Crude (1859 -)

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In 1859, the first drilled oil well began production in Titusville, Pennsylvania. In 2017, there are more than 900,000 active oil and gas wells across the United States. As industry expanded, so did its consequences, creating an interlocking, layered system of natural ecology, landscape, human condition, industry, and political influence, all working at great benefit to some, and great cost to many. Crude (1859 -) focuses on these interconnected relationships, referencing this system through a dialogue between form, material, and experience. By creating an immersive sculpture, I seek to communicate kinesthetic and psychological experience through artistic means, working towards a higher awareness of the forces that push and pull the world.

I was raised to respect the land of my grandparents: use, but not harm. Manage invasive species, plant trees, make hay, and raise animals, but never abuse. When I was young, my great uncle taught me to rest my head at the base of the tall, tall red pines. He told me to watch them sway in the wind and listen to the soft creaking of their motion. My father continues to show me the careful handling of the sugar maples—prevent disease, make sure to not leave a wound. Only take a portion of their sap, and allow them to heal. My mother cares for rivers. She clears the dead logs so the water may flow wide enough for boats, but not change its course, and she removes trash so both the visitors and residents may enjoy the water's health. My grandmother taught me another side, spending 30 years teaching and advocating for strong and just environmental policy. She showed me not just the ecological side of environmentalism, but the political side as well.

From this background, I have consistently been drawn back to making artwork with an environmental focus. *Crude (1859 -)* is a sculpture that addresses the layers of balance—human, environmental, and political—that I have been taught about through my upbringing. Through a dialogue between form, material, and experience, the work references a system composed of the interacting and inseparable layers of natural ecology, human condition, industry, and government that surround the extraction and consumption of petroleum. To discuss the form and concept of my work, this paper will navigate through an exploration of conceptual basis, inspiration and historical connections to the work of other artists, and connect these ideas to the ways in which the materials and structure of *Crude (1859 -)* seek to accomplish its exploration of the aforementioned system.

At the scale of roughly 8 x 8 x 8 ft, *Crude (1859 -)* is composed of three elements: a suspended topographic form, a metal pipe that stands around five feet tall beneath the topographic form, and a looped audio track that is played from within the pipe.



Figure 1: Installation view of Crude (1859 -)

The material of the topographic form is glycerin soap, melted and poured in multiple thin sheets, molded into their own unique forms, and suspended to compose a larger structure that references a landform[1]. Glycerin soap was chosen for its relatively low environmental impact (in comparison to waxes or resins), and its materiality and appearance—like that of light through water or ice. Individual organic soap forms make up the landform, which spans the height of two feet to roughly ten feet, providing space beneath in which the viewer can enter. The pipe is

[1] In this paper, I use the terms "topographic" and "landform" interchangeably in reference to the same element of *Crude (1859 -)*. This is not because the meaning of the terms is interchangeable, but because in the context of this paper each meaning is applicable. Topography refers to the representation of geography specifically in the context of a map. Landform is a term denoting a feature of a landscape, implying a more experiential encounter, rather than the perceptual encounter of map-based topography. Because the form referenced in *Crude (1859 -)* speaks to both experience and the language of maps, the terms will be used interchangeably in this paper.

situated within the landform, allowing the viewer to approach it, playing the audio track, which reads timelines of oil spills and campaign contributions in a loop, underlaid by a soft drip. The dialogue between the materials is one of visual and material conversation between the landform, the rusted metal pipe, and auditory element. Through this material conversation and the experiential aspect of *Crude (1859 -)*, I address the ecological/social/political/industrial system surrounding petroleum through the language of art.

What I refer to as the "system" surrounding petroleum can be understood as the network of interaction and influence of money, politics, power, industry and environmental condition that leads to ecological benefit/burden and human cost/gain, all supporting one-another in a cycle of profit and loss. Even examining the current and historical conditions of the United States alone proves this system to be extremely complex. Because of direct profit from oil leases and political incentive to remain semi-autonomous in supply, there is a vested U.S. governmental interest in the continuation of oil activity propelled by political—and at times personal—benefit. This can and does lead to regulations, subsidies, exemptions, and decisions, such as where to build pipelines and rigs, that all lead to inadequate protection for vulnerable peoples and cost to the environment (Osofsky et. al., 5). Despite the knowledge that petroleum is the largest contributor of environmental pollution and emissions, it is still heavily relied upon on individual, industrial, and governmental levels. Taking this interconnection of influences, a fair and effective addressal of oil consumption or oil industry practices must not only be environmentally focused, but also focused on an environmental justice approach to minimize human health risk and the unfair distribution of burden on minority populations.

To begin addressing such a system in my work and strengthen its conceptual development, I have consulted the work of Helen and Newton Harrison and Hans Haacke. In particular, I have looked towards the Harrison's *The Lagoon Cycle* and Haacke's *Condensation Cube*. Both of these works address the political, social, and environmental conditions of their

respective subjects. As inspiration artists, they demonstrate important theoretical and historical basis for my own aims.

The Harrison's *The Lagoon Cycle* is a work composed of seven cycles, and contains drawings, photographs and written dialogue between the characters of Lagoonmaker and Witness. As the cycles progress, the Lagoonmaker and Witness speak narratively about their experiences and dreams as they attempt to raise Sri Lankan crabs on a progressively larger scale. The dialogue between the Lagoonmaker and the Witness in the very first cycle sets up two points of view. The Lagoonmaker aspires to take a species from an environment, and raise it elsewhere, perhaps as a way of creating a sustainable food supply and profit. The Witness sees the human/socio-political conditions of Sri Lanka as its people have been impoverished by modernization and foreign influence, and generally takes a wider view, pointing out the faults in the Lagoonmaker's plans as they grow more and more ambitious. This recognition of both viewpoints, that of possibility and progress, and that of struggle and loss, is important to the entreaty of the second half of the cycles, beginning in the 5th. The speakers say:

> Pay attention to the flow of the waters
> *Pay attention to the integrity of the waters flowing…*
> Pay attention to the discourse between
> earth water and men interruption
> is an outcome
> *Pay attention to the meaning of the nature of*
> *such discourse and the nature of the*
> *meaning of interruption After all*
> *a discourse is a fragile transitory form*
> *An improvisation of sorts*
> And anyone may divert a discourse of any
> kind into another direction if they do not

value its present state

Pay attention to changes of state (Harrison, 82)

And later "*Pay attention to the cost of the giving of advantage and disadvantage*" (85). Thus the work asks the viewer not only to consider their dreams, thoughts and conversations, but how those may interact with the world around them. Writing about the work, Michel De Certeau says "It is remarkable in that it escapes a political reasoning that deals only with the relationships of force between human groups. It displaces that kind of politics. It returns to more primitive relationships, those concerning social balance in a biological environment, and it does so in a way that inscribes the relationship to nature in the network of human condition." (Harrison, 23). This addressal of social balance within the environment is one of the ways in which the Harrison's work addresses political concerns. Other work of the Harrison's is also political in the sense that it actively explores problems of countries and localities and proposes solutions.

Hans Haacke is likewise political, but of different character. In his work, Haacke is critical, uncovering those people, institutions, or conditions behind the problems or topics of his focus. He addresses the idea of systems, both as components of the social and environmental reality, and as a term for works of art that change and respond to their environment, relying on all of their components to function (Haacke, 102). His *Condensation Cube* is one such work. A 12" x 12" acrylic cube containing water and hermetically sealed, the cube seems to be a closed system, isolated from its surroundings. However, it is in reality an open system, the water condensing, dripping and reacting to the conditions of its environment (whichever gallery or museum it is shown in).

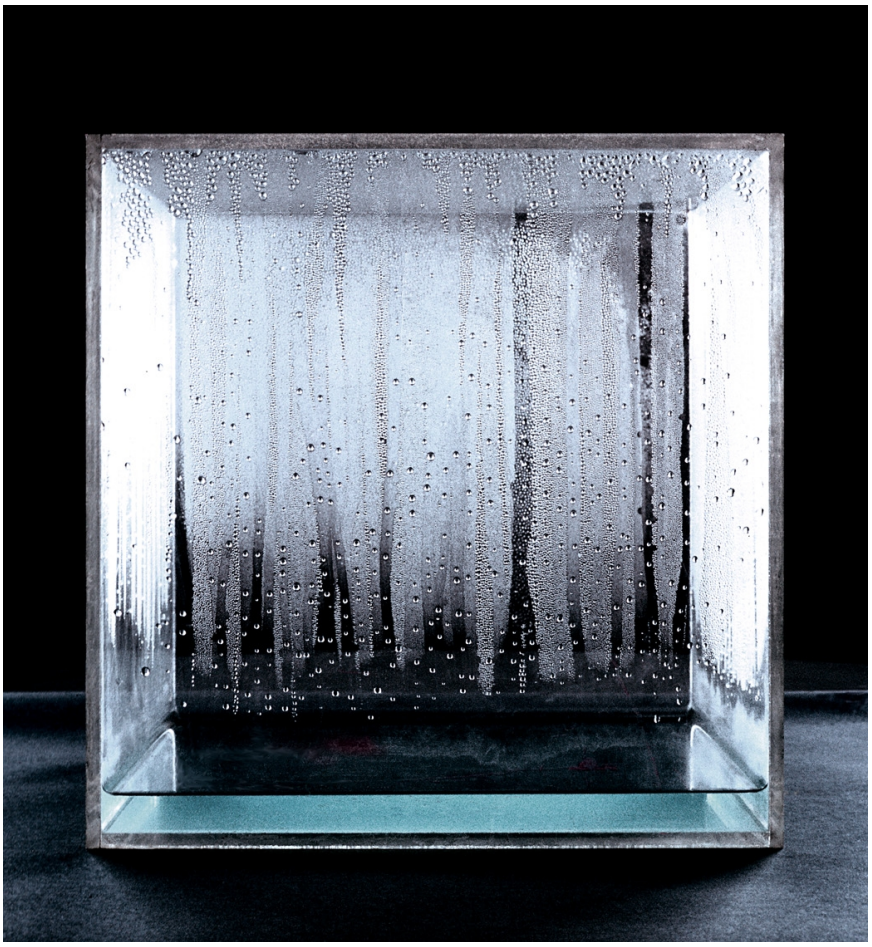

Figure 2: Hans Haacke, Condensation Cube, 1965.

Not only does this work reveal instability of the supposedly stable environment of the art institution it rests in—a commentary on the preservation of artwork—but it also provides visible evidence of environmental response to both human and non-human action (Weintraub, 70). It is a work that relies as much on its materials as its interaction with the presence and absence of viewers. As such, *Condensation Cube* is itself a system, relying on each of its parts to function, while simultaneously referring to larger social and environmental systems of the gallery.

In both *Lagoon Cycle* and *Condensation Cube*, I have found inspiration for the ways in which broad systems can be referenced through art. In my own work, I haven taken the approach of using layers to address the constantly shifting landscape of natural, political and

social influence implicit in the network of oil and environmental harm. To do this, *Crude (1859 -)* contains both physical and metaphorical layers relationally situated to create a performative environment using the language of installation art. To begin addressing this, I will speak about the largest layer/component of the work: the suspended landform.

Composed of multiple suspended organic forms, the landform is a topography that seeks to speak not to one specific location, but to the idea of both landscape and seascape.



Figure 3: View of the landform in Crude (1859 -).

A general sense of landform combined with the translucency of the material lends ambiguity to the form. It does not outright mimic specific natural forms, but references them. Its form could evoke a hill, a cloud, or perhaps a wave. This ambiguity between land, sea and landscape can

be connected to the work of Maya Lin, an artist with visual and conceptual ties to the likes of Marcel Duchamp, the Earthworks of Michael Hiezer, and the monumental minimalism of Richard Serra, among others (Maya Lin). Writing specifically about Lin's *Water Line*, an installation of a wire drawing of an underwater mountain range, John Beardsley states Lin "sees the distinction between water and land as artificial, allowing us to ignore the destructive impact of pollution, resource exploitation, and climate change on the underwater environment." (Andrews, 100).



Figure 4: Maya Lin, Water Line, 2006.

Whatever occurs on land will inevitably impact the sea, especially in the context of petroleum activity[2]. Therefore, by failing to distinguish between landform, seascape, or even atmospheric

[2] For example, deforestation or heavy fertilizer use may affect soil quality, causing increased pollutants or erosion. Eventually soil and/or its contents makes its way into waterways, flowing

form (such as a cloud), *Crude (1859 -)* can address its topical system in both offshore, onshore, and atmospheric contexts. Additionally, by creating a topographic landform, I use a piece of vocabulary of mapping used to understand land and sea.

Topography, and its sister bathymetry (the mapping of depth in water) is a way of understanding place and form in maps, which partition the world through imaginary boundaries and borders. Maya Lin writes in her book boundaries that "maps are inherently political—how we choose to present the world geographically will inevitably alter our perception of it…"(6:27). A topographic landscape becomes how we visualize the world, but seldom is it experienced in such a way outside of maps and images. The artificial creation of geographic or political borders creates separations or barriers in places where they do not physically exist. Thus a divide is created between the way landscape and geography is conceptualized and the way it is experienced. Lin's work addresses this divide both by depicting water and landforms in undifferentiated fashions, and through the experiential movement through and around her works.

In my own work, *Crude (1859 -)* emphasizes this consideration of the divide between perception and experience in a similar way, relying on a combination of the form and scale of the topographic structure. The suspended form is large enough that it can be experienced in a semi-immersive, kinesthetic way. The viewer is now able to experience the materiality of the sculpture from below, in addition to above and from the sides. This movement of the body into and around the work, and the interaction created by such motion asks the viewer to engage with the work not simply on a visual level, but an experiential one as well.

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towards the sea and impacting aquatic life, which may decrease the profit of fisheries, leading to decreased income for fishermen and so on and on.



Figure 5: A viewer of Crude (1859 -) enters the work and listens to the audio from the pipe.

Therefore the landform is both perceived as a representation of space, and as an experiential space. By creating a topographic landscape that is at a large enough scale to walk through and around while still retaining the character of a model or map, the boundary between perception and experience of landscape is explored. This element is conceptually important because of the gap between the conceptual knowledge of environmental harm and the power structures/institutions behind it and a physical encounter with such a system[3]. *Crude (1859 -)* seeks to create a physical encounter with a landscape like one could find in nature, situated in

[3] For example, one could conceptually realize the reality of environmental harm and poverty inflicted by the *Deepwater Horizon* BP oil spill of 2010 through exposure to news coverage of the event and studies/reports in the years after, but someone who is not in a geographically affected area would never experience the immediate and lasting health, economic, community and environmental loss caused in Gulf of Mexico coastal communities.

such a way that cannot be divorced from an encounter with references to power structures and history of environmental and human loss.

In addition to scale, time becomes integral to the structure and concepts behind *Crude (1859 -)*. To accurately reference a constantly evolving system, the work cannot be completely static. The element of time is invoked in multiple ways throughout the work, including the topographic form. The topographic form is made from multiple pieces, each unique, and suspended to create a composite form. This use of multiples additionally begins to speak of time. By creating an accumulation of repeated forms, I reference the accumulation of time and labor behind the making of each. Their suspension into a composite form integrates the labor and time behind each of the individual pieces into a form greater than its parts. To better understand the role of repeated objects and multiples, I looked to the works of Ann Hamilton, and in particular, her installation *indigo blue*.



Figure 6: Ann Hamilton, indigo blue, 1991/2007. Installation view from Places with a Past: New Site-Specific Art at Charleston's Spoleto Festival.

First installed in an old auto repair garage for the 1991 Spoleto Festival (Places with a Past: New Site-Specific Art) in Charleston, South Carolina, the installation featured a mass of 14,000 pounds of blue work clothing. Each article was part of a worker's uniform, and this accumulation of objects becomes “an enormous accretion that spoke of time, repetition, and the touch of numerous hands” (Heartney, 214). By amassing as many articles of clothing as she did, Hamilton created a type of monument whose physical encounter invokes both the presence of the labor behind creating the installation, as well as the individual histories of the uniforms and those who wore them (Jacob, 72). Behind the mass of clothing, a person was seated at a table manually erasing the lines of books from back to front. This act was not intended to erase history, but to create and reveal a new history of manual labor and personal action, as well as create a conceptual link to history of life and labor reference by the blue workers’ uniforms. As a viewer entering the installation, the first encounter was the blue clothing. After walking around, one would see the attendant at the table, their action of erasing becoming clearer upon approach. This experience embodied the unfolding of knowledge through movement and time.

Likewise, the repetition of form within the landform of *Crude (1859 -)* may invoke the notion of time and the idea of expanse of place. The many components of the whole each have their own individual form, echoing that of their composite. Each of the individual pieces has its own unique curvature, individually echoing the form of their greater whole. By creating the sculpture this way, each piece becomes both a singular form referencing a natural landform, and something that is crucial to the larger whole. This creates something that relies on each individual part to make a functioning whole, much like the balance of an ecosystem, the survival of a community, or the maintenance of political power.

The work of Maya Lin also becomes relevant in this discussion of time and place. In many of her installations and landworks, time is just as important a material as rock, water, earth, or wood. Writing about Lin’s work, John Beardsley states that “[s]pace is experienced through time; time is measured by movement through space.”(89). By creating works that ask

movement of the viewer through and around the work, Lin places the viewer in the environment of the work. They experience it through movement and through time, their experience becoming an integral part of the artwork.

In such a way, Lin uses installation as a means to speak not just to the visual eye or the mind, but in the language of the body. As one of many artists within a larger history striving to make visible the invisible dynamics of the world, Lin's use of installation allows her work to do this in an immersive sense. To describe this, Lin writes that "the work may speak to the whole body, may have temperature, sensation underfoot, smell, sound and tactility, as well as sights. Installation could be described as an attempt to speak to the mind in the languages of the body: space, substance, systems, sensation" (Beardsley, 62). In *Crude (1859 -),* I use some of the language of installation art, inviting movement through and around the work. In this sense, *Crude (1859 -)* could be considered a performative, or theatrical, sculpture as described by Rosalind Krauss in Passages in Modern Sculpture.

According to Krauss performative sculpture can be defined by the way in which it intends to theatricalize the space it is situated in. In the distinction between art and theater, theatricalized art may use audio or lighting to theatricalize its space. However it relies as much if not more on the movement /unfolding of the sculpture through time, and the participation of the viewer, who, by act of moving through and around and encountering the work, becomes a participant in the work. Their presence in the work lends the sculpture meaning by pushing the static time of a sculpture into a changing and evolving experience. Both the unfolding of knowledge through movement in Hamilton's *indigo blue*, and the movement of the viewer through space in the work of Maya Lin, as well as her focus on erasing barriers through experiential encounters, achieve this notion of theatricality. Krauss gives other examples of the methods a sculpture may amplify this theatricalization of a space, including the use of lights to alter the atmosphere of its place, and the use of audio or video to "connect separate parts of a space into an arena contrapuntally shaped by performance"(204). *Crude (1859 -)* theatricizes

its space in both the participatory, movement based aspect of the viewer, but also through its sound element, which connects the experiential and visual aspects of the work to its more pointed concept. The audio of *Crude (1859 -)* connects the plane of the floor to that of the the suspended landscape, connecting the figure of the metal pipe with the landform through its content. Its source, a found metal pipe, connects the metaphors of land and industry found in the audio and landform through its materiality.

In its materiality and form, the pipe references the equipment and industry of oil drilling and transportation, the rusted patina and signs of use creating a heavy, harsh contrast to the transparent and airy elements of the landform.



Figure 7: Detail views of the pipe in Crude (1859 -).

The pipe is also surfaced with layers of dripped soap, thereby referencing the landform materially, mimicking the accumulation of form and the arrestment of movement found in the suspended landform. The audio also bridges the divide between these two elements by addressing each of their respective focuses, relaying information in a type of oral history that

draws together the layers of the work, connecting them through interweaving a political, monetary, and environmental history of the distribution of benefits and burdens.

Again, Ann Hamilton was influential in this aspect of my work, using audio a similar way in her 2010 installation *the event of a thread*, located in the Park Avenue Armory.



Figure 8: Ann Hamilton, the event of a thread, 2012-2013.

A massive white cloth was suspended in the cavernous space, manipulated by the motion of swings and bracketed on either end by the acts of reading and writing. On the western end of the cloth, two readers were seated, reading from a scroll. Together, they vocally wove their readings, speaking to a caged flock of pigeons, their reading then transmitted to viewers of the work over radio, emanating from paper bags. Hamilton speaks about this element of the work in her artist statement, writing that this act is the address of “one species bound by gravity to another whose capacity for flight provokes irreconcilable longings in the other; part explanation, part impossible communication” (1). This connects the audience on the swings, the motion of

the cloth, and the elements of reading and writing, thereby drawing together the threads of the installation. Hamilton writes that "Words allow us to travel while the tactile keeps us present; a rhythmic exchange of reeling out and pulling in that is also the swing's pendulum" (2). Each action becomes part of a collective action, contributing to the experience of the work in different, interconnected ways.

The audio of *Crude (1859 -)* seeks to connect the experience and layers of the works together in a similar way. The track begins with the sound of dripping, followed by a voice narrating a timeline of major oil spills from 1967-2010. The information of this narrator is limited to date, location, amount, and type of oil (for example, "January 23, 2012. Port Arthur, Texas. 462, 000 gallons. Crude."). When this narrator reaches the date of 1990, a second voice joins in, listing the campaign contributions of the oil and gas industry, first as a sum and then divided by party, for each election cycle between 1990 and 2016. Eventually the audio loops, a cycle the refers to the future continuation of the past patterns.

The essentialization of the information included in the audio is not meant to imply that it contains all of the facts of each year, event, or situation, but rather refer to this absence of detail. In particular, the timeline of oil spills emphasizes this absence. By only relaying date, location, amount and type, the actual circumstance and details of the event are omitted. How did this happen? What was the impact upon the environment and the communities nearby? Was anyone held responsible for any of the spills? This absence mimics both the reality that there often was a literal absence of meaningful response or responsibility in many of the oil spills mentioned. Additionally, I hope absence of detail leads the viewer to wonder about the content between the gaps of the information and dates, and will perhaps pursue the answers themselves. This search for knowledge would provide a more meaningful realization of the reality of the environmental, political, industrial, and social systems surrounding petroleum.

The ecological, geological, human, political, and industrial layers of petroleum extraction and consumption are inextricably tied to each other. Like my father showed me, if you tap too

hastily or take too much sap, the maple trees will scar and weaken. Like my mother taught me, if the river fills with trash, the life within and along it will suffer. If it becomes too crowded with boats and visitors, the life within and around it will decline. As my grandmother taught me, it is not enough to focus is on the loss of wetlands or the death of birds. You must focus on why these things are happening—who benefits and who hurts—and what can be done to stop it. Understanding this balance between community, land and sea, politics and industry must be the foundation for conception and action towards a more sustainable and just future. Like this connectedness, each element of *Crude (1859 -)* is tied together by material, experience and concept, relying on both its parts and its audience to reach towards such an understanding. Through movement and experience, I work to bridge the gap between conceptualized landscape and environmental harm and their reality and experience. In keeping with the eco-political and social system of inspiration and critique, I hope my work will bring into question the role of the observer and participants through a dialogue between form, material, and experience. There is power in experience, just as there is power in knowledge. I hope that *Crude (1859 -)* has provided both.

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