SHUT IT DOWN.
SHUT IT DOWN.

At stake in ‘INFRACTIONS’ and across ‘The Gas Imaginary’ as a body of work, is the mediation of a disassess fossil energy transition, facilitated entirely by the logics of settler colonialism. The unconventional oil and gas fracking industry was developed in the post-war US—with parallel experiments conducted in remote Australia—and accelerated in the wake of the 1973 US oil embargo. The US Energy Act 2005 enabled the use of fracking injection fluids to avoid oversight by major US environment acts, and this deregulation has been a precedent wherever the industry has crossed borders to be installed. In 2009 just two years after the Northern Territory Emergency Response Intervention, the ‘unconventional’ (coal seam gas) approvals process in Queensland set up liquified natural gas (LNG) plants and export infrastructure on the karstic valley of Gladstone, and thousands of wells across Western Queensland. Presently, the Condamine River, renowned for pan Aboriginal garreria blockades against pastoral invasion during the land-fracturing frontier wars (entirely unmentioned in early anti-fracking films), is now bubbling, unstoppable with methane.

When the Queensland approvals process was whistleblown in 2009, this set in motion temporary moratoriums in most Australian states. Still, a precedent had been set that LNG companies are able to extract unlimited water for free from the Great Artesian Basin, while there is no domestic reserve policy in Eastern states, nor any feasible plan to disperse the industry’s massive piles of toxic waste. Most gas is going overseas, creating false scarcity in the Australian market. It is the threat of this gas shortage on the East Coast, now being coupled to Covid-19 economic ‘recovery’ narratives, that all Australian states are being pressured to frack their gas reserves by the Federal Government. If extracted, these reserves will equal approximately three times the world’s annual emissions of greenhouse gases. Fossil gas is a proven contributor to increased global warming and methane spikes in the last decades. The current scope of new LNG infrastructure planned globally, including export hubs planned across the European Union to import fracked gas from the settler colonies, risks—‘if fault—emissions ‘lock-in’ that far exceed UN temperature goals for habitability.

It is difficult to find a better example of the new-global consequences of Western capitalistic law’s ‘productive’ inattention to the varied, ethnical (earth-bound) laws of First Nations peoples. It is important, at the same time, to emphasize that there is contingency interested in this otherwise, for the coronavirus has destabilised the global economy, investments in fossil energy amid global oversupply have never been riskier even within the myopic economic fascination of fossil capital. This raises major questions, including for respected energy market analysts, about the extreme (anti)realism of current gas plans.

‘INFRACTIONS’ documents an interconnected moving image of the precise situation and challenges facing an inspirational First Nations-led anti-fracking campaign in the Northern Territory of Australia, where 90% of the population only on groundwater. A colonial geography of the North (of which Gladstone was once planned as a capital) persists in explaining the presence—before fracking arrives—of toxic water and unregulated mine tailings. It is both devastating and mobilising to be informed that in places like Maritana Community and Wave Hill, where victorious pastoral industry walk-offs paved the way for the Aboriginal Land Rights Act (NT), First Nations have only Native Title rights that do not enable a right of veto over mine proposals. These frontline justice claims are further framed by internationally renowned Indigenous legal theorist Professor Irene Watson, whose own capacity in South Australia is also threatened.

The Northern Territory Aboriginal Land Rights Act was delivered in 1976 at the start of an insensible mining boom, and the Aboriginal peoples, following from Que Kenny’s plebiscite in the night sky above Ntaria (Hermannsburg), were the first royalty agreements of the new era. The 1970s land rights moment also marked the beginning of the most extractive five decades—globally—in the history of fossil capitalism. Capital Desert landscapes most familiar to art audiences as the country of Albert Namatjira are now connected by a private pipeline to the Gladstone port.

In 2011, the NT land councils were neither mandated nor resourced to cater to the rush of gas shipment along the ‘first in first served’ logic of the NT’s Petroleum Act. In just one year, 85% of the NT was covered in exploration permit requests. Only in 2014 was the policy changed to release set tracts of land possible for fracking, rather than making the whole state a free for all. Today, 35% of the NT is covered with approved exploration permits, while current laws allow for possible exploration over 35% of the NT.

The Scientific Inquiry into Hydraulic Fracturing of 2016 (referred to in the film) explicitly acknowledged that First Nations community submissions “almost universally expressed deep concern about, and strong opposition to, the development of any onshore shale gas industry on their country”. The Jumandji Institute for Indigenous Education and Research at UTAS released a comprehensive literature review of both recent NT fracking inquiries that summarised: ‘Most if not all exploration permits issued in the Northern Territory for unconventional gas have been issued in the absence of free, prior and informed consent’.

In Gulf Country, the sovereign music and film experiments of the people of Orwelloakwah—who also sees himself from the Metarama and Palm Valley gas fields—discern regional solidarities and intergenerational strength in this new era of mining refusals. Stepping up are esteemed musicians, painters and community leaders on the frontline of overwhelming industry plans that threaten hard-won homelands and the ancient connectivity of underground waters.

Industrial society’s frantic use of resources goes hand in hand with accelerating processes of dematerialized image production, as corporations have taken over more of the media landscape. It is not a coincidence that artists are playing a role in resisting these upcalculated investments in fossil infrastructure around the world. ‘INFRACTIONS’ gives only a snapshot, across a small number of sites, of a much larger intersectional First Nations-led movement for climate justice. Their connections are international, begin and end with sovereignty, and actively organize (more, faster, at higher pay) around interconnected housing rights, water and renewable energy at every level of government. Between familiar driving routes and ancient waterways, two kinds of cameras assess the surrealism of fracking infrastructure and cultural resistance to such. One is omnisciently surveillance; while through the main actions from the ground of country, we sit and are people, are led by what community organizers prefer to film. At one point the surveillance camera gets turned back upon the banality, and strangeness, of socially licensed fossil community security; ‘divestment’ thus appears here also in an aesthetic register.

This is less a film about ‘bad sponsors’ or even ‘two laws’ as it is about incommunicable powers, authors, and agencies that either commit to strained interconnected lifeworlds, or simply double-down on destruction. Song lines, resistance histories, and politics of experience help to frame for a non-Indigenous audience how settler recognition concepts, and laws of irresponsibility incorporated, smother the integrity of First Nations in ways that threaten all cultural futures. Step it up.

Rachel O’Reilly, September 2020

Dir: Rachel O’Reilly, 2019, 3:32hrs, HD video, split screen with text, Dolby 5.1

FEATURES in order of appearance of counties:
Jack Green, community leader and ‘Peers Award Finalist’ (Gawler, Goulburn)
Gladwin Howan, musician and community leader (Gawler, Yarrawonga)
Robert O’Keefe, ranger (Wakatipu)
The Xanadji Band from Narrabri
Castie Williams, musician (Western Australia)
Quo Kenny, community worker and law student (Western Australia)
Julie Ingward, artist (Gawler/Goulburn)
Jackie Jeffesson, educator (Tonewong Gawler)
Nika Xavar, educator (Gawler/Goulburn)
Ditsakait ‘Ray’ Down, musician and community leader (Mullumbi)
Professor Irene Watson, contributor to the draft UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, 1995-2009 (Tangangkala, Maitangung Kungodji)

Creative Credits:
Director/Research/Cameraman/Sound: Rachel O’Reilly
Producer: Maximilian Haig
Editor/Visual Research: Sebastian Rodinsky
Credits: Thurl Hopkins, Guillen Now (Nobula Photography)
Sound mixing: Ines Jeczek
Map visuals: Vibe Medina, Benjamin Reynolds (Fla.Liz)
Editor: Katharina Habbi

Film Thanks:
Shawn from the Firewheel, Artists on Climate and Cultural Change, Katherine Regional Arts Centre 2017. Watch This Space (Munyungan), Guaritv (Berlin), Prof. Irene Watson, Lindsey and Richard Johnson, Lauren Miller, Alex Read, Biller McGilery, Sarah Keenan, Diana McAleer, Kirsty Hewson, David Nilsen, Caro McDonald, Jo Holdaway, Mark Debell, Martin Catlin, Alex Kelly, Carmen Arnolda, Bong Simao, Cheryl Watson, Simi Carters, Beth Sowter, Phil and Rick, Siwja Huening, Mariana Kelle, Lily Neko, Carin Mathiesen, Albin Ang, Joe Collins, Zevon Dougnerk, Ineet Swanen, Nathan Gray, Jacky O’Reilly, Lawrence O’Reilly, Jonathan Oxide, Ashtie Joyce Sady, Kafie George, Regine Sattur, the PhD research of the Centre for Research Architecture Goldmeedia, and the Earthbound Radio | Corporal Grounds group of workers artists in Berlin.

Commissioned by KWM Berlin Production Series, dedicated to artists’ moving-image projects supported by the Julia Stoschek Collection and DOK/DEFA Germany/Switzerland. Additional support: Australia Council for the Arts