

The Visibility/Invisibility of Oil

Alejandra Rodríguez-Remedi

workshop
visibility
invisibility
crude oil
Niger Delta
interdisciplinarity
holistic understanding
knowledge exchange

Within the context of the *Reflecting Oil Colloquium*, working group 2 set out to make an interdisciplinary contribution to the understanding of the (in)visibility of crude oil and its industrial infrastructure. The seven participants engaged in discussions about how oil is represented culturally and perceived socially, producing the texts below. These texts retrace the (in)visibility dynamic which characterizes crude's journey through the production chain: from its extraction to the flow of commodities into our consumer societies. Though these texts were written individually to reflect each author's unique perspective, they all connect to the project of the sole artist in the group, Nigerian photographer **George Osodi**, whose work documents oil's impact on the environment and peoples of the Niger Delta, Africa's most important oil-producing region. The region has gained visibility in part thanks to Osodi's provocative work, inviting those in the Global North to question the provenance of the oil we consume to fuel our lifestyles. The idea of individual texts gravitating around his photographic project emerged organically at the colloquium when he presented his work to the group.

Osodi's evocative images became a catalyst for participants to relate to oil's (in)visibility intellectually and emotionally.

Osodi has said that his highly aesthetic, beautifully framed photos seek to arrest people's attention, to connect them deeply with those underlying narratives of the region he grew up in. The photos brought an unforeseen creative dimension, recalling US sociologist Patricia Leavy's claim that the arts "can connect on an



Working group 2, George Osodi's presentation on the Niger Delta, *Reflecting Oil Colloquium*, University of Applied Arts Vienna, 2022

emotional level, can create micro/macro links so that we can look at one person's individual story and connect it to something much larger in our culture.”¹

Conversations at the heart of the group's creation of “micro” and “macro links,” as Leavy puts it, encouraged participants to share and learn from each other's perspectives. **Pit Arnold**, a reservoir engineer at the University of Leoben, shared his research on the topology of the pore spaces of rocks carrying oil, and his latest findings using 3D to visualize networks of paths and patterns as oil flows in a porous medium. Canadian environmental humanities scholar **Jordan B. Kinder** contributed his experience of the materiality of Athabasca's bituminous sands and his research on petrocultural imaginaries. **Simone Gingrich**, an Austrian social ecologist specializing in sustainability, contributed her expertise on social changes caused by industrialization, especially in terms of fossil energy and land use. Leoben petroleum geologist **David Misch** shared his knowledge of Austrian hydrocarbon provinces, his experience working with the oil and gas industry, his applied research on shale gas and oil, and his interest in technological solutions to alternative energies. Cultural theorist and science/technology historian **Benjamin Steininger** shared his knowledge of Austrian oil and gas as well as his theories about the place of oil as a hypermodern fossil substance in petromodernity. Italian architect **Arianna Mondin** contributed her expertise on how oil relates to space, shaping cities and our everyday lives, through a reading of Pasolini's *Petrolio*.²

In preparatory online meetings, that I led, the group's members got to know one another and learned about each other's perspectives. During these sessions, participants had spoken of the complex ambiguity of oil, connecting it to economic and political power. Societies, they argued, have not benefited equally from the economic growth resulting from fossil fuel use. Less developed parts of the world

are experiencing a slower transition away from oil and gas. At the outset, participants questioned what some perceived as an aestheticization of oil, a highly toxic substance, sounding a note of caution about the implications of a research project driven by artistic practice which indulges in subjectivity. However, the group identified in the project's multi-perspectival approach a meaningful effort to foster holistic understanding of the omnipresent yet elusive nature of oil, which they agreed is needed to tackle the challenges of just, sustainable transitions. Though participants spoke different "research languages" and held different understandings of research, they all, explicitly or implicitly, alluded to the value system underlying their own work, acknowledging its ethical dimensions and expressing appreciation for the chance to engage in interdisciplinary talks.

At this initial stage, the group proposed producing individual texts as an alternative to the original output format suggested by the project team (a single collaborative text, a format not everyone felt comfortable with). Conversations began about how these texts could be articulated to reflect interconnectivity *formally*, so that the pieces became an integrated whole. Mondin suggested the holistic structure of *Petrolito*, a novel composed of seemingly disparate notes, as a model to connect the group's individual contributions. Her suggestion evolved into a plan to write a *Petrolito*-inspired metatext, a task she herself undertook: an individual output where she deconstructs and reconstructs those "oil-spaces" visualized across texts.

From these discussions, a plan for the group's two days of collaboration at the colloquium was designed. It included activities to encourage exploratory and more focused conversations. A reader, collated by the project team in collaboration with participants, was a shared referent circulated to the group before the colloquium. It included Hans Peter Hahn and Jens Soentgen's 2010 article "Acknowledging Substances: Looking at the Hidden Side of the Material World"³ which fed into the group's reflection about oil's (in)visibility. Artworks by Logar and others were also included in the reader to draw participants' attention to creative methods of inquiry and thus set the grounds for informed discussion about "artistic ways of knowing"⁴ which emanate from the arts-based methodologies underlying the project. A key question propelling the group's discussions was: how can we approach oil's (in)visibility from our respective disciplines? Put another way: what do our respective disciplines offer to the understanding of oil's (in)visibility?

During the colloquium, the participants exchanged views about science and technology, the oil industry's infrastructure, consumer societies, political will, education, and more. Conversations took on what Mondin called a "mobile dynamic": feeling ideas (and participants) move as they adopted different perspectives. The last half-day of the colloquium, devoted to a plenary when all three participating groups gathered to offer insights into their work, gave this group an opportunity to present its reflections. This moment of introspection allowed participants to retrace their steps to make profounder meaning of the territory they had explored collectively over two days. It was clear that Osodi's photos, which offer at least two readings (an immediate one conveying the materiality and impact of the substance, and a symbolic one inviting multiple layers of meaning), had facilitated an attempt to build a narrative of oil's (in)visibility. The collective reading of the photos revealed narratives of colonial influence, power relations, social inequality, and corruption. That it was Osodi himself who led the narrativization of the selected photos, presented as an embodied experience of oil, made this participatory exercise yet more compelling. Wanting to give their outputs significance and coherence, the group envisioned Osodi's project as a thread tying their contributions together. There was also a recognition of the key role Osodi's artistic methodology played in facilitating knowledge exchange during the group's discussions—this proved particularly rewarding for the scientists in the group with little experience of working with artists.



George Osodi
Black Gold, 2015

While reflecting on how to summarize their work to date, the group thought it relevant to give insight into the scope of their discussions and work dynamic. It was agreed that the most effective way to communicate this to the plenary would be to select two images which visualized the art/science territory the group had explored and conveyed the role that images had played in igniting thinking. The group selected *Black Gold*, an Osodi photo from 2015, which he described as a holistic picture of the Niger Delta evoking the periods before and after oil, giving visibility to the substance and its impact on people and the land. The second visual was a 3D simulation of oil movement in the pores of a rock which Arnold had introduced in a presentation about his research. The group found this scientific visualization of the flow of oil to be especially enigmatic. *Black Gold* and the 3D simulation are thought-provoking germinal images which facilitated creative knowledge exchange. Participants wrote preliminary outlines of their individual contributions which were subsequently shared with the group to convey an idea of how they intended to navigate the common ground they had delineated at the colloquium.

After the colloquium, the participants finalized their texts, which became the primary source for Mondin's metatext. Written from an oil-as-space perspective, the metatext offers a horizontal and vertical reading of the group's individual contributions, unveiling a complex structure reminiscent of what she has theorized as the "architecture of oil." Mondin's nonlinear approach illuminates not only points of encounter between texts but also expressive points of diversion and paradox. Her metatext is a creative exercise in interconnectivity which encourages explorative engagement with the texts until a common site, "the rooms of a building" (in her words), is revealed where new understandings of oil's (in)visibility can be unveiled.

- 1 SUNY New Paltz, "Arts-Based Research Keynote Speaker: Dr Patricia Leavy," March 13, 2018, YouTube video, 26:43–26:55, <https://youtu.be/CJu4At61n2E?t>.
- 2 Pier Paolo Pasolini, *Petrolio* (Turin: Einaudi, 1992).

- 3 Hans Peter Hahn and Jens Soentgen, "Acknowledging Substances: Looking at the Hidden Side of the Material World," in *Philosophy and Technology* 24, no. 1 (2011), 19–33.
- 4 Patricia Leavy, ed., *Handbook of Arts-Based Research* (New York: Guilford Press, 2017), 13.