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NORTH SEA OIL AND GAS: TANJA ENGELBERTS

Anna-Rosja Haveman

Over the course of several years, Dutch artist Tanja Engelberts has investigated the industrial landscape of the North Sea, which resulted in multiple artworks including *Cities of Desire* (2016), *Future Maps for Hollow Places* (2020), *500 Meters Afar* (2021) and *Decom* (2021). She has photographed and filmed the otherworldly structures and observed how people work and live on production platforms and drilling rigs, out at sea and thus out of sight. Alongside capturing enthralling visual material, Engelberts collected many anecdotes of the people who carry out the day-to-day operations on the rigs.

In this interview, art historian Anna-Rosja Haveman and Engelberts discuss her artistic practice, with special focus on recent research into the oil and gas production on the North Sea.

Anna-Rosja Haveman: Tanja, your artistic practice has dealt with different places that show, or hide, relations to the fossil fuel industries or intoxicated waters. For example, the photographic project *Petroleum Borealis* (2018–2019) resulted from a trip to the Canadian Athabasca Tar Sands. With an interest in the materiality of photography, you printed aerial views of the depleted forests with actual tar sand and petroleum coke, which resulted in an equally vulnerable looking and almost decaying artwork. In the first film you ever made during your residency at the Rijksakademie in Amsterdam, *Hollow* (2018), the spectator sees an artificial circular form, reminiscent of a lake enclosed by a dike within a larger lake; what it is, is not entirely clear. The area is surrounded by trees with birds relaxing in this seemingly tranquil place. If it was not for the grim noise in the background, the spectator would not realise that the represented site is bleaker than it initially appears. In fact, it is a deposit for contaminated sludge: het IJsseloo in the Netherlands. You began working with the topic of extraction while in Canada; currently, you are working on the subject of the offshore oil and gas industry in the Southern North Sea (NL/UK). The Netherlands is a big producer and user of natural gas and oil. How did your research into the Dutch offshore oil and gas industry start?

Tanja Engelberts: After making a lot of work abroad, I wanted to bring my practice closer to home. I live in the Hague near the beach and love the North Sea. Five years ago, I had already created a photographic work, *Cities of Desire* (2016), about the offshore industry. At the time, I had read an article about abandoned platforms and rigs at sea, so subsequently I dove into the topic and learned how packed the North Sea was with about 900 production platforms. I got into contact with people in the industry,

which eventually enabled me to travel out at sea with maintenance and supply ships. It took a lot of effort and time before I was able to enter the platforms: I had to take offshore safety trainings and was dependent on the right people to help and trust me. This resulted in a series of photographs printed on steel, *Cities of Desire* (2016), an exhibition and a symposium “500 meters afar” at Stichting IK, Vlissingen, the Netherlands, with guest speakers Siebe Visser (director Swift Drilling) and Lorenzo Frankel (at the time working for Follow the Money, a platform for investigative journalism).

ARH: The title *Cities of Desire* refers to several chapters titled “Cities & Desire” in Italo Calvino’s *Invisible Cities* (1972). What connections do you see there?

TE: I read this book during my self-initiated residency on a maintenance vessel, “Kroonborg,” during 2016 in the south end of the North Sea in the Dutch and English sector. In this book, Marco Polo talks about his travels with Kublai Kan. Some of the imaginary cities described in the book reminded me of the actual offshore platforms. Polo describes the cities full of imagination and emotion, which forms a stark contrast with the arrangement of chapters by Calvino. He used the mathematical sequence of the Fibonacci order. I was really taken with the contrast between the sensitivity of the text and the scientific structure of the book. For me, when observing the offshore landscape, I felt that this relationship was reversed: the architecture is completely pragmatic, but by talking to people and visiting platforms, I rediscovered a sense of wonder. During the two-week shifts, a platform or rig becomes a home for the people who work there.

ARH: After working on *Cities of Desire* in 2016, you worked in other places, but eventually returned to the Dutch offshore industry as a topic in your practice in 2019/2020. The offshore industry has been immensely successful from an economic point of view and extremely damaging considering the ecological implications. What was it like to visit those little industrial islands out at sea, infiltrating in these what I imagine to be strange places as an outsider? To contextualize, you and I are aware that the Netherlands has been involved in oil and gas extraction for many decades. In 1959, the first and largest natural gas field was discovered in Slochteren (Groningen, the Netherlands). This discovery initiated a race between multiple companies, of which NAM (Shell) was the largest. Many small gas fields were found both on- and offshore in the Netherlands during the 1960. In addition to the natural gas, oil was found in the North Sea during the 1970s and early 1980s. Despite the collapse of oil prices in the late 1980s, exploration activity continued, although the results were more often becoming “disappointing.” Currently many fields have reached their tail-end and have stopped producing, resulting in many abandoned platforms.



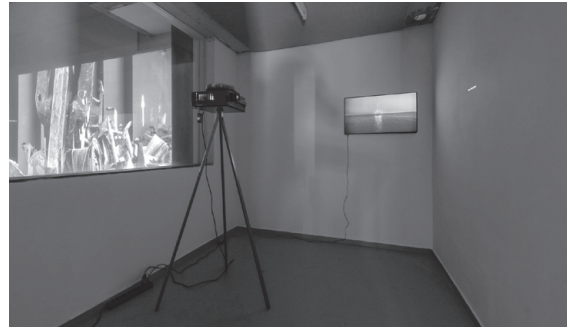
Tanja Engelberts, *500 Meters Afar (Morning)*, 2020, Digital print on Hahnemule photorag, framed, 40 × 22,5 cm. Courtesy: Galerie Caroline O'Brien



Tanja Engelberts, *500 Meters Afar (Night-time)*, 2020, Digital print on Hahnemule photorag, framed, 40 × 22,5 cm. Courtesy: Galerie Caroline O'Brien



Tanja Engelberts, *Decom*, 2021, Duration: 14'56" (loop)
Format: 4K / 16:9 Colour. Installation view. Courtesy: Rijksakademie van Beeldende Kunsten. Photographer: Sander van Wettum



Tanja Engelberts, *Production Cycle*, 2021, slideprojection with text, steel, lightbox, Installation view. Courtesy: Rijksakademie van Beeldende Kunsten. Photographer: Sander van Wettum



Tanja Engelberts, *Decom*, 2021, Duration: 14'56" (loop)
Format: 4K / 16:9 Colour. Film still. Courtesy: Rijksakademie van Beeldende Kunsten



Tanja Engelberts, *Decom*, 2021, Duration: 14'56" (loop)
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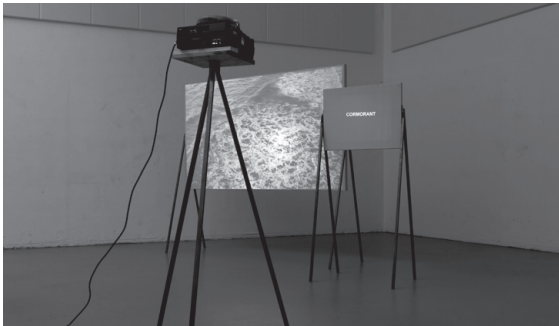
Tanja Engelberts, *Decom*, 2021, Duration: 14'56" (loop)
Format: 4K / 16:9 Colour. Film still. Courtesy: Rijksakademie van Beeldende Kunsten.



Tanja Engelberts, *Forgotten Seas*, 2021. Sound performance with Marcel Imthorn. Courtesy: Rijksakademie van Beeldende Kunsten. Photographer: Sander van Wettum.



Tanja Engelberts, *Forgotten Seas*, 2021. Sound performance with Marcel Imthorn. Courtesy: Rijksakademie van Beeldende Kunsten. Photographer: Sander van Wettum.



Tanja Engelberts, *Future Maps for Hollow Places*, 2021, Duration: 03:43" (loop) Format: 4K / 16:9 Colour slideprojection with text, steel, Installation view. Courtesy: Rijksakademie van beeldende kunsten.



Tanja Engelberts, *Future Maps for Hollow Places*, 2021, Duration: 03:43" (loop) Format: 4K / 16:9 Colour.

CLIPPER COMPLEX

In the deep hot night, just the two of them, staring at a containership passing by. A platform asleep, the nightshift thinly staffed. A silence has settled between them, they just stare into the field, twinkling lights revealing further outposts. They look down, the black water with a shimmer of red, pink, yellow.

There is a suggestion; maybe to just feel alive, maybe a small act of rebellion. They pick up some scaffolding slats, long wooden beams casually thrown over board; fluttering in the air, a soft round motion, pale white against black and white, soundlessly disappearing into the dark surface. A second, a third followed, the gentle motion, an easy flight.

A loud crack in the night, a gust of wind sets of frantic motions, running down stairs, work boots, metal, glass, darkness, sweaty hands, torches, equipment, trickling sweat, falling tools, flickering lights, nervous laughter, relieve, a quick cigarette, dawn, bed.

twelve hour shifts
slumbering zombies

twelve hours on
twelve hours off

day-time
night-time

wrapped in a ball of insomnia

CLICK

CLICK

CLICK

L09-FB1

They leave the harbour in the beginning of the afternoon. The sky is bright blue, but the waves are building steadily. The vessel will not arrive until the next morning. People are settling in, resignation for the upcoming weeks. Some stay in their quarters, others move on deck watching the coast pass by, some already perched on the couch of the rec room smoking and watching television.

Waves building, the gruff sound of the boat smothered by the crashing of water against the hull. By dinnertime, the galley grows uncomfortably silent, some faces changing colour.

A little spec at the horizon grows steadily, outlining the black silhouette of the monopod in the late evening sun. The scaffolding crew ready for the next morning. Overnight the waves keep rising and falling, the scratched yellow of the monolith standing tall against the waves.

With swells higher than four meters, making an approach impossible, there is nothing to do but wait. Wait for the calm. The whole day the crew keeps to themselves, save for some impromptu meetings about the weather, the waves, the planning.

Breakfast, lunch, dinner, dark blue waves crashing, a night filled with the rise and fall of the ship. Morning looking at the waves, the bloody waves. Three meters, four meters, up and down, rise and fall, dark blue, indigo, petrol, white, yellow, brown, against the weathered yellow pillar. Paperwork, television, reading, feeling the waves.

Crew stare at the platform, cursing, waiting, betting. Dinner filled with speculation, some kind of disappointment about the waves and the wind never turning into a true storm. A seasickness inducing nuisance; the ship drifting.

A nervousness settles on the boat, people walking on the deck, some trying to get rid of the restless energy, others more sedate: watching tv, eating crisps, drinking tea, but all keeping an eye on the treacherous foe.

During the night somehow things settled, early morning a scaffold is built.

DUC-TE-E

The yellow tip rises above the water level,
wind howling through the metal rods, the
topside already missing.

On a soft morning the vessels, like a pack of
predators move in; clamping steel between
steel tearing the structure from the seabed,
metal stuck in mud slowly pulled out,
a vacuum disturbed in one calculated
movement.

Each meter unearthed;

Eocene

Palaeocene

Cretaceous

Jurassic

Triassic

Permian

Carboniferous

Devonian

dark rust with algae green

black and blue mussel

the smell of barnacles catching air for the
first time.

meter by meter

pulled out by its roots.

A corpse hanging from a crane, before it
touches the deck.

TE: Offshore workers, working on those platforms, were surprised by my interest in their daily life — apparently not many people ask about it. It was often enough to get a conversation going. Out at sea everything is very DIY, because there is nothing. You have to figure everything out yourself, which is an attitude I like. It is also a predominantly male-dominated engineering world, where you have to show that you did “your homework.” For example, there is a difference between offshore platforms and offshore drilling rigs: the process starts with a rig, which is a movable island used to locate oil or gas. Once it is confirmed that there is something worth drilling for, they build an immobile platform that stays for 20 to 50 years, however long it takes until the recourse is depleted. If you do not know this difference, the workers would not take you seriously.

I also think it helped that I am not an outright activist, proclaiming my opposing ideas or operating as an undercover Greenpeace infiltrator. People who work in the offshore industry are bound to a tight working schedule; they work for two weeks, with twelve-hour shifts. I grew up with a father working in an industrial printing press, he worked different shifts, morning, day or night. I understand the difficulty of achieving a regular family life; it is something the offshore workers often desire but find to be unattainable.

ARH: You document a world that is unknown to and inaccessible for most people, primarily with photography and more recently film. This can be considered a political act in itself; the first step towards change is documenting and naming the issues. It seems to me that you, alongside visually capturing the alluring architectures, almost operate as an ethnographer when recording the many anecdotes of the people who carry out the day-to-day operations. Instead of voicing outright critique, your work documents the oil and gas extraction practices that are still in place, or being dismantled, at a time when a quest for a more sustainable future is high on the political agenda. How do you navigate this complex topic?

TE: I feel in awe of the technology that made the structures possible. At the same time, I feel embarrassed for these feelings, now that we know the consequence of 60 years of oil and gas production. In the past, the platforms were symbols of humans conquering nature. Now, we approach them more negatively, being aware of the natural harm they cause. I am interested in the changed attitude of the public and have discussed this with offshore workers. For instance, I met a crane operator who worked for NAM at sea; at the same time, he lived in Groningen where his house was demolished by the man-made earthquakes.

To me, it shows how people can live with this paradox. I met and talked to so many people and recorded a lot of stories, some of the stories illustrate the feverish years in which the industry flourished, when money was really

not an obstacle. I once heard an anecdote about one of the few women working on the platforms. After giving birth, she returned to work offshore while her newborn child remained onshore. Each morning a helicopter would deliver her breast milk to her husband and baby at home. These kinds of anecdotes show a very different side of the industry. I will use these stories and my own contemporary observations about the industry as material for a forthcoming publication.

ARH: Your work shows the economic activity and worlds that lie beyond the shoreline of the beach (or out of sight in the harbours). The work ponders, and contributes to, the memory of a past glory turned into doom. You have recently explored how to represent the invisibility of the decommissioned platforms with the film *Future Maps for Hollow Places* (2020). Can you tell me about this work?

TE: When a platform is removed, nothing remains visible for the bare eye above the water surface: nothing refers to the history of the place. With this work, I imagined what people would see in the future if they would fly over that seascape, searching for signs of the past. It is filmed with a drone that is searching for something, which contributes to the feeling of trespassing and secrecy. The work combines this film footage with a DIA slide show with names of the platforms, the sounds of the projector gives both rhythm to the film and also references the type of machines used in the beginning of the offshore industry.

The names of the platforms are amazing: since the 1960s, Shell UK has given platforms the names of birds. There is an urban myth that Shell started with Auk, and continued in alphabetical order: Buk, Cuk, etc. Of course they would be in trouble once they got to Fuk. Auk is a bird, so they decided to use bird names. With species extinction, are the drones replacing birds in this world? For a related series with the same title, *Future Maps for Hollow Places* (2020), I overlaid prints of a seemingly empty sea with a reflective material; once illuminated by a flashlight, you can read the platform names.

ARH: You look for stories and elements that deviate from the expectations and associations one might have with the fossil fuel industry. You have an eye for the people, birds and weather circumstances in this technologically driven world. Do you have more examples where this is shown in your practice?

TE: Recently, I have been researching the decommission process: when a field production cycle comes to an end, the facilities must be dismantled. These processes, however, have to come to a halt because of the presence of a certain birds: the operators have to wait until the bird leaves. A Dutch company, Allseas, made one of the largest ships in the world that moves

entire platforms to the harbor. When I was at the decommissioning yard in Vlissingen, they were waiting for specific weather conditions. In this case, the platform was in the water and they had to wait until the tide was a certain height, so they could lift it to the harbor floor. This was also related to the moon. It's nice to see how weather conditions and natural phenomena still play a role.

ARH: Your last film titled *Decom* (2021) refers to the place where it is shot, namely at a decommissioning yard. What interests you about this process?

TE: As the offshore oil, as the gas industry is coming to an end, this is a growing venture. I realized that the rigs were just standing in the harbors of the Netherlands, England, and Denmark, like a silent army on the fringes of the North Sea. This is the end of fossil fuel industry, there is nothing left to extract, in the North Sea, at least. Unfortunately, the industry is still inventing more means of extraction and exploitation around the world. Many of the people who worked on the Dutch platforms and rigs were young men that started in this industry when they were in their twenties. These men spent their working life, and, to a certain extent, their private lives, in these otherworldly cities. Now they are retired and, in a way, these platforms are also on their way to their retirement.

The decommissioning yard is a fascinating place and visually appealing for an artist: the first time I was there, I saw giant rusted legs of a platform standing on the docks; you call them jackets, which were about 120 meters high. When they transport the platform from the sea to the harbor, they leave everything inside, they don't take out the beds or beddings, not even the food. So when it comes ashore, it's like an abandoned city. Some things are reused, but most of it has to be cut to pieces: helidecks, cranes and jackets. Twenty men work with blowtorches, and cut the massive platforms into pieces, which are brought to the Hoogovens (Tata Steel IJmuiden). The men use scissor-like machines to cut through everything. This place felt totally alien; at the same time, it used to be a place where people lived and worked. Some of the people who were dismantling the structure had also worked on similar platforms at sea in the past. I made the decision for *Decom* to devoid the film of any people, to enhance the strangeness of this place. The machines take over and clean up the scraps of humans. Sometimes we get really close to the demolishment, which is also a really violent act, it's crazy to see.

ARH: You draw a parallel between the rhythms of the film, decommissioning and fracking. Can you elaborate on this?

TE: These "buildings" took so long to emerge, they were on the sea for over 20 years, and it only takes 4 weeks to cut them in scraps. The decom yard has its own flow, the film has the same rhythm, it is very slow and then all of a

sudden there is a burst of violence. You also see this cycle at sea, when an oil or gas field reaches the end of production. Operators stimulate the field through fracking; it means the pressure drops, a violent explosion occurs, and the oil flows back up. Then they repeat the process.

As a visual artist, I tried to recreate these violent cycles. There are different types of shots. There are wide shots, filmed in the mist, adding to the mysterious otherworldly sense. Some shots get really close to the cutting: we see the fire and hear drills pounding on metal or concrete. Another scene oscillates between the machine-perspective and the perspective of an onlooker. For instance, I filmed on top of a cutting device, which creates a sense that you are inside this machine. In other shots, you see a metal arm pulling on something.

ARH: The different perspectives in the visuals are enhanced by the sound design. What are the multiple elements of sound?

TE: On the one hand, there are the machines, cranes, metal on metal, but I also wanted to add something otherworldly. This became the sound of a Gregorian choir singing a hymn for Saint Barbara. I came across a choir in Utrecht, that specialized in hymns for the holy Barbara, which is included in the soundtrack of the film.

I had a very strange experience at a drilling rig in the harbor of Amsterdam, where I surprisingly encountered a carved wooden statue of a woman. Standing on a small shelf, 40 cm tall, enclosed by the bleached Formica of the walls, Santa Barbara (among others the patron saint of miners and people working with explosives) looked out over a plastic seating area: the helicopter waiting lounge. A crewmember from Portugal had placed her there for good fortune. It was a strange thought to have the protectors of miners so far from solid ground. Of course, a rig is a mining operation.

ARH: Your next project also revolves around a Dutch topic: the Groninger human-induced earthquakes. Soon after the gas fields were discovered in the Netherlands, engineers and geographers warned against potential land subsidence and earthquakes. In 1983, the geographer Meent van der Sluis attributed earthquakes to gas extraction, whereas NAM (Shell) initially denied any relationship between the two.

Only in 2012, after huge amounts of damage by the earthquake in Huizinge (Loppersum) of 3,6 on the Richter scale, were the earthquakes starting to be taken seriously by NAM and the Dutch government. It has taken much protest and only after severe damaging earthquakes was it decided that The Netherlands will halt the gas production in Groningen by 2022. Interestingly, some artists (such as Sissel Marie Tonn), although not that

many, have dealt with it in their practice — perhaps because it still is a very sensitive topic for many people who have suffered from the negative consequences closer to home, compared the fracking on the North Sea. Can you share some of your plans?

TE: Although the extraction of gas and oil does not literally leave a hollow place, the idea of a void beneath the Earth's surface leaves room for speculation. I am interested in the idea of a void, because it suggests a certain porosity of the rock. Porosity as a vulnerability, a cavity, exposed to everything that penetrates the earth's surface. By means of measurements and observations, we already know a lot about the Groningen gas fields — the earlier mentioned village of Slochteren — after years of gas extraction. Residents have seen the landscape in which they live change drastically over the years. Farmland gave way to derricks; solid ground beneath their feet became a threat. I want to explore how abstract, measured data can be connected with a more human approach, like the experience of residents and the changes in society.

Anna-Rosja Haveman is a curator, writer, and researcher. As a PhD candidate at the University of Groningen, she investigates the varied and changing artistic approaches to Dutch coastal landscapes, from the 1970s until today.