

*Oil's Well That Ends Well: Appropriation as
Social Critique*

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-Abstract-

Modern American civilization is a culture of oil. The discovery of this resource and its subsequent use as fuel radically changed almost every aspect of American life, and yet we collectively fail to acknowledge the ominous future unraveling as a result of our reliance on this vanishing resource. My unconscious participation in the cycle of extracting, refining and combusting this finite resource has propelled me to consider the extent to which this substance has fueled my lifestyle. While there is a general awareness of the fate that awaits our dependency on oil, this concern hardly bothers us on a day-to-day basis. My aim as an artist is to address a wider, non-art audience by distorting icons from the golden age of oil. To do this I have fabricated a fully functional coin-operated pony ride in the shape of an oil pumpjack. My intent is not to persuade people to forsake their cars for bikes, but rather to encourage viewers to consider that if current trends continue, the problems that face our culture now will only worsen for the coming generations.

-Introduction-

In an age of digital representation and mass media, the function of symbols has gained significant power over an audience well versed in this dialectal vocabulary. Art practice has always been about the interpretation of visual information, but the proliferation of mass production and media has created a language of loaded signs that are known on a national scale. The arts have adopted this new language as a reflexive tool of critique, and in doing so, has begun to address the role of art outside a context of its own making. Like Hot Wheels cars or Barbie dolls, art mirrors the values and beliefs of its intended consumers. Objects designed for children are especially telling, as their expected purpose is to inculcate beliefs and behaviors that help the child become a member of society. Turning these images and objects around and presenting them as art displaces their original social function and imbues them with a new purpose as a lens to reflect on our culture.

Using forms from my childhood, I have invented a readymade that comments on the oil culture of America. *Oil's Well That Ends Well*, a kiddie ride in the shape of an oil pumpjack is a strangely logical machine, residing at the confluence between industrial icon and commercial kitsch. Nostalgic and dated, the ride seems made for children, yet the sources speak to older generations, echoing the passage of problems from one generation to the next.

-Industrial Readymades-

In order to understand the implications of constructing a kinetic sculpture with obvious references to industrial and kitsch icons, it was necessary to understand how commercially produced objects have in the past functioned as art. Inevitably this led me back to the peerless work of Marcel Duchamp and his readymades. It's debatable when exactly the term "readymade" came to connote an entire way of art practice, but Duchamp had been creating them for two years before his famous *Fountain* (1917) revolutionized art. Readymades were the ultimate rejection of the artist's hand, and emphasized the artist's idea over the actual object on display. Many of the readymades involved puns and jokes, in titles and through visual contradictions. One such work, entitled *Traveler's Folding Item* (1916) (figure 1) presents an ordinary Underwood leather typewriter case on a narrow stand. The work contains a sexual joke arising out of the brand name "Underwood" on the typewriter's cover, referencing the objects similarity to a woman's skirt while alluding to what might be underneath, tempting the viewer to glance under the empty leather case.¹

This Dadaist strategy of humor enabled the artist to treat nothing as sacred, skewing notions of what constituted art and how it should be presented. An object became a readymade when the artist chose that form to convey an idea. This opened

¹ The combination of male and female gender expectations adds a comic uncertainty to what one might find when looking underneath the "skirt."

the door for almost any object deemed art to be considered as such due to the assorted connotations people inherently apply to objects. In effect this also allowed art practice to begin to relate to wider society by providing the audience with references to the consumer culture that created these products. However, this was almost a century ago, and contemporary artists have subsequently utilized the readymade as a way to deconstruct the relationship between art and societal concerns.

One artist who explored the function of the readymade in relation to everyday life was Dennis Oppenheim (1938-2011). Oppenheim's sculptural works from the 1980's until his death in 2011 are prime examples of industrial readymades – objects removed from their original utilitarian role and recast as symbolic objects. As metaphors, they speak of the complexity of society and its support structures, often echoing the unspoken anxiety regarding rapid industrialization. More akin to installation than sculpture, much of Oppenheim's work during the 20-year period from the 1980s until 2000 was inspired by industrial architecture and machinery. Individual mechanisms combined to fill spaces, provoking feelings of claustrophobia and danger. If these machines seemed dangerous, then what of the minds from which they were born? Oppenheim establishes a direct link between the authoritative and abstract forms of industry and the mysterious intricacies of the human mind, through poetic and cryptic titles referencing his thought processes. Works such as *Impulse Reactor, A Device for Detecting, Entering and Converting Past Lies Traveling Underground and in the Air* (1980) (figure 2) and *Way Station Launching an Obsolete Power (A Thought Collision*

Factory in Pursuit of a Journey) (1980) (figure 3) unite this industrial vernacular with the artist's own mental notes. Oppenheim overwhelms the viewer with the complexity of interacting mechanisms; as a result the individuality of each component becomes lost, much like an individual amidst the forces of industry. Constructivist and Minimalist forms appear in old steel air ducts or in arrangements of conveyor belts and galvanized metal, while the more recognizable forms of industry such as smokestacks and conveyor belts demonstrated that these objects did not have an artistic origin. Through his appropriation of industrial forms, Oppenheim implicated wider society, addressing a collective dysfunction arising from the growing environmental concerns of over-industrialization.

As art began to comment on broader society, objects and images taken directly from consumer culture were seen as having as much symbolic value as any work of art. This practice, called appropriation, eliminated any distinction between high art and popular or commercial art. Thanks to the media and national corporations, emotions and recognition associated with these symbols resonates beyond the walls of the art institution, in the collective memory of the American public. Presented as art in an institutional context, kitsch imagery becomes a critique, of wider culture, of social norms and practices, and of the institution of art itself.

-Critical Appropriation -

Appropriation is inherently a political act. As a process that decontextualizes imagery that surrounds us, appropriation yields new perspectives and understandings of the original objects and allows art practice to address everyday life. Appropriation acknowledges that no art exists in a vacuum; the work's meaning is constructed from the collective knowledge of wider society. Despite having origins in the readymades of Duchamp, appropriation became a staple of artists directly responding to the culture they lived in from the 1960's forward. The pop artists used this commercial imagery to demonstrate the power of seriality to transform images into icons, using products of the media as readymades. While not overtly political, much of the work from this movement relied on mechanical reproduction to idealize mass culture and production, addressing the similarities between advertising and high-art. Ultimately this signaled a transition in the role of art in society from contemplative objects absorbed in their own history to socially reflective works that became a looking glass into the artist's culture.

The work of Hans Haacke (1936-present) is a prime example of art being applied as a tool of introspection to better understand the role of art in wider society. Working in a manner similar to an investigative journalist, Haacke is a master of appropriation. His practice reveals the art institution's underlying system of support, and validates the behavior of the artist as analyst. As art historian David Holt points out, this new artist

was “a rebel and social critic” his art, “primarily a form of political rhetoric.”² This was a cause for concern for museums showing Haacke, as nothing was safe from critique.

For example, the multi-media sculpture *Metromobiltan* (1985) (figure 4) implicated the mutual relationship between the oil giant Mobil and the Metropolitan Museum of Art, demonstrating ties between business interests and the art institution. The entire work consisted of appropriated images and objects that were arranged to show how commercial interests contradicted the supposed politically neutral museum. In another, earlier show, *Mobil Observations* (1981) (figures 5 & 6) Haacke assembled a press release and series of sculptures and prints that subverted typical oil industry media and advertising. The ambiguity that arose from Haacke’s appropriation of Mobil logos and quotes undermined the visual authority that characterized business imagery, questioning its supposed validity by twisted imitation. In fact, the sculptures and press release were half-truths, with real quotes from the parties involved, displayed as they would be in typical news releases. There was no hiding the obvious satire in these works, due to the fact many of them were original publications placed in an art setting. As a demonstration of the power of context, the political implications spoke for themselves when subjected to the scrutiny of the art institution. Haacke himself acknowledged the powerful role appropriation plays in the reading of political art when addressing his use of minimal aesthetics and materials. With respect to *On Social*

² Holt, David K. "Postmodernism: Anomaly in Art-Critical Theory." *Journal of Aesthetic Education* 29.1 (1995): 85.

Grease (1975), a series of cast aluminum plaques of quotes from business executives regarding art, he said, “they look as if they would be at home in the lobby of corporate headquarters or in the boardroom. Transplanting them from that imagined context into an art gallery can be devastating.”³ Despite the serious nature of Haacke’s work, humor still plays a large role, as evidenced in many of the titles of his artwork. For example, the title of the work *Metromobiltan* is a satirical summation of the situation, a simple pun that reveals the connection between the objects. This approach has its roots in the political wit of the Dadaists and their linguistic games. As a creative technique, simple satire presents a strategy for dealing with issues that are highly polarizing, offering the audience an immediate reaction that leads to more subtle conclusions.

Appropriating political imagery and subject matter in an artwork is a slippery slope that can direct the artist to lofty aspirations from single-perspective opinions. Art that immediately confronts the viewer with a political statement elicits narrow analysis and little inner reflection. Depending on the viewer’s beliefs, the artist would either be preaching to the choir or being dismissed immediately when taking a firm stance for or against any contested topic. However, with the application of humor and satire, an initial reading of the work is offered that ultimately invites more questions than it answers. Moreover, satire offers a common ground of comicality that the audience can initially

³ Grasskamp, Walter, Molly Nesbit, and Jon Bird. "Yve-Alain Bois, Douglas Crimp and Rosalind Krauss: A Conversation with Hans Haacke (extract)." *Hans Haacke*. London: Phaidon, 2004. 121. Print.

appreciate and understand. Only with contemplation does the work become critical of the sources it juxtaposes. This is necessary to politically motivated art because the viewer must arrive at his or her own conclusion and feel compelled to act after grasping the implications. This technique has shaped the fabrication of my sculpture towards a more politically neutral and commercial aesthetic that initially masks the pressing-issue of the future of fossil fuel consumption.

In addressing oil as a political or economic topic, taking any firm stance is a risky operation. The problem posed by our dependence on oil remains just as pressing, regardless of how any political party acknowledges it, yet to take a side results in a corresponding dismissal by the other. Consequently, a symbol of hope for one group can be a symbol of despair for the other. Currently, this is where the oil pump resides - as an image of industrial prosperity and freedom from foreign energy and conversely as a symbol of environmental pollution and destruction. Appropriating symbols that inspire a range of associations, the oil rig-kiddie ride relies on the viewer to have his or her own opinion, and to then re-examine that opinion when reminded that our children are the ones who will ultimately be most impacted by our decisions.

-Oil's Well That End's Well-

Oil. Seldom does one word evoke such a myriad array of emotional, political, and personal responses. Yet this is the world we live in, and oil is the substance that has been driving us since the industrial revolution. Oil's application to commercial, economic, political and environmental aspects of western society has propelled human actions to a level equal to that of nature, so that our mistakes are now on a par with natural disasters. As a participant in this supply and demand economy, I am complicit in the continued exploitation of fossil fuels to support my daily comfort. Despite the media attention that surrounds our oil dependency, there remains a general malaise between concern for the environment and the pragmatic energy needs of society. This is also true of the relationship between the lofty aspirations of art and its ability to engage wider audiences and problems. In both situations, there is the intent to do well; yet mainstream application proves difficult to properly address the underlying dilemma. In art, kitsch presents a solution to this dilemma by incorporating aspects of popular culture, making it more accessible to audiences outside of an art institution. By referencing these objects that exist outside of the gallery I utilize their subjective connotations to prompt introspection on the viewer's part.

For many people, myself included, kiddie rides are a nostalgic reminder of simpler days when the promise of a penny for the pony ride was a sufficient bribe to incite good behavior while the grown-ups shopped. It represents what feels like a better

time, a comfort arising from the oblivious innocence of a child, free from the worries of the future. But these pony rides were not built solely for the amusement of children; they also served a legitimate function, as a way to increase business by having children nag their parents into shopping at a certain store.⁴ As a commercial tool, the rides were moneymakers in their prime, pulling in new customers, bringing back old ones and possibly generating a small profit from their use. Prevalent as these rides were from the 50's through the 70's, they eventually faded from their pride of place outside almost every local grocery store, and now appear only randomly, often at small or older stores, generally looking worn out and tired. Damon Carson, the owner of the only kiddie ride refurbishing company in America⁵ acknowledges that, "the golden era of kiddie rides is over," yet they, "have cult appeal in America. For half a century, kiddie rides have captured pop culture in miniature."⁶ Their continued existence demonstrates that they hold a certain nostalgic charm, worth keeping even if children riding it are few and far between. Presented adjacent to a kiddie horse ride, the iconic pumpjack appears as an abstracted version of the original ride, and its weight as a cultural symbol reflects the same sense of waning nostalgia as the kiddie ride.

⁴ Indeed, the cashiers at my local grocery store gave out pennies to children shopping with their parent to be used in the rides on the way out.

⁵ Consequently this is the same company that the coin-box and fiberglass saddle on the actual sculpture came from.

⁶ Arellano, Kristi. "Interview: Damon Carson." *The Denver Post*. N.p., 14 May 2006. Web. 28 Jan. 2013. <http://www.denverpost.com/business/ci_3818152>.

Invented in 1925, the oil pumpjack quickly became the newest and most popular oil extraction tool in the United States.⁷ Previous inventions were inefficient and prone to mechanical problems, but the new pump was so well balanced and produced such consistent results that it dominated the industry. Consequently, the machine was so widely deployed that it became an icon of the vast means of production that kept our country moving. Located within miles of almost any given town in rural America, the simple machines became a ubiquitous part of the western American landscape, as iconic as cowboy hats and tumbleweeds. In many cases, the wells represented the introduction of economic prosperity to otherwise desolate plains, and symbolized the widespread industrialization of the American West. Moreover the jacks personified this mechanization with their simulacra to a preexisting icon of the region: the horse. The up-and-down rocking action of the walking beam were reminiscent of the motion of a galloping horse or bucking bronco. Even the counterweight "head" on the end opposite the motor was formally called the horsehead and the cable that entered the ground the bridle. Presently, the pumpjacks are commonplace in rural areas, and it isn't unheard of for people to go out and actually ride the pumps. Most are slowly rusting away, though

⁷ Over 200,000 of the units have been sold according to the American Oil and Gas Historical Society. Wells, Bruce. "All Pumped Up - Oilfield Technology." American Oil & Gas Historical Society, 7 Feb. 2013. Web. 28 Jan. 2013. <<http://aoghs.org/technology/all-pumped-up-oil-production-technology/>>.

there still exist vast fields of the units around towns like Electra, Texas which claims to have over 5,000 machines running in a 10 mile radius.⁸

From this prosperous beginning, the pumpjack has fallen from its place of pride to become an eyesore for many local communities, barely producing enough oil to warrant running. As oil has become harder to find, the pumps have increasingly found sustained use in low-production wells known as “stripper wells,” constituting almost 75% of the oil wells in America today.⁹ Currently, most pumpjacks are used in areas producing less than 15 barrels a day. Despite this, these wells still account for some 275 million barrels a year, or 20 percent of U.S. produced oil.¹⁰ These once plentiful wells are an indication of a resource that is running on empty. The decline and resulting abandonment of these machines also represents a significant loss of money, both through unrecovered oil left in the ground and the loss of business to the area. As they rust away, the pumpjacks are no longer an iconic silhouette on the horizon, but a graveyard of days come and gone. It makes evident the fact that oil has a substantial weight as a cultural symbol as well as an economic resource, and that no matter how we begin to wean from our dependence on oil, it's not going to be easy by any measure.

⁸ Pruitt, Bernadette. "A Fading Town's Liquid Legacy: Once-thriving Electra Hopes 'Pump Jack' Title Brings New Fortune." *Dallas Morning News* 23 Sept. 2001. Print.

⁹ Anna, David. "Ultra-low Cost Well Monitoring Could Keep Marginal Oil Wells Active." *DOE - Fossil Energy Techline*. U.S. Department of Energy, 19 Jan. 2005. Web. 28 Jan. 2013. <http://www.fossil.energy.gov/news/techlines/2005/tl_well_monitoring.html>.

¹⁰ United States of America. Interstate Oil and Gas Compact Commission. *Marginal Wells: Fuel for Economic Growth 2010 Report*. Oklahoma City: IOGCC, 2010. 13. Print.

As an artist in America, the future of oil is of great concern to me. Oil has fueled the first car that I drove, warmed the house I grew up in, and I've used its byproducts in my own art practice. The work of photographer Edward Burtynsky has allowed me to visualize the alarming impact of oil on the world around me (figure 7). Indeed, most Americans have only briefly seen the complicated distilling columns of a refinery while speeding past on the highway, or a solitary pumpjack toiling away in some empty field. Yet these operations look like scale models in comparison to the landscapes that Edward Burtynsky (1955-present) has been photographing for the last decade.

Traveling throughout North America, Burtynsky has documented the profound impact oil has had in transforming the global environment and culture, from the expansive oil extraction fields of Belridge, California (figure 8) to vast refineries located in fields all over the world. In his photographs, the lone pumpjack is no longer a prosperous icon of industrialization, but a swarm of locusts, each extending its long proboscis into the ground, draining every last drop of this precious resource. The photographer's introspection of oil weaves several smaller photo projects into a larger narrative that connects oil production to American culture. In many respects, Burtynsky implicates the audience as the devotee of this system, by photographing the vast highway networks of American cities and the numerous events dedicated to the internal combustion engine. The documentation of these events and places "articulate a secret truth" as curator Paul Roth points out, "largely because they give shape to our dread, to

a suppressed realization of what our lifestyle has wrought.”¹¹ The photographs only present what is actually happening, leaving the audience to form their own opinion after seeing the facts. This political neutrality has informed the clean aesthetic of my work as it demonstrated the power of presenting issues ambiguously, without the ego of the artist.

Despite the industrial and commercial aesthetic of *Oil's Well that Ends Well*, the fabrication has ironically been done entirely by hand (figures 9 & 10). Thanks to funding from the Undergraduate Research Opportunity Program, the kiddie ride started out a little over five months ago as mild sheet steel, stock metal forms and a set of blueprints. The sculpture is fabricated in a professional manner that looks more commercially produced as a result of the experience I've gained working with metal over the past three years. The limited visual presence of the artist's hand makes the work more like a readymade, and the appropriation more convincing. No longer just a one-of-a-kind object on a pedestal, the work gains legitimacy through the imitation of mass production. The scale of the work also situates the piece within plausible dimensions of a coin operated kiddie ride, an actual pumpjack and even a small horse. With the addition of a coin box, fiberglass saddle and powder-coated color, the piece even functions exactly like the child's ride. This is fundamental for the work to act as a satire of modern day sensibilities regarding oil consumption.

¹¹ Burtynsky, Edward, and Paul Roth. "Essays." *Burtynsky: Oil*. Göttingen: Steidl, 2009. 167-69. Print

The work of contemporary artist Chris Burden (1946 – present) offers a similar approach to the use of children’s toys as satirical works of art. Burden is probably best known for his 1971 performance piece *Shoot*, in which the artist was shot in his left arm. However, his most recent work reflects a keen sense of cultural awareness and introspection. Burden’s sculptural work has increasingly employed the potential of children’s toys as a microcosm of present day industrial and social production. In his work titled *Medusa’s Head* (1990) (figure 11) Burden utilized readymade train sets to visualize the immense industrial systems that mine and transport resources. Existing as a giant, 14-foot diameter sphere cut up by miniature mining outfits and crisscrossed with a maze of train tracks, *Medusa’s Head* was in Burden’s own words, “a metaphor for a world engulfed in its own technology.”¹²

In a more recent work, *Metropolis II* (2010) (figure 12) Burden once again returns to the readymades that are children’s toys to speak about broader society. A terrifying and exhilarating scale model of a fictional urban network of highways and skyscrapers with over a thousand toy cars circulating on its multi-leveled streets, *Metropolis II* is a reflection of modern life. Burden finds the potential for the toy cars to become the very systems and objects they mirror, while still retaining their original function. As a result, Burden attracts a wider crowd to the museum, creating dialogue with a non-art

¹² Charlotta Kotik, “Chris Burden: Medusa’s Head” (New York, Brooklyn Museum, 1991), flyer accompanying the lobby installation of the work. Quoted from: Burden, Chris, and Peter Noever. *Chris Burden: Beyond the Limits*. Wien: MAK-Österreichisches Museum Für Angewandte Kunst, 1996. Print.

audience. But this conversation is not a debate, and the work is not meant to be overtly political. The artist presents a system that entertains, fascinates, and overwhelms the viewer, but does not present an opinion of it. Instead, it relies on the inherent spectacle of the work to function as a satire of current society.

Like the work of Chris Burden, *Oil's Well That Ends Well* is in effect a toy. Painted in primary colors (figures 11 & 12) to appeal to children and functioning like any other coin-operated ride, the rideable pumpjack is aesthetically independent of a political slant. However, titled and placed within an institutional context, the symbols that it contains speak of real world implications and the debate concerning the future of oil. In this role, the title functions as a catalyst for introspection, a simple pun of the common saying "all's well that ends well." Normally justifying the means to an end, the altered statement references the long history oil has had in America and the inevitable decline of fossil fuel supplies. Implicitly political, the title simply reminds the viewer that this resource is not infinite and its extraction comes at a cost. Additionally, the functionality and choice required to make the ride move also becomes a political statement that the viewer themselves make. The audience funds the metaphorical pumping that occurs when the ride is turned on, therefore their role in the continued extraction of oil becomes clear. This real-world functionality¹³ and symbolism take the ride from the realm of pristine art object and back into everyday life. It incorporates the subjective connotations

¹³ Video can be found at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aL5vy82UqMc>

inherent in the icon of the pumpjack with the commonplace and nostalgic associations of kitsch. The aesthetic perfection and lightheartedness of the actual sculpture mask the social criticism implied by the title, a reminder that the problems of society do not disappear when entering the timeless space of a white-walled gallery.

The adage, “All’s well that ends well” is not an absolute statement. Neither an acknowledgement of failure nor a sign of victory, it is a simple reflection of past, present, and future. It is a suggestion and a reminder that effort can still be made and that challenges and setbacks can ultimately benefit the overall outcome. The juxtaposition of these words in regard to America’s oil consumption may not solve economic and environmental problems, but it challenges the state of normality that reassures us that we can continue indefinitely using oil and its various by-products.

-Images-



Figure 1: Marcel Duchamp. Travellers Folding Item. 1916.

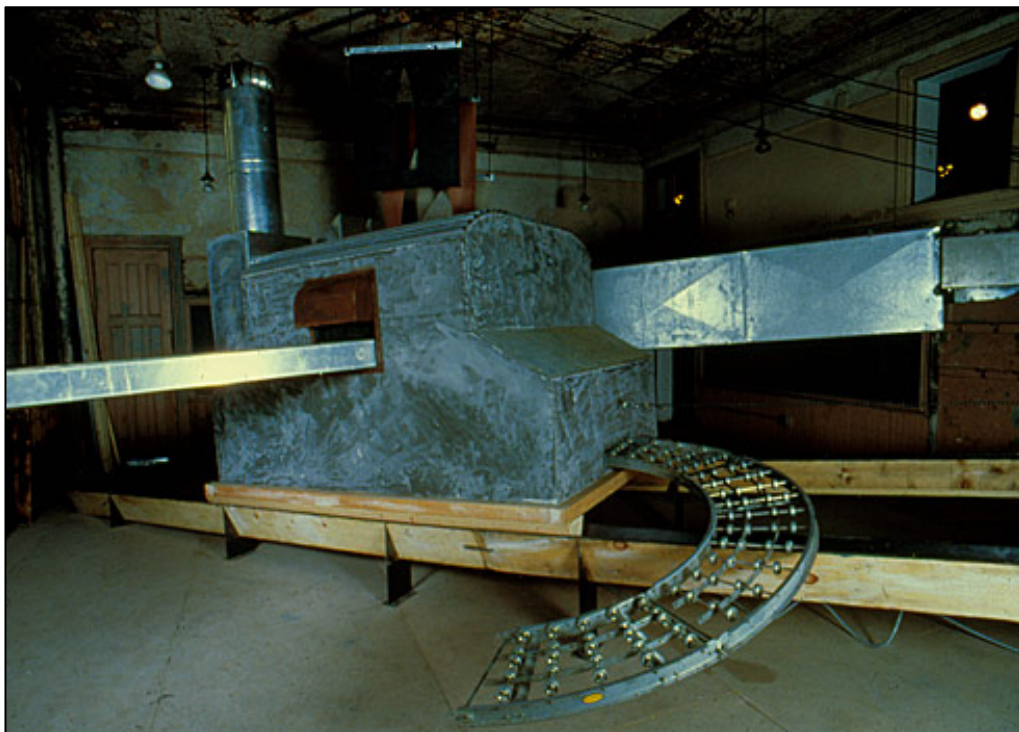


Figure 2: Dennis Oppenheim. Way Station Launching an Obsolete Power (A Thought Collision Factory in Pursuit of a Journey) (A Clip in a Rifle - A Weapon). 1980.

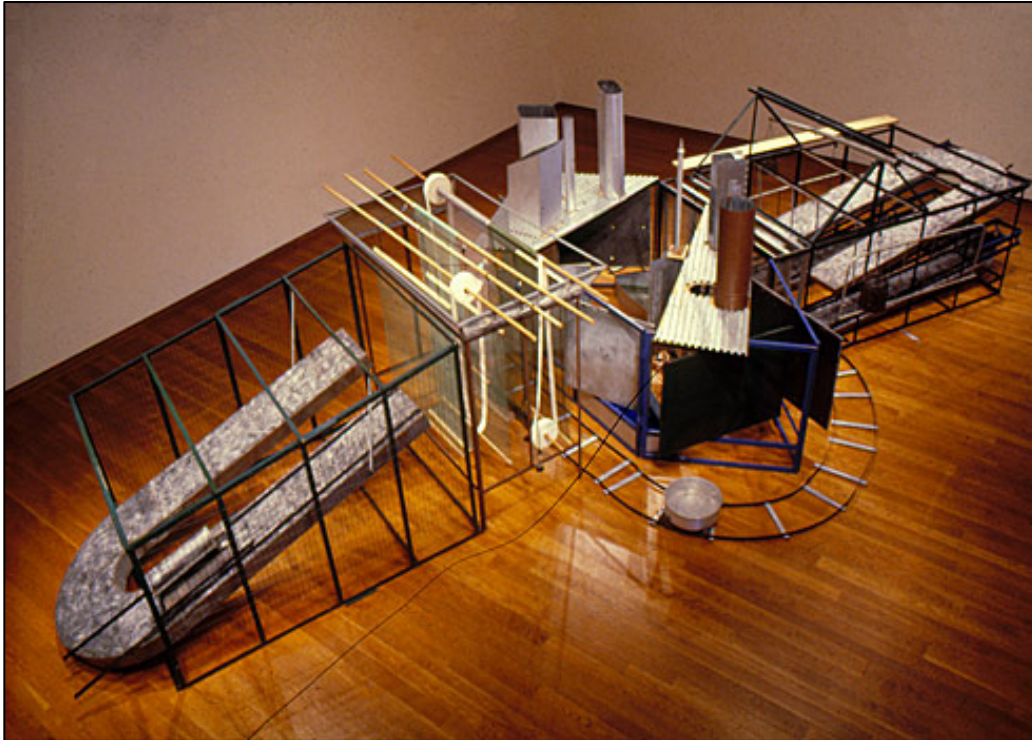


Figure 3: Dennis Oppenheim. Impulse Reactor, A Device for Detecting, Entering and Converting Past Lies Traveling Underground and in the Air. 1980.



Figure 4: Hans Haacke. Metromobiltan. 1985.



Figure 5: Hans Haacke. *The Road to Profits is Paved with Culture* (left) *The Goodwill Umbrella* (right). From the exhibition *Mobil Observations*. 1981.



Figure 6: Hans Haacke. *Creating Consent*. 1981.



Figure 7: Edward Burtynsky. *Oxford Tire Pile #8, Westley, California*. 1999.



Figure 8: Edward Burtynsky. *Oil Fields #2, Belridge, California*. 2002.

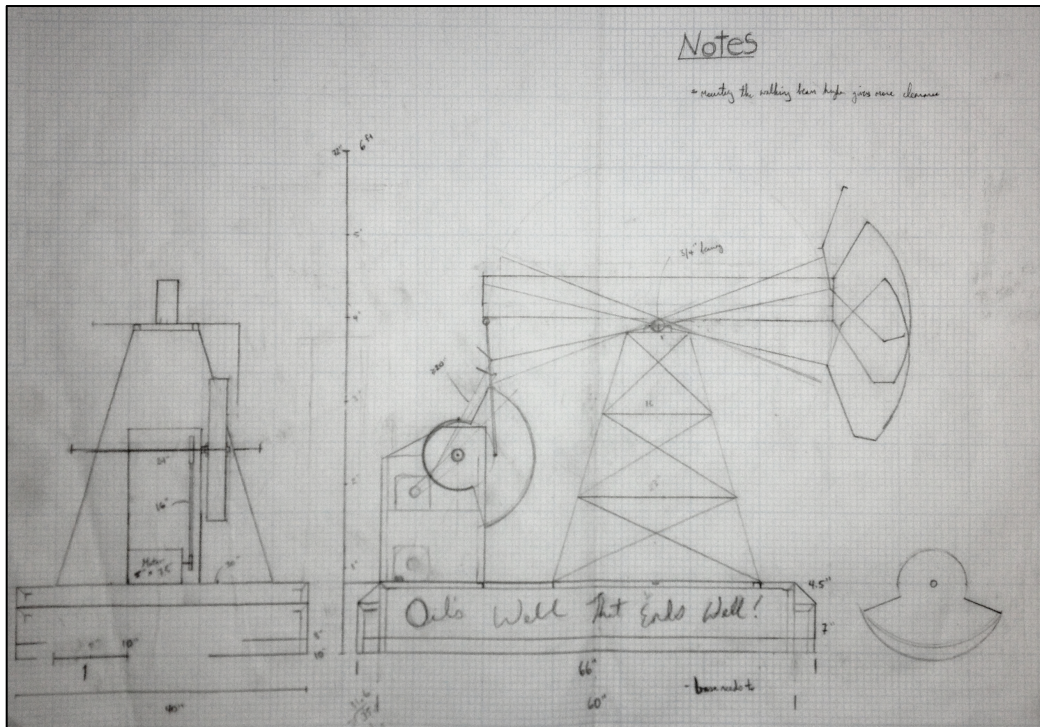


Figure 9: Original Blueprints of *Oil's Well That Ends Well*, documenting the conception of the sculpture from paper to steel.



Figure 10: *Oil's Well That Ends Well* before painting.



Figure 11: Chris Burden. *Medusa's Head*. 1990.

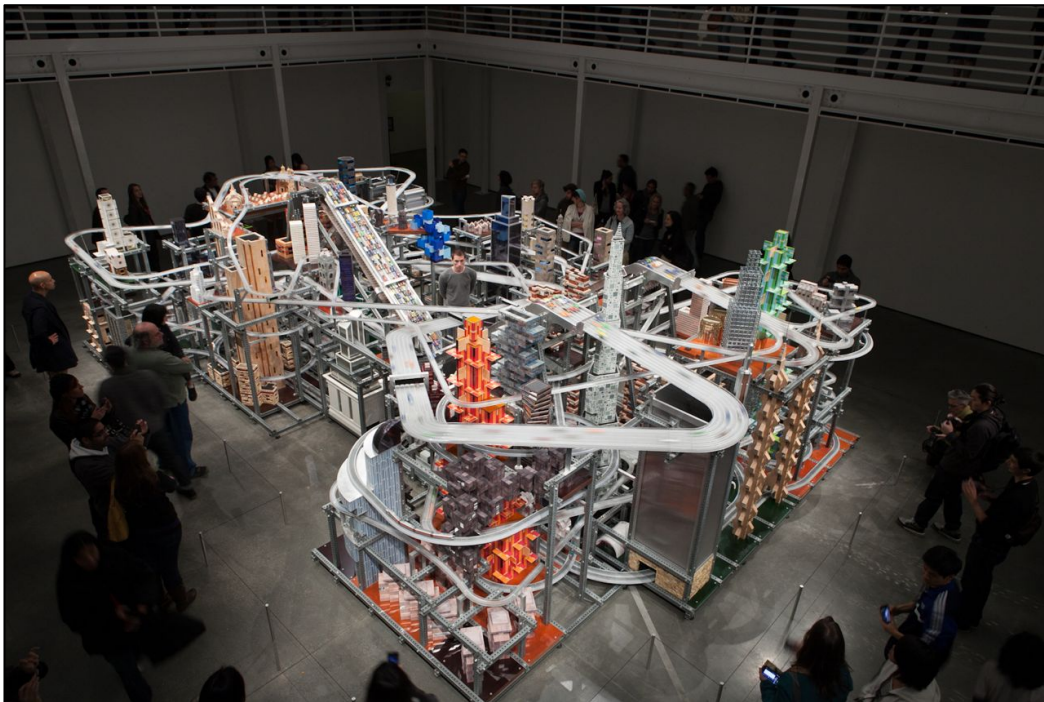


Figure 12: Chris Burden. *Metropolis II*. 2010.



Figure 13: Oil's Well That Ends Well, powder coated and assembled. Video at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aL5vy82UqMc>



Figure 14: Oil's Well That Ends Well, powder coated and assembled. Video at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aL5vy82UqMc>

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Figure 6: Haacke, Hans. *Creating Consent*. 1981. John Weber Gallery, New York. Tate papers: Lesson Learned. Web. 27 March 2013.

Figure 7: Burynsky, Edward. *Oil Fields #2, Belridge, California*. 2002. Charles Cowles Gallery, New York. ARTstor. Web. 27 March 2013.

Figure 8: Burtynsky, Edward. *Oxford Tire Pile #8, Westley, California*. 1999. Charles Cowles Gallery, New York. ARTstor. Web. 27 March 2013.

Figure 11: Burden, Chris. *Medusa's Head*. 1990. Museum of Modern Art, New York. ARTstor. Web. 27 March 2013.

Figure 12: Burden, Chris. *Metropolis II*. 2010. Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Los Angeles. Arrestedmotion.com 2012 opening photos. Web. 27 March 2013.

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