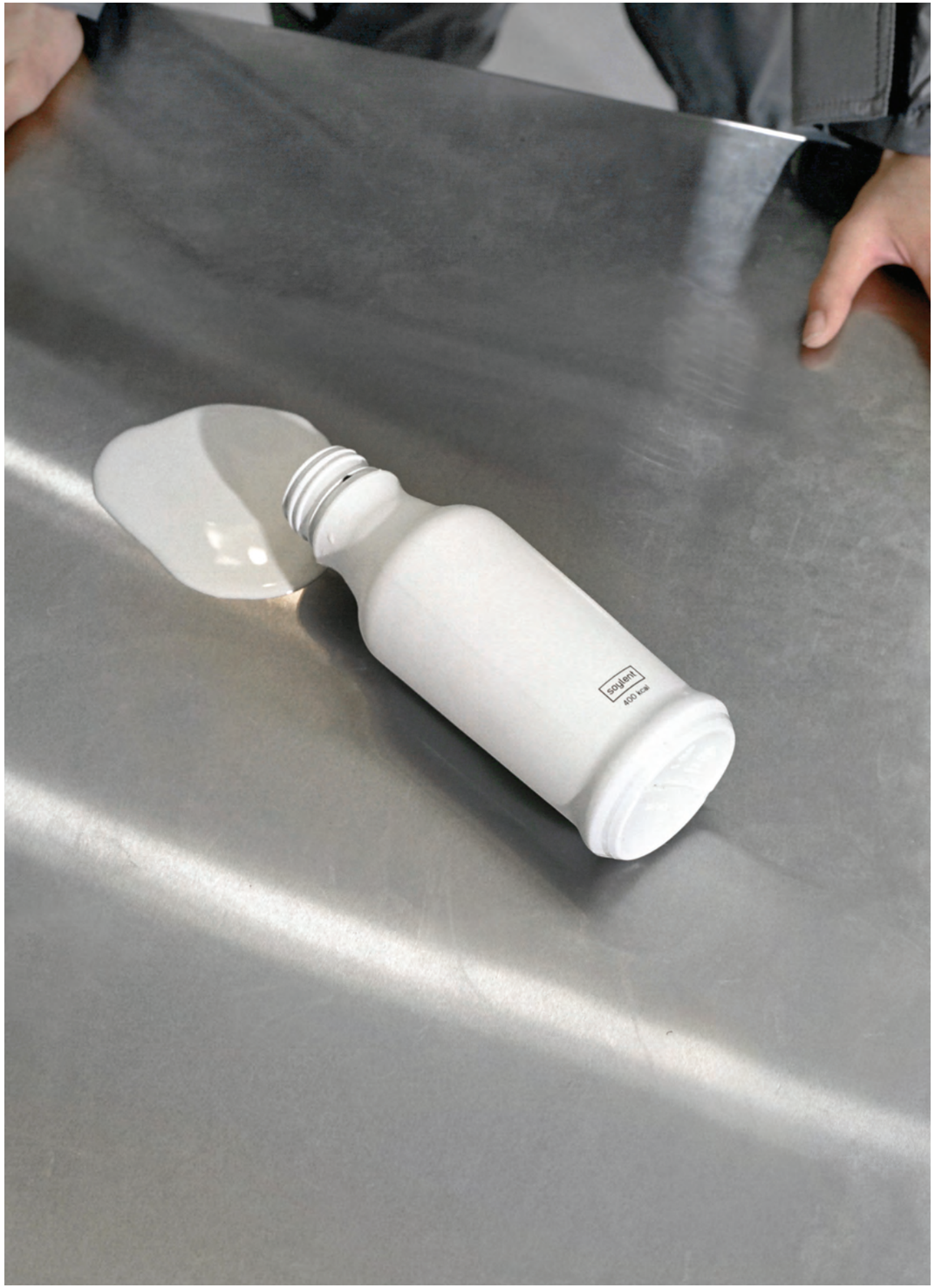
Sean Raspet

with
Ceci Moss


PROTOTYPE:
complete-nutrition 90% algae-derived
paste product


soylent
400 kcal

Los Angeles artist Sean Raspet's work operates with and amongst the determinate systems that influence our world, such as finance and chemistry. Over the past few years, this research has evolved into some interesting paths for the artist, who became a self-trained chemist in order to realize projects that range from reconstituting crude oil in *Hydrocarbon Reformulations* to the creation of experimental flavors for Soylent. In this conversation we discuss this recent work as well as the upcoming launch of his algae-based food company non/food, co-founded with Lucy Chinen.

Ceci Moss **A number of your projects explore how systems work to mutate and change material forms, revealing the power of processes such as chemical formulation, financialization, or the law to regulate or enact these transformations. Could you discuss your distinct approach to sculpture in more detail?**

Sean Raspet **Despite their abstraction, all of these processes are physical processes of physical materials. As these and other forms of abstraction become increasingly pronounced in the present day, I feel it is crucial to trace out the underlying materiality of these systems. This is how I approach materiality in general: through the lens of the dynamic between abstraction and concretization at work. And I think one of the areas where material becomes both exceedingly abstract and exceedingly concrete and specific is at the level of molecules and purified chemical compounds.**

CM **By distinguishing the materiality of abstract systems in your work, what do you hope to disclose to the viewer? And what, to you, is politically or socially implicated in those gestures? I'm thinking of *Technical Milk* (2015) where, through a process of molecule swapping, you created a general milk flavor for the meal replacement drink Soylent. As a basic form of nutrition necessary for human life, milk carries with it a long and complicated history. What are you communicating about abstraction by chemically composing milk's artificial facsimile in *Technical Milk*, particularly within the context of contemporary food production?**

SR **I think these kinds of abstract entities are relatively indifferent to viewer scrutiny (be they chemical, financial or otherwise). They will exist and function regardless of whether we are aware of them and understand them. In many cases they can't be viewed in the literal sense, another kind of reading or encounter is necessary. My goal isn't to make these structures legible to everyday comprehension. I'm more interested in using them as a format or a material that is then potentially open to reformulation.**

In terms of the social or political implications of working with these structures, I don't want to put too much weight on any endeavor that exists primarily within the art economy and that is seen and discussed primarily by people within this sub-segment. But from within the discourse of the art world, I think it's important to view things from the perspective of production rather than purely consumption. Most commentary on culture or the economy that occurs within the art world is focused on consumption, consumer culture, finished commodities, or brands, etc. It seems more important to me to directly focus on and work within the modes of production and materials that underlie this "consumer economy" and our day to day lives.

Soylent R&D Promotional Trade Show Booth, 2016 Installation view, Société Berlin, Frieze, New York, 2016 Photographer: Robert Kulisek
Clothing: Nhu Duong Styling: Jon Wang Models: Michael Xufu Huang, Eliot Glass and Yulu Serao © Robert Kulisek (pp. 117-119)

Soylent Nectar, 2015-2016 Courtesy: the artist and Soylent (promotional image) (pp. 122-123)

For example, our culture's main mode of production is a chemical one. However, we live in an extremely chemophobic society. If you say the word "chemicals" almost everyone has a negative, even visceral connotation. So we are a culture that is fundamentally afraid of or repulsed by our own mode of production. And this is very absurd, since we ourselves, and everything around us, is composed of chemicals.

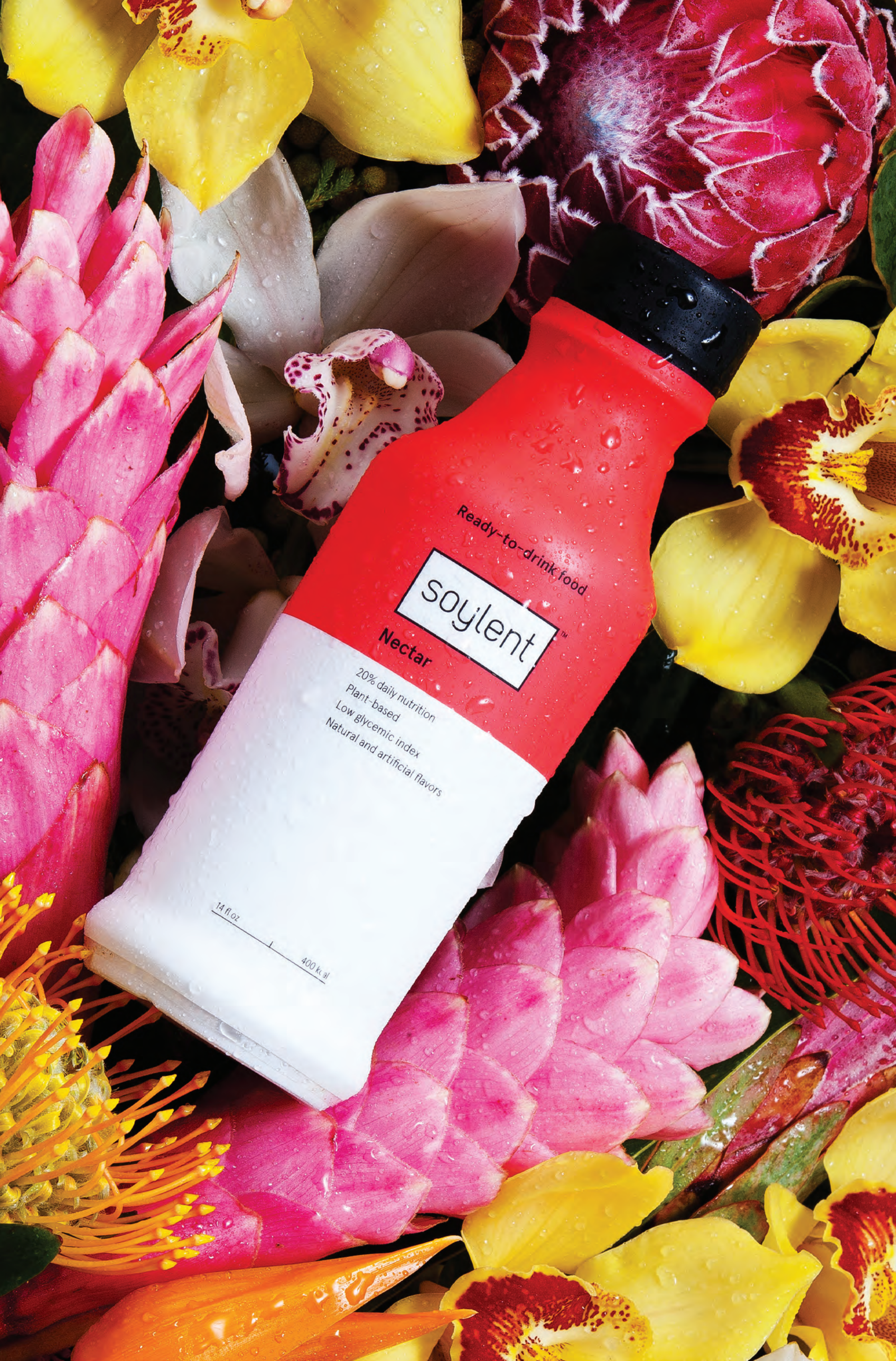
This relates, I think, to your question about *Technical Milk*. In our present culture many people believe that all things that are "natural" are good and all "artificial" or "synthetic" things are bad. In fact the entire division between "natural" and "artificial" is a construct. The term natural has no meaning from a scientific perspective (though sometimes it can have a legal or regulatory meaning but that's another subject). Many people are unaware that a specific molecule or chemical compound is exactly the same whether it was extracted from a plant or produced synthetically through chemical reactions. There is a universality to the laws of chemistry and physics, and to matter in general. In the end a molecule is a specific arrangement of atoms in a particular configuration. It doesn't matter what processes that formation of matter went through to get to where it is now. It's like a text, it's a word spelled a particular way, regardless of where each of those letters came from or who wrote them.

But this homology between natural and artificial flavors and substances isn't merely an academic point. There is the fact – counterintuitive to most people – that artificial flavors are generally much better for the environment. I think the main area of political and social effect for my work is in producing actual products that circulate in the mass economy and beyond the more restricted art economy – since we have to admit that the reach of the ideas that are discussed in the field of art is rather limited. I'd rather focus on entities that can be consumed and provide a metabolic function rather than a kind of artwork that is a static object and needs to be stored.

CM **This spring you will be realizing that exact ambition through the launch of your new company non/food. Can you discuss the concept behind the company, as well as describe the micro-algae products you plan to make?**

SR **The company, non/food, which I started with Lucy Chinen, makes food products from algae-derived ingredients. Algae, especially microalgae, are really the most sustainable food source. The saltwater varieties require almost no fresh water to grow, and most varieties can be grown in solar-powered tanks or bioreactors outfitted with LED lights (which is actually more energy efficient than direct sunlight) that use far less land, water and energy – including greenhouse gas emissions – than open fields and tractor harvesting, for example.**

Despite all of this, there are very few food products on the market that are algae-based. Occasionally, you can find some algae such as chlorella or spirulina (technically a cyanobacterium) in specialized foods, but usually there is only a small amount and the bulk of the food is made from other ingredients. We feel there is a really urgent need to restruc-


Ready-to-drink food
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Nectar
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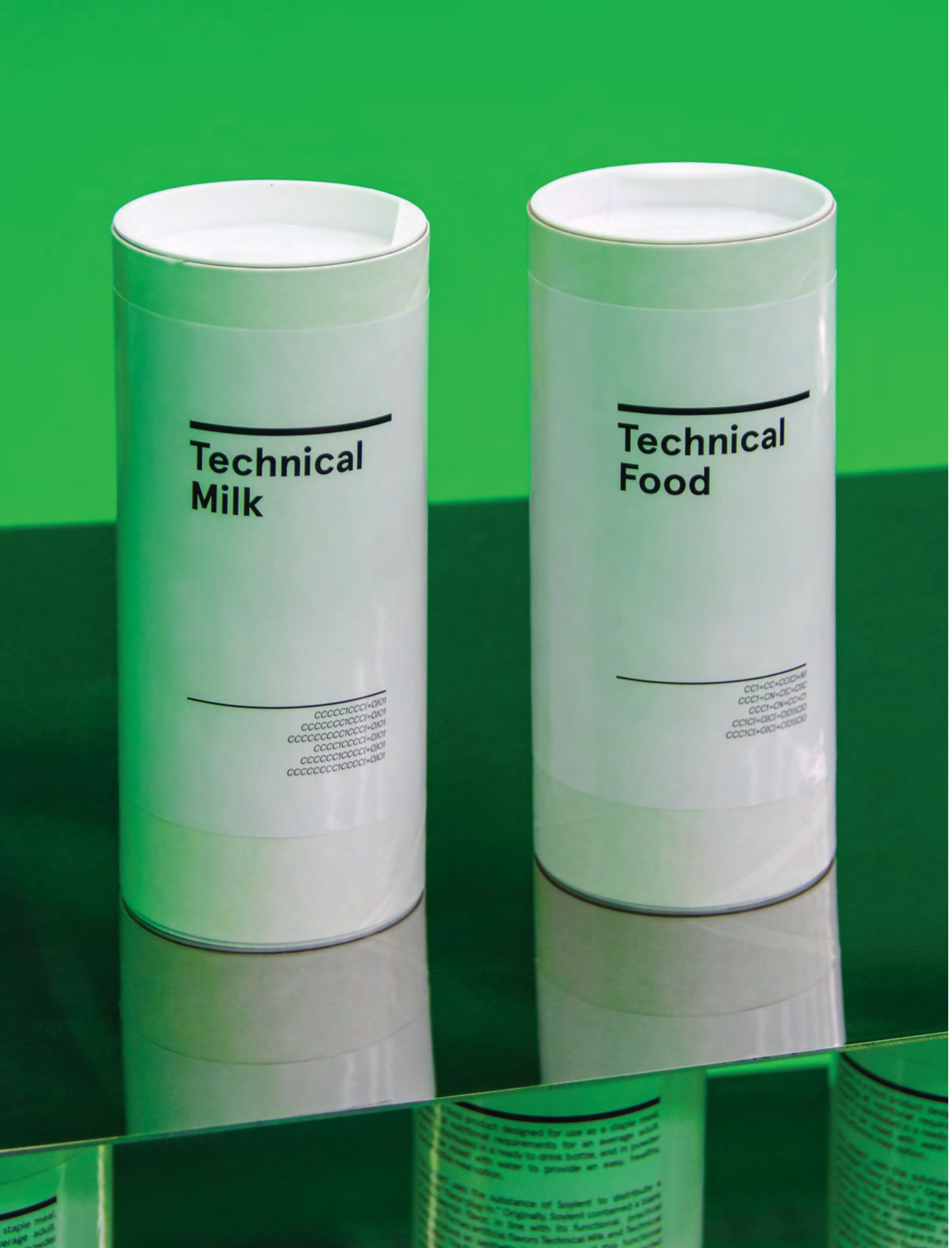
Plant-based
Low glycemic index
Natural and artificial flavors
14 fl oz
400 kcal



(Technical Milk) and (Technical Food), 2015 Courtesy: the artist and Swiss Institute (opposite page) O=C(OCCC(C)C, 2014 Courtesy: the artist and Société Berlin (pp. 126-127)

ture traditional agriculture and food production by making algae a staple food (which of course also requires changing culture as well). And so our primary goal is to produce new food products made from various forms of algae to try to accelerate this process.

For me personally, the company comes out of my previous work with artificial flavors and mass circulation, and more recently my time working for Soylent and developing flavors and product prototypes for them, including Soylent Nectar. For non/food we want to eventually get into the realm of more experimental flavors and formats, but our first product will be pretty straightforward: non/coco, an algae-based alternative to chocolate that contains no cocoa ingredients.

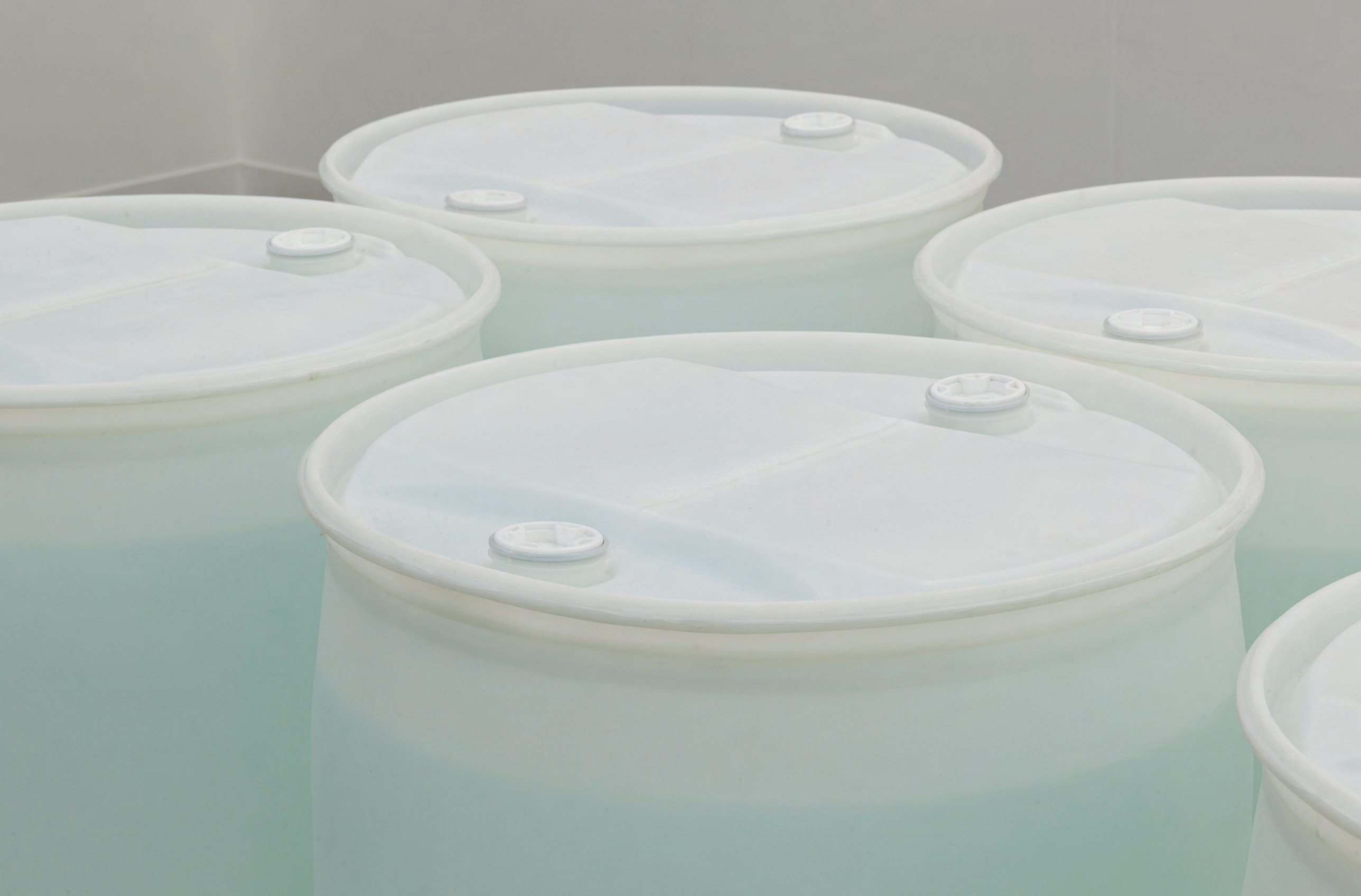
It has the consistency and flavor of chocolate, but it will be much more sustainable and will avoid the really terrible issues that are endemic to chocolate production: child labor, slavery, and deforestation, as well as the fact that with a shifting climate many cocoa crops are rapidly dying. Since it is made from algae it will also be high-protein and low-carbohydrate so it can counteract some of the more negative effects of conventional chocolate consumption.

Chocolate is interesting since it generally holds the top spot of most appealing flavor for a new product. But it is also a completely arbitrary flavor, like most flavors. Cocoa powder doesn't taste particularly great without a large amount of sugar, and it has to go through an elaborate, intensive process to make it ready for consumption. Its ubiquity today is largely a result of the legacy of colonialism, and one could easily imagine a world where it had been a different plant that was widely cultivated in the colonial era and that the average consumer has a preference for today. Chocolate is essentially an obsolete product, and so we figured we would start there. We're starting with the past, and then with subsequent products we will work towards building new flavors and formats that haven't previously existed.

CM **I foresee taste becoming a major aspect of the company's identity. I'm curious to hear more about your research process in flavor development, both artistically and professionally. When creating a new flavor, where do you begin? How might that intersect with non/food's future products?**

SR **A lot of my past work with flavors and fragrances, especially the ones I was producing primarily for art contexts, have focused on breaking down flavors into their primary molecular components or generating flavor formulations through systematic variations on a molecular structure. Generally prioritizing the structures of the component molecules (or often a single molecule) as the main determinant of the formulation, and considering flavors from a non-mimetic or non-skeuomorphic perspective where they don't have to try to reference or reproduce something in nature.**

I find this to be a very compelling way to think about flavors: every flavor is ultimately a collection of specific molecules in certain proportions so why not let the molecules themselves inform the process rather than only using these molecules to create facsimiles of the flavors



of pre-existing things. It also opens up the realm of possibilities a lot further so that it is possible to develop entirely new flavors and not just simply rehash versions of “strawberry,” “banana,” etc.

But working commercially – which I equally consider a part of my art practice – there is often a limit to how “new” you can make a flavor. The general public can have a strong aversion to any flavor that’s not already familiar. Dr. Julie Mennella, a pre-eminent flavor scientist, once told me that a person can’t know whether or not they like a new flavor unless they’ve had a chance to try it on ten separate occasions. The ingrained aversion to the new – in industry speak it’s called “food neophobia” – is so strong that very few companies take any risks in trying to develop a flavor outside of the most basic and familiar.

You can add to this the specific contemporary aversion to anything that seems “artificial” mentioned previously. In some of my flavors I actually try to highlight artificiality, or blur the line between something that tastes natural and artificial. I think an “artificial” taste could be a plus, people just have to be willing to try new things and to recondition themselves. And again artificial flavors are better for the environment so we should embrace them if only for that reason. (For example, consider the amount of roses that are needed to make one kilogram of rose oil. Then consider the amount of land and water needed as well as the amount of gasoline needed to power the farm and processing equipment that goes into that production.)

For non/food we definitely want to take risks with more innovative flavors and formats. But we will be introducing these more innovative products gradually, and building up a customer base and listening to their feedback. For me it’s kind of uncharted territory. In my previous work as an artist I never had to consider customer feedback. But it’s also very exciting because I’m optimistic that it can expand the conversation and the impact outside of the art world, hopefully having a positive effect on the sustainability of the food supply overall.

non/food informational diagram, 2017 Courtesy: the artist and non/food (opposite page)