**The Oil Show**

Inke Arns

> 'Take an average man, performing physical labour for 25,000 hours to produce the amount of energy that is contained in one barrel of oil. That barrel of oil, if it is pulled out of the ground in Iraq, can be pulled out of the ground for one dollar. You invest a dollar and you get back 25,000 hours of human labour. This is essentially free energy.'
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> **– Matthew David Savinar, lawyer, founder of lifeaftertheoilcrash.net**[1]

In late July 2010 I travelled for the first time to Nigeria. I had been invited to take part in a workshop with members of the Slovenian artists' collective Irwin/NSK at the Center for Contemporary Art (CCA) in Lagos. The incentive behind the workshop was the steadily growing (and still unabated) interest of Nigerian citizens in passports issued by the (fictitious) NSK State.[2] We landed around eight in the evening on Murtala Mohammed International Airport in Lagos. It was pitch-dark. Lagos is a city with an estimated 15 to 20 million inhabitants in one of the oil-richest countries on Earth (Nigeria is the eighth-biggest oil producer worldwide), but it has neither street lighting nor, as I found out later, a functional power supply system. Our hotel, as most houses in Lagos, was enclosed by a tall wall studded with barbed wire (or, alternatively, broken glass), and the courtyard accommodated two massive diesel generators providing electrical power. The noise was nerve-racking, particularly at night. We drove several times to Lagos Island, a huge offshore gated community sheltering the country's superrich: the local upper classes who get a share of oil revenues and the community of expats working for the big international oil companies. The three highway bridges linking the island to the mainland are guarded by heavily armed police. Real estate on Lagos Island is many times more expensive than in London, Paris or Tokyo, as prices are being fuelled by the oil conglomerates' seemingly limitless buying power. Companies such as Shell, Chevron, ExxonMobil and Total exploit the Niger Delta's colossal offshore reserves – with disastrous consequences for the environment and the region's 30 million inhabitants.

These consequences are manifest in George Osodi's photographs. Osodi is a Nigerian photographer who works for international news agencies. We meet in a restaurant on Lagos Island. Looking at the pictures he took in the *Oil Rich Niger Delta,* as the series is titled, one often has to guess whether they were taken in daytime or at night: due of the uncontrolled flaring of gas a permanent black veil of smoke clouds the sky and the earth to the point where they become undistinguishable. On this backdrop Osodi shows women, children, a village cut in two by a ten-lane pipeline highway. His apocalyptic images are reminiscent of Werner Herzog's film *Lessons in Darkness*, which documents

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[1] Quoted in *A Crude Awakening – The Oil Crash*, CH 2007, 94 min. (dir. Basil Gelpke and Ray McCormack).

[2] An extensive travel account can be found in Inke Arns, 'The Nigerian Connection: On NSK Passports as Escape and Entry Vehicles', in: *State of Emergence. A Documentation of the First NSK Citizens' Congress*, ed. Alexei Monroe, Leipzig: Plöttner Verlag, 2011.

the burning oil wells in Kuwait in 1991. The name Ken Saro Wiwa vaguely emerges from my memory. He was, as my subsequent research tells me, a Nigerian civil rights campaigner and writer who in 1989 founded the Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People (MOSOP), for which he was awarded the Right Livelihood Award (often called the 'Alternative Nobel Prize').[3] Among MOSOP's demands were the political and cultural autonomy of the Ogoni people, the regeneration of areas devastated by oil mining, and the participation of the local inhabitants in the revenues of the oil trade. In 1995 Saro Wiwa and eight of his fellow campaigners were executed by Sani Abacha's terror regime.

Travelling back to Germany I noticed that the newspapers were full with stories of the oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico. After what I had just seen in Nigeria, this sudden burst of attention seemed to denote a strange imbalance in the public's perception. The sinking of the Deepwater Horizon rig was of course a terrible accident, but "fortunately" it happened off the coast of the United States. In other words, it struck right where the Western world is most vulnerable. Otherwise chances are no one would have paid notice – as in Nigeria, where disasters of similar magnitude have been unfolding on a daily basis for decades. 'When tonnes of oil are spilling from a defunct deep-sea well off the Atlantic Coast of the USA, the whole world watches in outrage', says Alagoa Morris, a retired civil servant and environmental campaigner who is documenting the effects of oil production in Nigeria on behalf of the environmental organisation ERA. 'Every year [for at least fifty years, I.A.] we have witnessed at least one accident similar to that in the Gulf of Mexico. But who cares? These are quiet disasters.'[4] On my way back home I realised that such disasters and "accidents", whether quiet or spectacular, are in fact part and parcel of business practice in the oil industry (hundreds of other examples from various regions around the world support this assessment). This practice is driven by the world's continually rising thirst for oil. Having developed a full-grown dependency on oil in the course of the past hundred years, the global economy is however reluctant to face the facts, since this would mean acknowledging that oil, as a non renewable resource, is bound to disappear sooner or later.

'Keeping the world's dependence on oil as long as possible is important.'
**Fadhil Chalabi, former Secretary General of OPEC, former Iraqi Oil Minister**[5]

This plan has indeed worked out: 'Oil is used to produce fuel and diesel. But that's by no means the end of it. We also tread on it, chew it and rub it into our skins.'[6] This is how Dajan Roman describes

[3] The movement aims to achieve its goals without violence. To this effect MOSOP organised several demonstrations, some of which were remarkably successful. The oil company Shell, for instance, temporarily halted its operations on Ogoni territory after MOSOP had called for a demonstration in January 1993 in which more than half of the Ogoni population – i.e. some 300,000 people – took part. It was because of actions like these that the Ogoni territory was forcefully occupied by Sani Abacha's troops. See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ken_Saro-Wiwa (last retrieved on 15 October 2011).
[4] Quoted in Bartholomäus Grill, 'Verfluchter Bodenschatz', *Die Zeit*, 5 January 2011, p. 19.
[5] Quoted in *A Crude Awakening – The Oil Crash*, op. cit.

the magic stuff. Oil, which is currently cheaper than water, can in fact be used to produce pretty much any chemical substance. A substantial part of the world's oil production – around 70% – is used as a primary energy source and fuel for transport (road traffic [personal, public and freight transport], air traffic [kerosene] and inland waterway transport). But many consumers are unaware that petrochemicals form the basis of everyday goods and substances, among which fertilisers, herbicides, lubricants, plastics (injection-moulded products, rubber items, foams), paint, lacquer, solvents, synthetic resin, synthetic fibres for garments or carpeting (nylon, perlon), cosmetics, food additives (sweeteners, artificial flavours), chemical preservatives, drugs, washing and cleaning products, explosives, printer ink, photochemicals, insulating and water-repellent materials, asphalt … In other words, hardly anything is free from oil. It is difficult to imagine what would happen if oil were no longer available as a cheap resource. This would also have far-ranging consequences on worldwide food production, as David L. Goodstein, professor for physics at the California Institute of Technology, points out: 'There are 6.4 billion [today: 7 billion, I.A.] people living on the planet now, and most of them are reasonably well fed – and that's a consequence of what was called the "Green revolution" in the second half of the 20th century. The "Green revolution" consists in very large measure of fertilizing land with petrochemicals; fertilizers that are derived from petroleum.'[7] Without oil, current global food production levels could no longer be sustained. One dreads to even think about the repercussions this would have.

'Not one in 50, not one in a 100 of the people in this country have an inkling of the potential problem that we are facing.'

**Roscoe Bartlett, scientist, US Congressman (Republican), Maryland[8]**

Most people cannot imagine that (cheap) oil might one day no longer be available, forcing us to change our current lifestyle. It is precisely this lack of awareness of the problems facing us that worries Republican Congressman Roscoe Bartlett.[9] Opinions may diverge as to whether 'Peak Oil' – the point in time when the maximum rate of global petroleum extraction is reached – is already behind us.[10] But the fact that this moment, if it has not already occurred, is bound to happen very soon is hardly disputed among scientists.[11] Peak Oil also marks the point at which the production of

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[6] Dajan Roman, 'Was alles aus Erdöl gemacht wird', *20 Minuten online*, 2 June 2008, available at http://www.20min.ch/finance/news/story/19551666 (last retrieved on 15 October 2011).
[7] Quoted in *A Crude Awakening – The Oil Crash*, op. cit.
[8] Quoted in *A Crude Awakening – The Oil Crash*, op. cit.
[9] See also my interview with a worker in the Azoty fertiliser plant in Tarnów (Poland) in September 2011, available at http://hmkv-dortmund.blogspot.com/ (last retrieved on 15 October 2011).
[10] The Texan geologist Marion King Hubbert first formulated the hypothesis of Peak Oil in 1956. See Marion King Hubbert, 'Nuclear Energy and the Fossil Fuels', in: *Drilling and Production Practice*, San Antonio: American Petroleum Institute & Shell Development Co., Publication No. 95, June 1956, p. 22–7, http://www.hubbertpeak.com/hubbert/1956/1956.pdf (last retrieved on 15 October 2011), and Thomas Seifert, Klaus Werner, *Schwarzbuch Öl. Eine Geschichte von Gier, Krieg, Macht und Geld*, Deuticke im Paul Zsolnay Verlag, Wien 2005, p. 235–46.
[11] See the study of the German Bundeswehr on the subject of Peak Oil published in August 2010 (original document available at http://www.peak-oil.com/wp-content/uploads/2011/01/bundeswehr_studie_peak_oil.pdf) and revised and officially released in February 2011. 'Teilstudie 1: Peak Oil. Sicherheitspolitische Implikationen knapper Ressourcen',

conventional (i.e. easily accessible and therefore cheap) oil can no longer be increased and will subsequently even decrease. From this point in time onwards demand – particularly from the so-called developing countries China and India – will increasingly outweigh supply. This is when, due to rising oil prices, the production of unconventional oil becomes financially interesting. In an article in the German daily *Die Zeit* Marcus Rohwetter explains: 'The oil trade was never clean, but in deep seas, on the North Pole and in the great expanses of Canada it becomes really dirty.'[12] For Matthew David Savinar, a lawyer and founder of lifeaftertheoilcrash.net, this is a clear indicator that we have reached Peak Oil: 'You don't go to these areas unless you've used up all the good stuff.'[13]

Our energy demands are currently secured thanks to oil, a fossil resource for which there is no equivalent at the time being. The fact that the development of alternative energies is still in its early stages can certainly be traced back to the previously mentioned lack of awareness or misconception that cheap oil will always be readily available. To illustrate our dependence on oil and emphasise the pressing need to develop alternative energies, let me once more quote David L. Goodstein: 'If you wanted to build enough [nuclear power plants] to replace the fossil fuel that we burn world-wide today, which is ten terawatts, you would have to build 10,000 – I repeat: 10,000 – of the biggest possible nuclear plants. And if you did that, the world-wide reserves of uranium would be exhausted in one or two decades.'[14]

**The Oil Show**

*The Oil Show* is strictly speaking not an exhibition title but a description of the world in which we live. Our world is The Oil Show. This is a world in which, against better knowledge and despite clear signs of Peak Oil, our dependence on oil is continuously growing. We neither can nor want to quit using oil. We are hooked on the stuff. This is what has so far prevented the successful development of renewable, non-fossil sources of energy.

The exhibition *The Oil Show* brings together 15 contemporary artists whose work addresses the geopolitical, social and ecological consequences of our dependence on crude oil. Their attention focuses on regions such as the Niger Delta whose natural resources have been ruthlessly exploited for several decades – a fact which is hardly ever discussed publicly in the developed countries.[15]

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*Streitkräfte, Fähigkeiten und Technologien im 21. Jahrhundert*, Strausberg: Zentrum für Transformation der Bundeswehr, Dezernat Zukunftsanalyse, available at http://www.peak-oil.com/effizienzrevolution-nach-peak-oil/peak-oil-studie-bundeswehr/ (last retrieved on 15 October 2011).

[12] Marcus Rohwetter, 'An die Ränder der Welt', *Die Zeit*, 4 August 2011, p. 21.

[13] Quoted in *A Crude Awakening – The Oil Crash*, op. cit.

[14] Quoted in *A Crude Awakening – The Oil Crash*, op. cit.

[15] According to a study by the United Nations Environmental Program (UNEP) the environmental pollution in the Niger Delta is such that its regeneration would take 25 to 30 years and cost up to 1 billion US dollars. UNEP suggested the Nigerian government and the responsible oil companies make this amount available through a special fund. See 'UNEP Ogoniland Oil Assessment Reveals Extent of Environmental Contamination and Threats to Human Health', press release of

Straddling art and scientific research, the interdisciplinary approach that characterises the works in this exhibition aims to raise the public's awareness of the increasingly complexity of the world, the result of an ever more intricate web of global economic interests.

The exhibition analyses the effects of globalisation by following the trail of the Baku-Tiflis-Ceyhan pipeline, a huge construction project begun in 2005 and completed in 2006 which leads the oil mined on the shores of the Caspian Sea to the Black Sea (Ursula Biemann). It comments on the planned construction of the Gazprom Tower in Saint Petersburg in a Brechtian singspiel (Chto Delat?) and investigates the financial structure of *The World* in Dubai, an artificial archipelago in the shape of a map of the world (Christian von Borries). It travels to the Niger Delta, into the "Heart of Darkness", where a 'fierce war for oil' (*Die Zeit*) has been raging for nearly forty years (Mark Boulos, George Osodi), but also to the Japanese island of Hashima, the Egyptian oasis Al Qasr and the Texan town of Electra – places whose natural resources (coal, water, oil) have been depleted (Carl Michael von Hausswolff & Thomas Nordanstad). While the images from the Niger Delta – despite the (environmental) desolation they evidence – are imbued with a sense of desperate hope, embodied by the people's resistance and resolve to fight for their rights, the places documented by Von Hausswolff and Nordanstad seem to foreshadow a disaster, which these places simultaneously encapsulate in a condensed form: as witnesses of an accelerated modernity with its various stages of development – colonisation, economic boom, ruthless exploitation of resources, and eventually emptiness, desolation and decay. Werner Herzog in turn visits the battle ground of the first war that was solely fought for oil, documenting the burning oil wells in Kuwait set on fire by Iraqi troops who had occupied the country in August 1990. *Lessons in Darkness* is an apocalyptic film which not only reveals the traumatic devastations that war inflicts on nature and man but also illustrates the insatiable need of resources of our species. In the two final sequences – titled 'Life Without Fire' – fire crews are seen setting fire to wells they have just extinguished ('Has life without fire become unbearable for them?').

Several artists in the exhibition make use of cartography. In *Petropol,* for instance, the French Bureau d'Etudes charts the history of the global oil trade from the end of the Victorian age to the year 2002 via the First and Second World Wars. Their diagram resembles an absurd road map whose trails are traced by the geopolitical and economic interests of major countries and their oil companies. In *George W. Bush, Harken Energy, and Jackson Stephens, c.1979–1990*, Mark Lombardi maps with mathematical precision the political and financial connections between various actors which are generally held to be antagonists (some having even declared war on each other), and by doing so reveals the nexus of global politics and terrorism.

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the United Nations Environmental Program, 4 August 2011, available at http://www.unep.org/dnc/Portals/155/countries/nigeria/press_release_ogoniland_en.pdf (last retrieved on 15 October 2011).

Heath Bunting in turn makes a succinct intervention in everyday life by "updating" protest placards from 1989 still found on British motorways asking to 'BAN MOTOR CARS', next to which in 2003 he placed posters stating 'GLOBAL WARMING IS YOUR FAULT'. The Californian Center for Land Use Interpretation explores invisible oil production sites in urban areas of Los Angeles, one of the oldest and still largest oil fields in the United States, and while doing so discovers unexpected camouflage techniques and oil rigs in unlikely neighbourhoods. Natascha Sadr Haghighian's *...deeply__to the notion that the___world is___to the observer... (commited) (real) (external)* merges the artist's personal memories of the first 'Car-Free Sundays' in the German Federal Republic in 1973/74, implemented in the wake of the Oil Crisis, with the political implications of this crisis and the simultaneous development of conceptual art practices. Michael Mandiberg's *Oil Standard* consists of a plug-in for different web browsers which translates all US dollar prices on E-commerce websites into barrels of crude oil. A range of computer games in the exhibition – *Oil Imperium* (DE, 1989), *Oligarchy* (IT, 2008) and *Oil Rush* (RU, 2011) – provide players with the possibility to construct their own (albeit virtual) oil empires and learn a great deal about the oil business in the process. Last but not least artists are also drilling for unconventional oil on the site of the exhibition venue, launching an advertisement campaign for the rare resource (*DOTOILDOT*) and transforming the Dortmunder U, the former Union Brewery, into a gigantic oil refinery (UBERMORGEN).

A number of artists and exhibitions have recently addressed issues related to renewable energies, among which the touring exhibition *Zur Nachahmung empfohlen. Expeditionen in Ästhetik und Nachhaltigkeit* (Examples to Follow. Expeditions in Aesthetics and Sustainability) curated by Adrienne Goehler (2010), the three-day festival *Überlebenskunst* (Art of Survival) at Haus der Kulturen der Welt in Berlin (2011) and, most recently, *Nieuwe Energies* at Museum Boijmans van Beuningen in Rotterdam, which presents sustainable approaches in art and design. While all these manifestations are well-intended, they fail to expose the urgency of the problem. *The Oil Show* has therefore chosen a different approach, addressing the root of the problem by directing its attention to our unrelenting dependency on oil, which (unfortunately) cannot easily be replaced by other types of (renewable) energies. The availability of cheap oil over the decades has increased our dependency and delayed any decisive action towards change. *The Oil Show* is therefore more than an exhibition title, describing our everyday life as part of a global entertainment programme. And as they say in show business, while business is good, the show must go on!

English translation: Patrick Boris Kremer