above the spill, but that I was working right on the cusp of it. Learning of the millions of gallons of oil below, I realized that I was working over an untapped natural resource. The invisible mass below became a philosophical trigger, a fuel for the creative impulse, an exploitable local resource.

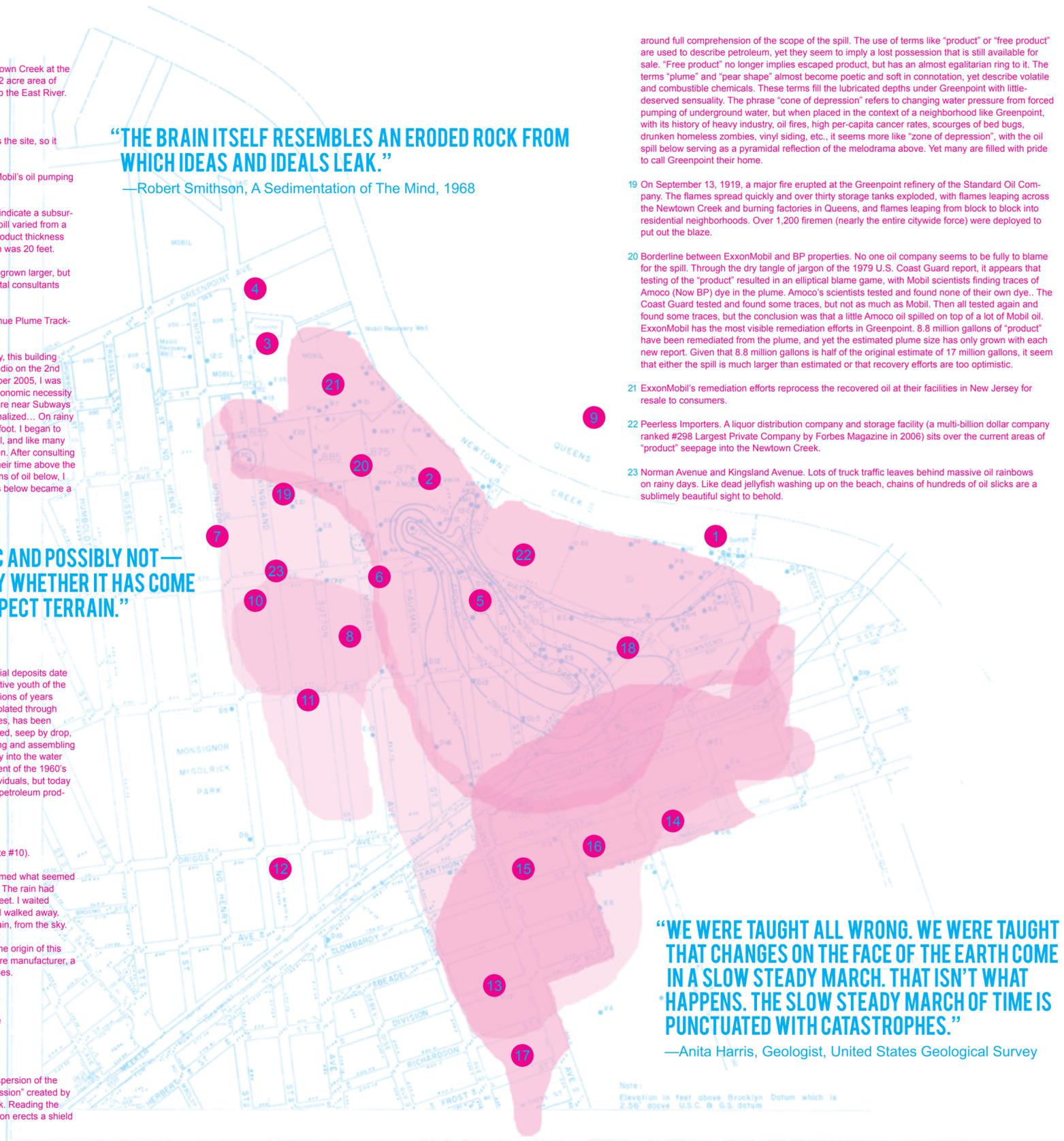
**"THE BRAIN ITSELF RESEMBLES AN ERODED ROCK FROM WHICH IDEAS AND IDEALS LEAK."**

—Robert Smithson, *A Sedimentation of The Mind*, 1968

**"IF A PIECE OF COUNTRY IS POSSIBLY EXOTIC AND POSSIBLY NOT— IF IT IS SO ENIGMATIC THAT NO ONE CAN SAY WHETHER IT HAS COME FROM NEAR OR FAR—IT IS KNOWN AS SUSPECT TERRAIN."**

—John McPhee, *In Suspect Terrain*, p. 43

- 9 The topography of the site is located within the Atlantic Coastal Plain, where glacial deposits date to the Wisconsin age (approx. 21,000 years ago during the last Ice Age). The relative youth of the landscape means it does not naturally contain petroleum deposits (which are millions of years old), and yet just a few feet below the surface of Greenpoint, refined oil has percolated through the topsoil. The petroleum, transported over land and sea, over thousands of miles, has been accumulating for a century. Through negligence, a liquid monument has assembled, seep by drop, into an inverted temple, underground and gleaming in darkness. Instead of carving and assembling geologic artifacts, a new geology has been synthetically created, muscling its way into the water table. A new geology for a new millennium. The artists of the Earthworks movement of the 1960's conceived of massive earth monuments created with deliberation by intrepid individuals, but today we have come to realize that our communal lethargy of consumption is enabling petroleum products to form temporal and effusive monuments.
- 10 Spic and Span & Norman Cleaners and Dyers (small plume contaminator).
- 11 Representation of ground contamination from former dry cleaning businesses (site #10).
- 12 Corner of Monitor Street and Driggs Ave. After a morning thunderstorm, I once filmed what seemed to be an endless stream of oil slick running down the sidewalk into a storm drain. The rain had calmed to only a slight drizzle, but oil infused rainwater was pouring down the street. I waited twenty minutes or more to see if it would dissipate, but I was getting wet, and so I walked away. The quantity of oil seemed as though it had no origin, as if it had fallen with the rain, from the sky.
- 13 The EPA report from May 2009 revealed another large plume of contaminates. The origin of this plume was linked to a soap manufacturer and lacquer storage facility, a light fixture manufacturer, a metal-works facility, a dry cleaner, and many other businesses and storage facilities.
- 14 Soap manufacturer and lacquer storage (southern plume contaminator, site #13).
- 15 ACME Architectural Products, metal works and storage facilities (southern plume contaminator, site #13).
- 17 Klink Cosmo Cleaners, Dry Cleaners (southern plume contaminator, site #13).
- 18 The "pear shape" of the "plume" is believed to be caused by the ground water dispersion of the product. The "product" gets broader as it moves towards a former "cone of depression" created by pumping wells and "discharge" points on Meeker Avenue and the Newtown Creek. Reading the reports prepared for the Coast Guard, the EPA, and ExxonMobil, the chosen jargon erects a shield



around full comprehension of the scope of the spill. The use of terms like "product" or "free product" are used to describe petroleum, yet they seem to imply a lost possession that is still available for sale. "Free product" no longer implies escaped product, but has an almost egalitarian ring to it. The terms "plume" and "pear shape" almost become poetic and soft in connotation, yet describe volatile and combustible chemicals. These terms fill the lubricated depths under Greenpoint with little-deserved sensuality. The phrase "cone of depression" refers to changing water pressure from forced pumping of underground water, but when placed in the context of a neighborhood like Greenpoint, with its history of heavy industry, oil fires, high per-capita cancer rates, scourges of bed bugs, drunken homeless zombies, vinyl siding, etc., it seems more like "zone of depression", with the oil spill below serving as a pyramidal reflection of the melodrama above. Yet many are filled with pride to call Greenpoint their home.

19 On September 13, 1919, a major fire erupted at the Greenpoint refinery of the Standard Oil Company. The flames spread quickly and over thirty storage tanks exploded, with flames leaping across the Newtown Creek and burning factories in Queens, and flames leaping from block to block into residential neighborhoods. Over 1,200 firemen (nearly the entire citywide force) were deployed to put out the blaze.

20 Borderline between ExxonMobil and BP properties. No one oil company seems to be fully to blame for the spill. Through the dry tangle of jargon of the 1979 U.S. Coast Guard report, it appears that testing of the "product" resulted in an elliptical blame game, with Mobil scientists finding traces of Amoco (Now BP) dye in the plume. Amoco's scientists tested and found none of their own dye. The Coast Guard tested and found some traces, but not as much as Mobil. Then all tested again and found some traces, but the conclusion was that a little Amoco oil spilled on top of a lot of Mobil oil. ExxonMobil has the most visible remediation efforts in Greenpoint, 8.8 million gallons of "product" have been remediated from the plume, and yet the estimated plume size has only grown with each new report. Given that 8.8 million gallons is half of the original estimate of 17 million gallons, it seem that either the spill is much larger than estimated or that recovery efforts are too optimistic.

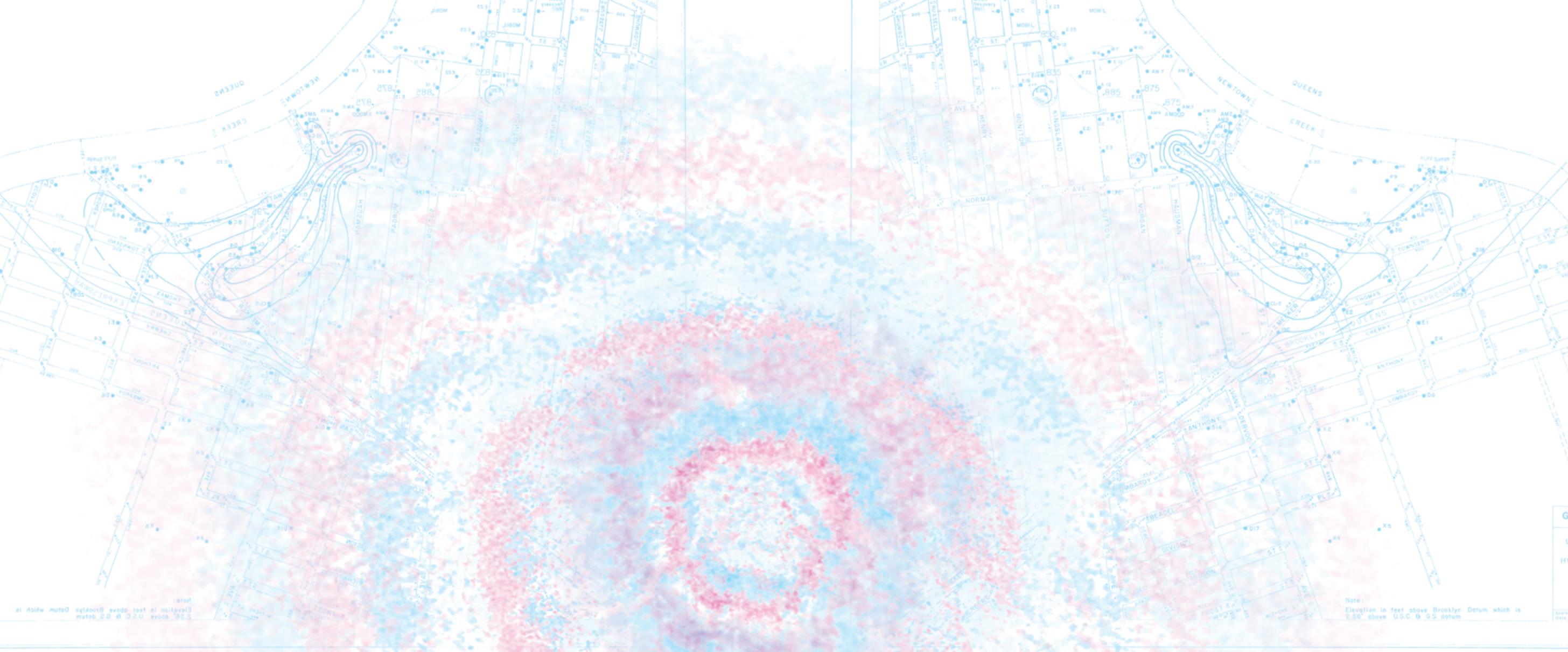
21 ExxonMobil's remediation efforts reprocess the recovered oil at their facilities in New Jersey for resale to consumers.

22 Peerless Importers. A liquor distribution company and storage facility (a multi-billion dollar company ranked #298 Largest Private Company by Forbes Magazine in 2006) sits over the current areas of "product" seepage into the Newtown Creek.

23 Norman Avenue and Kingsland Avenue. Lots of truck traffic leaves behind massive oil rainbows on rainy days. Like dead jellyfish washing up on the beach, chains of hundreds of oil slicks are a sublimely beautiful sight to behold.

**"WE WERE TAUGHT ALL WRONG. WE WERE TAUGHT THAT CHANGES ON THE FACE OF THE EARTH COME IN A SLOW STEADY MARCH. THAT ISN'T WHAT HAPPENS. THE SLOW STEADY MARCH OF TIME IS PUNCTUATED WITH CATASTROPHES."**

—Anita Harris, Geologist, United States Geological Survey



## THE BLOSSOMS OF GREENPOINT

Above the outer rim of the world's largest urban oil spill I sit in my studio on a milk crate drinking water. I drink a gallon of water every day from the water fountain down the hall, all my faith placed in the integrity of the insulation of the network of pipes that deliver New York City's notoriously decent drinking water. If you were to locate my studio on a map of the Newtown Creek and the surrounding industrial neighborhood of Greenpoint provided by the Environmental Protection Agency, you would be looking at a purple bloom surrounded by a hot pink halo that is the happy-colored graphic that is meant to represent the underground formation of anywhere between 17 and 30 million gallons of spilt, refined oil.

On any given rainy day, on this northernmost peninsula of Brooklyn, I descend the stairs from the second floor of this former factory, mount my bike, and ride down the drizzle-coated streets. It is on these days I chase rainbows -- not glimmering spectrums arching overhead, but momentary stains found underfoot, two-dimensional ghosts that levitate on the pavement's surface. It is the ubiquitous but phantasmal oil rainbow that I stop to photograph, to document as the evidence of accumulated accident that is the last gasp of the inertia of forward motion: exploration, innovation, invention, marketing, distribution, dissolution. North of the Brooklyn-Queens Expressway, an entire economic cycle ends here, along truck routes and crosswalks its residue dots the pavement, from its point of origin it is refined and distilled until optimal value and efficiency is achieved, packaged for transport in massive tankers and pipelines across oceans and continents,

the civilization's arterial system pumping the lifeblood along, only to end up escaped, drop by drop onto the latticework of the city streets, where in its final moment above ground it blooms into suspended radiant illusion. Linear time seems to freeze for a moment, a mystical event horizon occurring on the asphalt canvas, and then it disperses, finds its way into a gutter and wanders back underground. This is an occurrence so ordinary it goes nearly unnoticed, the accumulation numbing the senses. But in Greenpoint, where the aquifer is infused with oil, it doesn't stretch the imagination much to turn this landscape into opportunity, the streets to rivers of black crude, the rainbows to blossoms, the world's guts turned inside out, coming up for air.

But regardless of all that verbose mental projection, the oil rainbow is merely a momentary confluence of natural phenomena created by the right conditions. The blossoms only appear when a continuous rain has subsided and a leaking engine passes over the perfectly soaked pavement (usually at a stop sign, traffic signal or gas station) and the light, for optimal viewing, is overcast but not too dark or too bright. They may appear as a circular dollop no bigger than a compact disc or they may tentacle across a huge puddle next to a blocked drain. If the offending automobile is a real gusher, then I can follow the trail for blocks. The same occurrence each time produces a unique result.

And yet the phenomena, seen or unseen, repeated a hundred billion times over every second of every day, become self-replicating tears in the fabric of constancy, portals that are entries to an imperceptible dimension, philosophical triggers, blankets

acned with cigarette burns. These portals, set against the walls that line streets and the overstocked bodegas and the claustrophobic apartments above, are momentary releases from the rampaging impulses of self-gratification and obligation. They are transmissions from across time and place that imply, like fingers intertwined in nervous anticipation, that particulate matter, the human circulatory system, the Earth's encapsulated form, and the economic order are all of one arterial sphere, a stacked set of reflections, reverberating outwards. The result of accident, they are improvisational monuments created by blind hands, removed by a million permeations and transmutations of technology, that describe, with simple vivid color, the interlocking structure of human cosmology. A set of radiating swirls implies the expansionist impulse, the desire of humanity to leave its multifarious marks, from a rock turned upright to a scrawl on a wall. Nothing deliberate could say as much.

The oil spill is that accidental shard of data, like a smashed Compact Disc or broken windshield, that speaks slowly and eloquently of past and present while humanity can only rapidly ramble over stumbling existential sentences. And yet the optical trickery they produce is not even a thing, but an ethereal cocktail of natural resources and light. By looking down instead of up, the oil rainbow becomes the introverted sublime, the eye-opener for the shy mind, the mimesis of epiphany.

Outside of culture and artifact, without illustration or illusion, there are things in our midst that illuminate the fountainheads of infrastructure, that reveal the poor

welds of intersections, that point to the leaks in our plumbing, to the cast off luggage of our cultural needs. If all of human culture is merely an artificial framework constructed for the success of the species, a framework that has allowed humanity to transmit vast stores of knowledge to succeeding generations so that the cumbersome learning of evolution may be circumvented, then why does it suddenly seem that those transmissions are being intercepted, put on relay, sent somewhere else?

For now, our notions of progression have suddenly hit a wall of feedback, where what was taken as given has been up-ended by the angry residue of action. The linear conception of time is embroiled in entropy, the expanding fabric of the universe. But as the time spreads itself thin, what pockets are emerging? All things repressed, all things pushed underground will emerge, boil upwards, and reveal themselves, even if no one is there to bear witness. Resources may have been unearthed and the world traversed, continents may have shifted, economic dominance may move across borders, cultural enlightenment may have moved from desert, to island, to citadel, to stone city, to glass city, but it travels still. From the northern tip of the epicenter of America's artistic production, there is a mimetic signal, a high-pitched feedback frequency, a transmission reverberating outwards: the sound of something leaking in Brooklyn.

David Kennedy Cutler  
September 2008