CRUDE ILLUMINATION: A CRUDE OIL ART INSPECTION

Elia Vargas, Oakland, CA, U.S.A. Email: ecvargas@ucsc.edu.
Danielle Siembieda. Email: danielle@siembieda.com.

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Abstract

This statement details Elia Vargas’s hybrid research art practice and examines alternative histories of crude oil through the social practice of “Art Inspector” Danielle Siembieda. Using art inspection as a creative framework for understanding the entangled nature and culture of the product Crudoleum, invented by American mystic Edgar Cayce, Siembieda evaluates Vargas’s crude oil art practice through an assessment of its environmental impacts. The performative inspection speculatively and empirically examines assumptions about the materiality of oil. The purpose of this statement is twofold: to analyze the constitution of Crudoleum, contextualizing it within a history of other petropractices, and to continue Vargas’s ongoing critique of the perspective that fossil fuels are ontologically determinate by humans.

Historical Context

Oil is present historically long before its potentiality as fuel becomes the governing principle of contemporary life practices. The first commercial U.S. oil well began operation in Pennsylvania in 1859. The hydrocarbon paraffin, an overlooked substance of combustible potential and medicinal properties, is a crucial agent in this event. Paraffin wax was identified by German mystic/chemist Karl von Reichenbach in 1830 [1]. Kerosene, a paraffin synthesis, was the first major Western industrial application of oil, transforming home illumination, previously largely from whale fat. The shared presence of hydrocarbons in human blood and in oil mobilized competing narratives by industrialists and spiritualists [2].

Before kerosene, salt miners sold medicinal oil ointments [3]. Salt miner Samuel Kier, known as the “grandfather” of the American oil industry, built the first oil refinery. Medicinal crude oil was common to indigenous Americans, the ancient Chinese and others dating back 4,000 years. This statement considers Crudoleum: Pennsylvania Crude Oil Scalp Treatment, a product imagined—partially consistently with paraffinic chemistry—by American mystic Edgar Cayce. Danielle Siembieda’s performative art inspection examines Elia Vargas’s hybrid work Crude Illumination (Figs 1, 2) and tests the product Crudoleum.

Artist

Crude Illumination, exhibited at Southern Exposure gallery in San Francisco for the 2018 exhibition Thekla, curated by Lauren Marie Taylor, is a crude oil and light projection installation. In it an analog overhead projector enlarges an acrylic container filled with crude oil and dry ice. Dry ice is frozen carbon dioxide and sublimates from a solid to a gas at -109.3 degrees Fahrenheit. As the overhead projector illuminates the transformation of the dry ice, carbon dioxide slowly sublimates into the atmosphere—climate change in the gallery space.

The work argues that oil is a light practice: a type of media. More than being about oil, the work is the transformation of oil into the atmosphere, illuminated (and materialized) by the projector. The history of the overhead projector reveals an unsurprising link to the military industrial complex. There are no clear histories of the overhead projector; this task remains in need of further media scholarship. Some sources point to its early development by French optical scientist Jules Dubsocq in the 1880s [4]. Defunct web forums have suggested that it was first used as a tool for police departments to enlarge criminal fingerprint records. It is difficult to substantiate this, but the overhead projector was central in standardizing and modernizing World War II training procedures.

Crude Illumination is a light projection installation—the entire spatial arrangement matters. It is a deep study of and materialization of hydrocarbon change: a plurality of metaphor and material entanglements. As a metaphor, it resembles oily seepage contaminating arctic glacial shelves. It excavates a media archeology of projection. It figures oil as the inscription of solar light. Most importantly, it actualizes light-oil carbon transformation in the atmosphere.

Inspector

The Crude Oil Art Inspection of Vargas’s studio practice took place in late 2019. This was the Art Inspector’s first inspection in which crude oil was used rather than traditional art materials or materials used in construction or fabrication. Vargas’s practice raised an altogether new question: Is using crude oil more toxic than other studio materials, many of which derive from oil? How can such a question be answered? The Inspector’s conventional assessment includes: (1) the environment in which the artwork is produced; (2) the number of trials or practice iterations; (3) personal care and safety of others; and (4) disposal of materials. These categories were assessed using basic site observation, questioning of the artist and observation of work performed.

In the Art Inspector’s experience, artists primarily use materials purchased at home improvement stores or arts/crafts retailers. Common consumer products come with regulated safety sheets and material safety certification information; this is not so with Crudoleum. While this inspection was the first involving crude oil as the primary material, many oil derivatives are used in the life cycle of artists’ materials. Cellulose nitrate, used in a broad range of art production from resin casting and adhesives to late-nineteenth-century film, is a common example [5].

The onsite inspection started with a visual observation of the studio settings. The first site identifier was ventilation. Vargas’s studio featured opposing windows and a garage door he could open. Other studio identifiers included waste disposal, safety materials such as proper respirators, gloves, fire hazards and material storage. While the studio would have benefited from upgrades to precautionary and disposal systems, the artist’s use of hazardous materials was limited and handled safely. Prior to the inspection, the frequency of crude...
oil and dry ice testing was a primary concern. Dry ice should not be used in a closed environment. The handling of such materials, including acquisition, transportation, duration and disposal, would raise alarms with frequent use. However, Vargas used the crude oil and dry ice infrequently, such that long term effects of handling them were insignificant. Vargas performed a recreation of this work for the Inspector to observe. The circumstances of the environment are important for the context of the inspection findings. During the inspection, Vargas used proper handling and other precautions including gloves and ventilation.

**Artist**

Baar Products Inc. are the official reseller of “Cayce Care” products such as Crudoleum, the oil source for *Crude Illumination*. Cayce imagined the Pennsylvania crude oil scalp treatment during a trance state. He claimed sweet crude can regenerate hair because it is rich in paraffin. During a reading at the Warshawsky home in Detroit, Michigan, in 1935, he prescribed crude oil as a scalp treatment for hair loss:

(Q) What causes the falling out of the hair, and what should be done to prevent it? (A) This is a lack of an activity through the glands that are secreting from the system the elements necessary to make for activity in those portions of the thyroids. . . . Those portions . . . would be stimulated by a massage . . . with properties that aid the scalp circulation; such as a small quantity of the crude oil [6].

During the years 1918–1920, Cayce started his own oil prospecting company, Cayce Petroleum Inc., to divine the location of oil wells and use the profits to fund his teaching institute. Many oil prospectors had already requested psychic readings by Cayce to locate wells, a common practice at the time. Despite the penchant to dismiss Cayce’s use of crude oil, its primary use, from Constantinus Africanus (c.1087) to Georgius Agrícola (c.1555), was medicinal [7]. Hydrocarbons remain a common ingredient in pharmaceuticals today.

**Inspector**

The inspection began months before the studio visit, with a lab analysis of Crudoleum. Initial requests for Material Safety Data Sheets were sent to Baar Products. Other retailers who distribute crude-derivative products such as motor oil typically have these on hand. Since Crudoleum is sold as a health and beauty product (overseen by the Occupational Safety and Health Administration) rather than an art material or home improvement product (overseen by the Occupational Safety and Health Administration), the material transparency for health and safety is inequivalent. A health and environment consultant helped to determine the appropriate petroleum lab. Petroleum labs are not prepared to address unconventional products and creatively driven processes (see online supplemental Appendix 1). This difficulty in testing illuminates the knowledge gap between what materials are made of and how they are tested.

After deliberation, FOI Laboratory was chosen. It took roughly a month to receive results after sending a sample of the crude oil scalp treatment (see online supplemental Appendix 2). The primary results indicated a “hydrocarbon based product, similar to unrefined crude oil. No additional additives present.” FOI, however, only provided the Fourier transform infrared results, not the gas chromatography results, despite receiving payment for both. These results confirmed the product’s labeling as 100% crude oil, presumably extracted from Baar Inc.’s own wells in Pennsylvania and Tennessee. With the basic composition of the substance known, the Inspector referred to the Center of Disease Control’s (CDC) studies on crude oil and volatile organic compound exposure [8]. The CDC study on rats exposed to VOCs from crude oil found significant physical effects on the cardiovascular and respiratory systems. The Inspector would recommend minimal use of this material with continued protection. It is essential that the crude is not disposed of by pouring into groundwater but by collection into a hazmat disposal bin collected by hazmat waste management.

During the inspection, Vargas also discussed his work *Oil Rituals for the Future #6*, a paraffin wax and nylon installation exhibited in *Anatomy of Oil* 2018 at Gas Gallery, in Los Angeles, curated by Ceci Moss (2018), as well as various performances involving pouring the Crudoleum crude oil onto his body. There was concern that a performance involving washing the hair of an audience member with Crudoleum put the audience member at risk. This performance was conducted once. If it were to be repeated frequently, questions regarding the disposal of crude as well as audience and artist health would require further testing.

**Conclusion**

The aim of this short experiment has been to provide an introduction to what is a much deeper critical practice of refiguring crude oil beyond the conventional understanding of a fossil fuel made for human activity. *Crude Illumination* brings attention to the specific medium of oil in new ways. This experiment also illuminated gaps in knowledge and material transparency between oil-based manufacturers and scientific testing meant to disclose chemical and organic compounds that affect how crude oil is used and understood. An expanded history of oil reveals alternate possibilities for the substance and why open-ended thinking about it is not only a speculative matter but carries practical importance.

**References and Notes**