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Oil—The Substance Lubricating a Society Thirsty for Change

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Niger Delta
crude oil
delta operator
geology
ecosystem
energy transition

The Niger Delta. An art piece of nature that, with its anastomosing riverbeds embedded into a bright green landscape prograding into the blue of the Atlantic Ocean, has an almost surreal beauty. On the other hand, as portrayed by photographer George Osodi under life-threatening conditions, an ecological catastrophe so gigantic and overwhelming that even the incorruptible camera lens seems hardly able to convey a dirty truth that words would not do justice. Millions of liters of oil spilled virtually everywhere. Almost as if an expanding black hole would suck the color out of each and every tree branch, stream, pebble, and grass root to feed its never-ending appetite. It's not that the oil's deep black coloration and silky shine wouldn't also inherit a certain beauty in themselves. But disconnecting its visual elegance—for lack of a better description of its intense visual presence—from the drastic consequences of its harmful appearance, is unthinkable. Adding animals to the picture—even humans, toddlers, elderly women baking traditional bread and cake over gas flares set up a long time ago by global players in the oil industry, young, apparently strong and healthy men working in rudimentary refineries and following the promise of long-desired wealth and social status—makes for the plot of a disaster movie way beyond Hollywoodesque exaggeration. And yet the pictures show nothing but the plain reality of a society addicted to turbo consumption. A reality in which we all play our part. A reality that seldomly becomes as graphically visible as in the Niger Delta, yet existing in similar ways all over the globe—besides the realms of those wealthy enough not to be held responsible for their

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George Osodi
Ogoni Boy, 2007

actions. Could anybody look at these sceneries and not be embarrassed about the destructive power of industrialization—or whom- or whatever to blame?

The fluvial delta owes its name to the eponymous triangular-shaped Greek letter—an obvious geometric match when looking at the Nile Delta, which was first named accordingly. However, in technical language, the delta operator also means change. First introduced by the Swiss mathematician, physician, and astronomer Leonhard Euler,[1] the meaning of delta as a measure of property variations—for example a differential in temperature or pressure—is now one of the first things to be brain-washed into the heads of aspiring youngsters in technical universities. Delta means change. Full stop. Did Euler, who also had a profound interest in geography, see the less obvious connection between the delta operator and the fluvial delta—both being associated with constant change?

The not so simple truth about geographical deltas is that, by far, many of them do not actually resemble the Greek letter's

triangular shape. It is all down to the contrary forces of the fluvial system, transporting sediment from the continent and depositing them into the delta, and the open marine system, which tries to erode its way deeper into the delta plain during high tide or times of rising relative sea level.

Throwing coast-parallel wave activity in the mix, deltas may form all kinds of complex shapes beyond the overly simplified concepts of a basic geology class (or an enthusiastic climate movement, for that matter). Not only the forces of nature, also the uncountable variety of aqueous and terrestrial species claim their part of the diverse and sensible ecosystem that a delta represents, being fed by nutrients that are transported towards the delta by continental waters, laying foundations for growth of life, from microorganisms to large mammals. Last but not least, the delta is a place of oil. Rocks that are formed from the deposited sediments in deltas may be the source of oil (and, more frequently, gas), and, even more importantly, may also provide the subsurface reservoirs in which these natural substances are accumulated. In the Niger Delta, the oil is trapped very near the land surface, making it extraordinarily extractable—and, as evidenced by George Osodi's pieces *Black Gold*[2] and *Ogoni Boy*,[3] the region's omnipresent demon. Due to it being less dense than water, oil has an almost unstoppable physical tendency to force its way to the surface, which could almost be seen as metaphorical to Western societies' hunger to exploit it from the subsurface for constant growth. One could be tempted to find an excuse in its physical nature—as if oil would demand its constant consumption. For sure that would be a rather stupid argument—although not too far away from the perception of oil in an industrial era when the black gold was a symbol of success and stability. And for the wind of change.

Nowadays, the zeitgeist makes us believe that oil and gas are not part of us, or nature, but is rather the fuel for a cruel and immoral mafia of super-corporations so powerful that it may seem as if their acting would be completely decoupled from any democratic rationalities. That even the slightest doubt regarding the absolute evil of oil and its invisible sidecar CO2 is plain backwardness or driven by purely egoistic motives of those on the *winner's side*. And these prominent voices are not generally wrong—it could not be clearer that the lifestyle of a minority of Earth's human population, still a considerable number of people, is an ecological dead-end. Yet still we decide to buy our BMWs, MacBook Airs, and e-scooters—ok, sure, you are not a part of we, but obviously too many of us are. Because the world is not as black and white as these voices often tend to make us believe, but way more than fifty shades of grey. Yes, we will need a transition away from fossil fuels and more global social equality, but the truth is also that, as of today, there are no such concepts—real concepts, not simple wishful thinking—that do not come with a price that may or may not be equal to or higher than what has already been paid by the poor majority. Shutting down an oil well here and a tar sand extraction site there is a noteworthy achievement, but not a driver for global change, as getting rid

of oil and gas will create a new delta. A gap that will not be filled solely by reducing energy consumption in rich societies or by counting on apparently cleaner technologies—or whatever may be on the wish list of those with a strong belief in clear visions and simple truths.

"In this bright future, you can't forget your past," sings Bob Marley in "No Woman, No Cry." May the future answer if "No Oil, No Cry" is a possibility, and at what price we can make it a desirable reality for the majority of us. For now, oil is still a neutral chemical substance composed of carbon, hydrogen, oxygen, and traces of a few other elements. For now, young men in Nigeria still seek their way into their bright future in the polluted streams of the Niger Delta.

For the slightest chance to change this status quo for the better, we will need to use all the tools and knowledge that only our surf on the oil wave could help us develop.

1 Leonhard Euler, *Institutiones calculi differentialis [Foundations Of Differential Calculus]*, vol. 1 (St. Petersburg: Academiae Imperialis Scientiarum Petropolitanae, 1755), 5.

2 George Osodi, *Black Gold*, 2015, from the series *New Niger Delta*.

3 George Osodi, *Ogoni Boy*, 2007, from the series *Oil Rich Niger Delta*.