10.

Behind the Sun:
The Theater of Oil Expenditure

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In her ten-minute video *Behind the Sun*, Kuwaiti artist Monira Al Qadiri shows VHS footage of the burning of the Kuwait oil fields in 1991, overlaying it film with sound and text (Fig. 10.1). Al Qadiri's video shows this momentous act of willful destruction as part of the deeply contradictory process of wasting that underpins the oil economy, while giving that economy specificity in the ecology of the Persian Gulf. From an economic perspective, global powers have been warring over oil since the mid-twentieth century. The video shows how that resource gleans economic value through the conspicuous visibility of its squander and the environmental destruction at the very site of one of dozens of wars that punctuate the age of oil.

The sight of oil explosions, fires, and burning has become regrettably familiar since *Behind the Sun* was shot. In the video, the military tactic of earth-scorching is exposed as the mechanism of an economy that functions in and through its aesthetic use of oil and its deployment of war as an aesthetic sensibility. As oil burns and dissipates into a scene of environmental destruction, its economic value is assembled into a formal appearance within a cultural ecology that affirms a global necropolitics. The appearance of oil as at once valuable and wasted is deeply ambivalent, since it subsumes the aesthetic histories of the Middle East and North Africa into a vision of totalizing end: the end of nature, the end of beauty, the end of life as such, and the end of times writ large. As the video unfolds, it also hones the senses toward this devastating logic. It locates a hinge between art and the necropolitical logic by which a denunciation of ecological warfare might be articulated.

The ignition of Kuwait's oil fields was the culmination of the Gulf War (August 1990–February 1991), over the course of which the United States (led by its president George H.W. Bush) and a coalition force of thirty-five countries invaded Iraq (led by its president Saddam Hussein) in response to the latter's annexation of Kuwait. In January 1991, the US intensified its efforts through a series of air and naval strikes as well as ground attacks under a five-week-long tactical effort titled "Operation Desert Storm." Midway through that month, Iraq began to sabotage its oil reserves with explosives and landmines, and in early February, as the US took the area, the oilwells started

to catch fire; the blaze spread to more than 700 wells and surrounding oil lakes. Iraq also dumped 400 million gallons of crude oil into the Persian Gulf. By the end of February, Iraq was forced to retreat from Kuwait, and Iraqi forces were heavily bombed by the US as they withdrew. Kuwait, along with the entire Persian Gulf region, had been mobilized as an environmental sacrifice in the US and coalition forces' theater of operations.

The Iraqi army's scorched-earth strategy of withdrawal was a last-ditch effort to display its command over the oil economy by wasting that resource. It was also a tactical decision to pollute the air in order to obscure further American air strike targets. The burn lasted for eleven months, at a rate of over six million barrels of oil a day. The spoilage of land and air was therefore instrumentalized to preserve Iraq's market power and control of the territory. The burning of the Kuwait oil fields thus secured the transformation of the area from a site of material resources into a virtualized form of profit while the burning of oil quite literally obstructed the US army's view of the area when the latter was reliant on air surveillance and targeted strikes from above. It is through this point—the hypervisibility of burning oil as a war tactic—that Al Qadiri captures the convergence between the spectacle of war—and its invocation of the lexicon of the "theater" as a way to designate a geographic terrain that determine the perceptual limitations and availabilities of an attack and defense—and the cultural aesthetics that are transformed in and through that spectacle.

Fig. 10.1 Monira Al Qadiri, *Behind the Sun ("* . . . *in a world of beauty* . . .*")*, 2013, video. Installation view, *Theater of Operations*, MOMA PS1, New York, 2019. Photo Amanda Boetzkes

Behind the Sun appeared with works by Hanaa Mallala and Hassan Sharif at MoMA PS1 in New York in the exhibition *Theater of Operations: The Gulf Wars 1991–2011* (Fig. 10.2). The exhibition, which ran from November 2019 to March 2020, convened works by Iraqi, Kuwaiti, and Palestinian artists alongside works by American and European artists who sought to expose and contest the theatrics of the coalition governments who were managing the spectacle of war through selective distributions of the visibility and invisibility of its casualties. The exhibition captured what was vehemently denied by the coalition administrations: that they were striking civilian territories and lives, and that the siege of Iraq and Kuwait was a bloodbath, bookended by economic pressures of embargo, immiseration, restriction of basic supplies, and reinvasion.

Al Qadiri's video envisions the burning of the Kuwait oil fields as nothing short of a scene of apocalypse. She captures the event both from a distance as a glowing light on a distant horizon akin to a sunset, and via more immediate footage from the road near the area, which filled the camera frame with billowing clouds of thick, black smoke issuing from a fiery

Fig. 10.2 Peter Keeley and Ruba Katrib (curators), *Theater of Operations*, MOMA PS1, New York, installation view, 2019. Photo Amanda Boetzkes

ground. From these disparate perspectives, the sight of the burning fields shifts from the geological to the technological and back again. The video conjures associations with volcanic eruptions and the mushroom cloud of a nuclear bomb. But it also gathers the footage into beautiful abstractions: shimmering orange light on the water of a nearby lake or the biomorphic form of a rose with intermingling red, orange, and pink flame rising up against a velvety black backdrop. It is at the edge of this contradiction between earthly catastrophe and natural beauty that Al Qadiri overlays the footage with a deep male voice reading Arabic poetry taken from an Islamic television program. The vocal draws out a mutation at play within the video. From the enchanting tones, Al Qadiri locates a harrowing inversion from the mystical love and infinite appreciation of nature to a wholly destructive oil war. Religious glorying in the blooming of the earth has been engaged in a reversal: an economic glory activated by despoliation.

In capturing this visual culmination of decades of attacks on the Persian Gulf (both before and after the Kuwait oil fires), *Behind the Sun* points to two premises that characterize the economic and political parlay of the global oil regime: first, that acts of willful destruction have an aesthetic efficacy in the strategizing of warfare; and second, that the oil fires were not merely byproducts of this logic and its imaginary but were also the aesthetic instruments that consolidated the global oil economy as a ruling regime per se. The

burning of oil is a distribution of the sensible that instrumentalizes scorched earth for a global economy that has triumphed over the living earth through its willful destruction. It makes little difference that there were separate nation states engaged in the power struggle: the oil exchange was galvanized and recapitulated as a sovereign operation through a totalizing event of death. The video therefore documents both the *use* of oil wasting in the context of war and the *exchange* of oil wasting from an act of war into a founding pillar of a global culture held together by a paradoxical economy of waste.

Al Qadiri shows the seizure of land and the senses and the reorientation of both toward a witnessing of the economy's auto-expenditure: its procedure of consuming itself to glean a new horizon of productivity through the destruction of war. In this way, she corroborates the integration of necropolitics into cultural life as an aesthetic sensibility in and of itself. The wasting of oil is a terraforming instrument that initiates a theater of death—the blooming of death within life—as its co-emergent aesthetic arm. In what follows, I will elaborate how the work organizes the senses to show how the vital play of natural life has been prefaced by an a priori introjection of death within it. In the same way that a still life discloses the inward-dwelling rot of fruit or flowers, the video shows how nature has been displaced by the circulation of death precipitated by war.

Energy Expenditure in the Age of Oil

To elaborate the logic of war at play in the Kuwait oil fires, I invoke the concept of *glorious expenditure*. This notion is a reference to the writings of Georges Bataille, the mid-twentieth-century poet and theorist, as well as my own use of the concept in a theorization of the global oil economy and the aesthetics of contemporary art.[1] I argue that a contradictory logic of wasting appears in the discrepancy between the global economy that is founded on limited spatio-temporal parameters, and a surrounding planetary ecology, a second-order system that recurs in the human world as its excesses. Art registers the excesses of economic waste through the visibility of plastic materiality and a thematization of the economy's very plasticity. It is worth tracing some of this intellectual history here before returning to the twofold argument that the economy of earth-scorching produces an auto-consuming ecology, and that the lapse between the two systems of economy and ecology can be captured through the lens of aesthetics.

In his three-part essay *The Accursed Share*, published in 1949, Bataille gives a transhistorical account of economy from the lens of energy expenditure.[2] He suggests that organized societies inevitably produce a surplus of energy, which they gather as a resource in order to expand. Inevitably, that expanding society is driven to use this excess energy in rituals of conscious wasting, which he calls glorious expenditure, or *la dépense*. If that society does not burn its excess, that energy will accumulate as a pressure that bursts forth by way of unpredictable disasters. The suppression of societies' inherent drive to waste therefore generates a heterogeneous energy that is destined to be expended without conscience or consciousness. In precapitalist economies, such as those developed by the Aztecs or Northwest Coast First Nations, societies established sophisticated forms of energy expenditure such as sacrificial offerings, the ritualistic destruction of objects of value, and even the production and consumption of art. In restricted economies, such as those that appeared under the competing political regimes of the twentieth century, excess energy is expended in the form of destructive spoilage such as war and the atom bomb. Bataille's critique of capitalism is that its refusal to expend energy—its reingestion of energy in the form of profit accumulation—generated a cycle of consumption and stockpiling of energy that was driven toward ever more totalizing forms of destruction as the economy expands into a global exchange system.

Bataille's theory of economy has inspired a number of recapitulations that demonstrate the relevance of energy to the global politics of oil and the emergence of ecological subject (or non-subject) positions. For example, the cultural theorist and translator of Bataille's writings Allan Stoekl suggests that Bataille's understanding of energy expenditure has a bearing on our concepts of sustainability and how these are prefaced and foreclosed by the oil economy.[3] Through Bataille, he locates an ethics of systemic balance through a reflection on the transgressive operations of oil expenditure. For example, the ritualized sacrifice of people and objects in precapitalist societies was geared toward the violent crossing of the limits of the individual subject and its private property through the generous donation of energy in an effort to stimulate social mobility. This would allow the overturn of hierarchy within the social organization, but retroactively effect a location and preservation of its limits as a totality. But again, the rise of capitalism put all energy to productive use with no ethical avenue to expend surplus energy. On the contrary, it hypostatized the individual, class hierarchy, and energy slavery in the service of profit accumulation, thus denying the formation of a culture of energy expenditure, not to mention violently restricting Indigenous and non-Western practices of *la dépense*. Capitalism eliminated the possibility of a truly generous expenditure and instead drove itself toward an indefinitely expanding form that has breached the carrying capacities of living systems, and led to more problematic forms of destruction. The rise of nuclear energy through the pressures of the Cold War, in this account, was a symptom of this continual need to expend energy, precisely through the fortification of the economic prohibition to do so. Further, nuclear energy was not merely a marker of the globalization of this energy economy: it threatened catastrophe on a planetary scale.

This dynamic animates the oil economy and its aesthetic command over art and culture worldwide. But expenditure is not merely a matter of the spoliation of an abstract heterogeneous energy; oil in its multifarious forms is put to work in the wasting of lives and life itself *as* the instrument and object of the economy's accumulation of profit for the purposes of its expansion. Further, the expenditure of oil is neither accidental nor unconscious, as Bataille perhaps conceived of energy expenditure. Indeed, oil expenditure has been instrumentalized in such a way that economic force can be gleaned from the destruction of lives and living systems.

The Use of Oil Wasting in the Era of Necropolitics

Cameroonian theorist Achille Mbembe recovers Bataille's reflections on energy economies to examine the age of necropolitics, in which war becomes the primary objective of power, since it is through war that lives and populations can be enslaved, tortured, and killed as an integral part of exchange.[4] In Mbembe's account, the sadistic means of producing the exchange system is justified by the profitability of the exchange itself. Here, the intimate tie between race, slavery, and the disposability of lives becomes clear, but so also does the economic logic of the sites where this logic is put to work, such as plantations, concentration camps, terrorism, toxic dumping, and, as I am discussing here, scorched earth.

Crucially for my purposes, Mbembe also gestures to the aesthetic dimension of this paradigm, by which the torture of bodies and the exploitation of the living earth is deployed to consolidate the formation of power.

Necropolitical governance reterritorializes through the wasting of place; it incites mass expulsions and the resettlement of stateless peoples. It calls for the demolition of homes, resources, communication systems, and roadways and other types of infrastructural warfare. Under the governance of the occupying state, the population is yielded to a condition of disposability. All this is activated for the purposes of rendering the population's subjects (now nonsubjects) *exchangeable* in an economy of life and death. In this regard, Mbembe's argument resounds with Michael Mcintyre and Heidi Nast's concept of (bio)necropolitics, which details how capitalism cultivates and profits from creating a necropolis, a domain of expropriated, alienated, and socially dead people.[5] The necropolis is the postcolonial outcome of the biopolis of sovereign European land and subjects. The instrumentalization of killing in the service of the reproduction of European life is cast out of the colonial consciousness.

This analysis begs the question, where are the necropoli that power the global oil economy? It is important to bear in mind, though, that the necropolis is not just a discrete space—a here and now or a there and then in history. It is not just the burning of the Kuwait oil fields that generates a necropolis that is at issue, but also the embedding of oil into bodies and minds so that it becomes a spreading earthly topology after the catastrophic strike. The burning of the oil fields is a conspicuous display of the thriving of the occupier, and I would argue further that it gears this display toward the supremacy of a global necropolitics writ large. The oil fires burned for nearly a year, and would have burned for up to five had they not been extinguished by the coalition forces. But within this ecological predicament, to extinguish the fire was tantamount to the claiming of land, to its very reterritorialization under a new regime of power. In this sense, the oil economy had already corrupted any stable morality that might be schematically associated with the original concept of ecology as a system that promotes the flourishing of biological life through symbiotic relations. Instead, the economy occasioned a new form of ecology through the systemic interpenetration of biopolis and necropolis, living system and economy of death. The damage was done, but it also extended in and as a global oil culture.

Necropolitical logic is therefore the engine by which land was besieged, marked, burned, and spoiled in the case of the Kuwaiti oil fires, so that even the immediate profitability of the oil itself was folded into the abstraction of sovereign power that was discovered in and through the wielding of death. This paradoxical form of sovereignty—death as sovereignty in and of itself—achieved new technological heights during the Gulf War, when the US initiated a program of precision targeting of the land from the air, so-called "surgical strikes." Its arsenal had a much rougher edge than the Bush administration would have the audience for its theater of operations believe. The US developed asphyxiation bombs, laser-guided missiles, bombs covered with depleted uranium, and unmanned aerial vehicles. The language of precision striking was touted as a way to obscure the extent of the damage and deaths as well as the general brutality waged against civilian populations and their environments, which artists from both sides of the war exposed and repudiated.

As Mbembe points out, necropolitical wars are both mobile and distributed. They are "hit and run" affairs rather than strategies of acquisition and conquest.[6] Further, they produce a generalized "semiosis of killing" by which the totalizing power of death contains any resistance by transforming it into autodestruction. This semiosis constellates in the suicide bomber who takes hold of the siege by cloaking the body in the very materials of war and collapsing the individual body into the war-torn topography so that ballistic weaponry and

flesh, occupied and occupier, ordinary scene and catastrophic event of death all combine and scatter into indistinguishable debris. Likewise, we might think of the Kuwait oil fires as the event at which the economic parlay that descended on the Persian Gulf consolidated its necropolitical knot, the containment of Iraq under Hussein in a totalizing necropolitical dynamic. The smoke of the oil fires was engaged to shelter the territory from further US strikes, but at the same time it was a form of autodestruction that paradoxically secured the achievement of a global oil economy that put its own ecological wasting to economic use. In other words, it profited from the ecological destruction it created.

The Necroaesthetics of Plasticity

Mbembe's exposition of late modern colonization, via Bataille's conception of death and the expenditure of life as avenues to sovereignty, allows us to consider the contradictory position of land and sacrifice at play in the burning of the Kuwait oil fields and the aesthetics of oil wasting in more specific terms. Though she captured real VHS footage of the event, what we see in Al Qadiri's video is not just documentation. It is also an aesthetic reformulation of the logic of death-in-life that pervaded the event and its unfolding over eleven months.

On this point, I turn to the concept of plasticity: Mbembe argues that necropolitical logic intertwines with aesthetic form in and through the besieged body of the slave. In the colonial context, once a slave was sealed off within the spatial paradigm of the plantation, they entered a state of exemption from humanity. The slave's body began to exist as a pure instrument of production. Yet, Mbembe theorizes, the enslaved body is nevertheless able to stylize almost any object, language, or gesture into a performance. Further: "The slave is able to demonstrate the protean capabilities of the human bond through music and the very body that was supposedly possessed by another."[7] Thus, the state of subjugation is also an aesthetic capability and avenue into a paradoxical form of plasticity. Bodily plasticity is an extension of a cultural sensibility in which cruelty toward the enslaved is transformed into aesthetic play conditioned for the pleasure of the master. The negation of the slave body thus appears as ontological malleability. Any transformation of the body after it has been so wholly enslaved, even if such a transformation were an attempt at emancipation, could be recuperated as the enslavement of plasticity. Bodily plasticity is a mobile figuration that instantiates the despotic regime of colonial capitalism and its foreclosure of the future.

Plasticity, as a necropolitical sensibility—a necroaesthetics— appears as a superfluous visibility in *Behind the Sun*: a remarkable burst of beauty and life in a field of misery and exploitation. But the flourish of plasticity also points to the spatial interpenetration of the necropolis and the biopolis and the sadistic relation that subtends them. It marks a divergence from the historic spatial paradigm by which societies eliminate their waste to zones that become charged with the danger of taboo. As many theorists of waste have considered at length, within the totalizing regime of neoliberal globalization and in the context of widespread ecological crisis, there is no space for waste, only spheres of social coexistence with it.[8] I would therefore suggest we consider the emergent visibility of necroaesthetics as it appears in the video, as a symptom of the collapse of boundaries between the necropolis and the biopolis at stake in the ecology of oil wasting.

In this vein, we might reflect on the entanglement of the imagery of burning oil and the metaphors of natural beauty at play in *Behind the Sun*. As the rich voice embellishes the apocalyptic scenes with its homage to nature—sparkling stars, the burst of spring, the quivering of new life—nature as such and its violent destruction are fused. While the flames undulate

Fig. 10.3 Monira Al Qadiri, *Behind the Sun (". . . so beautiful it rivaled the roses . . .")*, 2013, video. Installation view, *Theater of Operations*, MOMA PS1, New York, 2019. Photo Amanda Boetzkes

against the black sky and the voice summons the image of roses, evoked in and through the blooming of smoke, nature is not only exposed as an abstract ideal but also converted into its opposite: an exuberant display of the totalizing end of life (Fig. 10.3). The possession of land through its destruction is revealed as an aesthetic expression of the global imaginary. The ruinous topography seemingly celebrates ecological death as the pinnacle of the oil economy.

Al Qadiri's video invites the viewer to take consciousness of glorious expenditure as a form in and of itself, one that is underpinned by plastic reversals of nature and death, biopolis and necropolis. To reiterate, the burning of the Kuwait oil fields was not an accidental or unconscious expenditure. It was both a military defense and an economic maneuver by which to seize control and gain power at a crucial moment in the globalization of the oil economy. Energy expenditure, profit, war, victory, and beauty are bound together through the rhetorical unfolding of the imagery. Yet Al Qadiri invites us to recuperate an ethical reflection at the site of this profound transgression. While the scenes are aesthetically compelling in their formal play, Al Qadiri lays bare the perversity of the destruction of oil expenditure and the emptying out of the religious sensibility, so underpinned by a profound adoration of the flourishing of nature. Before our very eyes, the video enacts the transformation from an appreciation of natural beauty to an appreciation of its death. While the logic of necropower might be subsumed into the language of war operations, Al Qadiri draws out the war's engagement with aesthetic expression as a force in its own right: the sensations of glory and ecstasy conjured by the event. The beauty and quasi-mysticism that Al Qadiri captures is a visual outburst characteristic of the sadistic sensibility of a global economic sovereignty achieved through oil expenditure and its deathly effects.

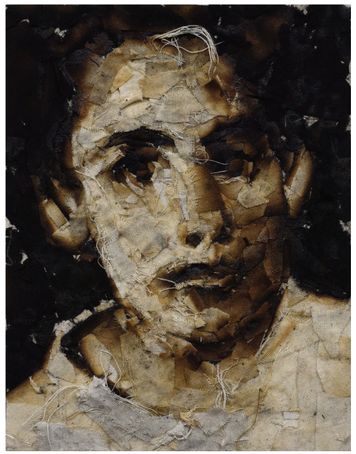

Fig. 10.4 (opposite, top left) Hanaa Malallah, *She/He Has No Picture*, 2019–20, burnt canvas collage on canvas with laser-cut brass plaques. Installation view, *Theater of Operations*, MOMA PS1, New York, 2019. Courtesy of Hanaa Malallah; Fig. 10.5 (opposite, right) Detail of Fig. 10.4

Plasticity in the Theater of Operations

Beneath the Sun was one of dozens of artworks that exposed and contested the necropolitical logic that animated the Gulf Wars in the exhibition *Theater of Operations*. Central to this exhibition was the effort on the part of artists to demonstrate the blatant visibility of civilian deaths in the Persian Gulf, the torture of Iraqi prisoners at Abu Ghraib, the spin-doctoring of affect of the two Bush administrations, and the experience of the wars on the ground of the theaters of operation.

Iraqi artist Hanaa Malalla's photographic installation captures this curatorial focus on the spectacle of war and the covert economic play it discloses. In *She/He Has No Picture* (2019) is a collection of what seem to be portraits, but looking closely they are faces pieced together out of burned canvas (Figs. 10.4, 10.5). The portraits were interspersed with the

Fig. 10.6 Murtaza Vali (curator), *Crude*, Art Jameel, Dubai, installation view, 2018–19. Photo by Mohamed Somji, courtesy of Art Jameel

names of people still missing and unidentified after a shelter in Al Amiriyah, Syria was attacked by a US smart bomb that killed 408 civilians in 1991. In the installation, the appearance of faces and names, people, lives is composed of microscopic pieces of war debris, encapsulating the way in which war grafts death into the living and builds a culture through its own spectacle. It is not just the case that the appearance of the war was crafted and visualized on public networks in the US but that these same theatrics were embedding themselves in bodies, memories, and histories as an integral part of the global oil regime. Through the exhibition rhetoric, which is strongly directed at the culpability of the US in orchestrating the Gulf Wars, the firing of the Kuwait oil fields becomes more coherent as an instance of the necropolitical logic for which the US and coalition forces are co-responsible, even if the acts were the direct outcome of Saddam Hussein's order to sabotage them. More strongly, the necroaesthetics exposed in *Theater of Operations* are integral to a generalized global oil culture characterized by its plasticity: the reformulation of land and lives, bodies and places in a mobile and expanding oil topology. Here I would like to gesture to the conspicuous appearance of plastic in contemporary art the world over; its place as a topological instrument of the oil economy of the Middle East is becoming explicit.

We might consider Murtaza Vali's 2019 exhibition *Crude* at the Jameel Art Center in Dubai (Fig. 10.6). The exhibition was animated by the stories, images, maps, and objects—essentially the fully materialized cultural imaginary—that accompany the global regime of oil and its history in the Middle East and especially in the United Arab Emirates. *Crude* showed that oil is anything but a base material or "pure resource." Rather, it is an energy source and a vector: a force that organizes culture, labor, land, relations, and lives. It denaturalizes the earth, rendering it purely economic—an exchange value in its own right—in and through its command of cultural life. *Crude* captured the full aesthetic and formal dimensions of oil, from its origin as liquid black gold (thick, sleek, and inviting) to its processing through infrastructure (geometric, balanced, efficient) and its chemical recapitulation as plastics (colorful, spectacular, disposable). But it also showed the oil economy in its ecological excesses: archives of displaced people, polluted terrains and climates, utopian visions of the Middle East turned into dystopian realities.

It is this pivot between the global oil economy and its mobilization of the planet into an auto-wasting system that invites the central question: how do we experience the forces that govern the global oil economy in relation to the waste it produces? Further, how does *art* understand the relationship between economy and its planetary wasting? To consider economy and waste through the lens of art is to show the material and formal dimensions of global oil in their co-implication. Art does not merely illustrate or punctuate the cultural imaginary of oil but rather shows the aesthetic processes by which it entrenches itself in ecologies and also how it represents this entrenchment *to itself*. Art shows waste as an integral part of the oil economy's automatic drive as the very aesthetic dimensions of waste operationalize and corroborate its violent and transgressive logic. In other words, the effects of waste, both aesthetic and ecological—the former embedded in the latter—are active agents of global oil cultures. Wasting and waste itself are tools by which the economy replicates itself as both a cultural form and an ecological predicament. In other words, the logic of the economy materializes itself and expresses itself in a processual rhythm that tears through environments.

This predicament is marked by a specifically *plastic* movement, though plastic is certainly not the only form of waste by which the economy expresses itself. Death as such is also an instrumentalized form, as Mbembe argues. The feedback loops of climate change such as carbon emissions, global warming, wildfires, desertification, and warming oceans are also discontents of the economy. But plastic as a particular form of waste captures its coextensive cause and effect, effect and cause, in a way that underscores capitalism's plasticity (both its protean capacities and its refusal to waste well). It carries out the killing as an agent that corroborates the economic logic into an infinitely expanding system. It is an exemplary waste of the oil economy insofar as it is a petro-commodity that was chemically designed for disposability (say, limited-use packaging or objects). But it is also put to work to replace all other materials too, especially those in limited supply (such as cork, for example). The economy of disposability *deploys complexity as such*. The use-value of plastic lies in its waste potential, but the recuperation of waste as ecological destruction—destruction as ecology—is productive. The original ideal of plastic's "wastability" was dependent on the assumption that there was a space for such waste to go and be redeemed in a new profitable form. But this assumption was a smokescreen; the reality that plastic is an indigestible and toxic excess discloses the perverse economy of global oil that relies on both the damage of its excesses and the management of this damage for growth. Without a real expenditure of energy (systemic biodegradation, or another form of nonprofitable waste) the economy simply spreads in malignant topologies. It introjects industrial byproducts into land, water, air,

and living creatures. This is essentially the consolidation of the necropolitical situation into bodies and living systems in a process that seizes the body's plasticity and commands its aesthetic expression.

Here is where art intervenes: while it incorporates waste and is therefore another symptom of the cultural imaginary of the global economy, it also repositions this waste for an alternative perspective of its own entrenchment in a self-wasting economy. It locates the intersection of economic expression and ecological perturbation, thereby visualizing the economy's necrotic excess. It reveals the affective dimensions of oil cultures as linked to the theatrics of war operations. Bodies are embedded with death, but more than this they appear toxic, as though charged with the spectacle itself. Plastic appears as both an aesthetic form and an instrument of oil necrosis. It does not merely sediment after the fact but perpetuates the logic through its material vitality. Indeed, as Australian cultural theorist Gay Hawkins argues, plastic became a topological agent through a pattern of emergent causation. While it disappears into its use-value as disposable or recyclable garbage, after being discarded it accumulates as a lively toxic remainder that cycles through environments in perpetuity.

We can understand plastic's movement through the economy by the way it seizes and integrates itself into social relations at all levels of production and consumption. But it exceeds these social relations as it embeds itself into ecologies, whether at the microscopic level (as in the case of microplastics on the Greenland Ice Sheet), or at the macro level (as in the case of accumulations in ocean gyres). It is helpful to conceptualize the difference between social and ecological relations by considering the roots of ecology in second-order cybernetics. If oil has been violently enforced as an ecology in and of itself, it is through its command of systemic feedback loops, whereby the processual movement of biotic relations in cycles of life and death is endlessly returning as the contamination of plastics and its effects of necrosis.

Fig. 10.7 Hassan Sharif, *Slippers and Wire*, 2009, slippers and copper wire. Installation view, Crude, Art Jameel, Dubai, 2018–19. Courtesy of Sharjah Art Foundation, image courtesy of Art Jameel

An example from the *Crude* exhibition stands out in this regard: a work called *Slippers and Wire* by Emirati conceptual artist Hassan Sharif (Fig. 10.7). The work is a heap of fluorescent-colored polymer sandals, piled high and standing at the scale of a human body. With no feet to wear them and no more steps to take, the accumulation of slippers captures at once oil's crudity as cheap slippers, and the efficacy of its systemic movement through environments as an absorption of life. The technological refinement and economic violence of oil has turned into a monstrous excess of discarded objects whose conditions of production are unaccounted for except in their aesthetic rendering. Oil's waste is subsumed into a surface appearance as plastic, as per Marx's account of the commodity. At the same time, the work implies absent bodies piled high, as well as the violent piercing of these bodies in the form of polyurethane slippers speared on a wired infrastructure.

The mythic transposability of plastic therefore has negative capability. While it effaces its origin in the economic logic of oil wars, in Sharif's work plastic commodities nevertheless disclose their emergence as an ecology of death. Not only is plastic an artificial substance (a fundamental offense to the integrity of natural substances). Not only does it accumulate as gluey muck, hard debris, and microscopic pellets, though these are present environmental realities. More strongly, plastic ensues from the sites of siege and war and thus accepts a necroaesthetic form in all ecologies, micro and macro, bodily and elemental. It shows that

the oil economy is not a closed system at all but the antithesis of a system: the system's circulation and self-organization as its own self-extermination. Herein lies the knot of capitalism read as a plastic ecology: it is underpinned by a drive to waste that violates the earth and life itself to yield a system of fuel production, and it continues to effect the violation of auto-destruction as its *self-justification*. Oil violently becomes ecological so that we can give an account of the transformation of nature into a synthetic ecology.

Theater of the Dead

The exhibition *Theater of Operations* explicitly reflected on the media spectacle of the Gulf Wars, but it also spoke to the negative capability of art as it emerges from such theatrics. The exhibition was strongly focused on the theatrics of the two Bush administrations, which obscured their instrumentation of war in their representations of it to the public. Among these theatrics were: the rhetoric of tactical and controlled strikes when their air raids were in fact generalized and applied against innocent civilians; the ruse of a war against an imprecise terror that the coalition was themselves procuring through their economic parlay; and the recasting of their own warmongering as a rescue and environmental reclamation from Saddam Hussein and other corrupt political forces in the Middle East. However, beyond the exposure of these theatrics, *Behind the Sun* shows the emergence of a new visibility of a global oil economy within a theater of paradoxes: the burn of oil appears as both the protection and the collapse of a nation state at the point of collapse. It shows the use of environmental despoliation as a strategic instrument of global reterritorialization in a global oil regime (a smokescreen of oil behind the illumination of the sun in a rhythm of concealment and exposure). It shows the oscillation of a simultaneous withdrawal from land, and a command of it: the transformation of land into an ecology as the corruption of nature, the profanation of the sacred, the penetration of life cycles by a vitalized appearance of necrosis. As a tactic of war, the burning of the Kuwait oil reserves was pure destruction. But as an animate aesthetic force in a theater of operations, Al Qadiri shows us, this instance of earth scorching signals the extraction of a totalizing oil commodity: the regime of a global oil ecology. This commodity is predicated on the rendering exchangeable of a billion lives (human and nonhuman), and indeed life itself, within its implicit logic.

The philosopher Alain Badiou argues that leftist experimental forms of theater were contributing to their own vulnerability by producing forms that abolished the classical tradition in order to experiment with "real" life and extend the former into the latter.[10] By contrast, the tendency of the right has been to carve new terrains of entertainment by which the history of theater can renew itself, including the spectacle of war. In this vein, philosopher Oxana Timofeeva proposes a synthesis between the two, what she calls a "theater of the dead."[11] For whereas the spectacle of war is a "theater without theater" (i.e. we watch mass death as a spectacle, but the spectacle is real), theater itself must now reconcile with the excesses of its own derealized reality as a new cultural form in and of itself. The maneuvers of the theater of the dead, Timofeeva argues, are brave enough to break the circle of the therapeutic function of art, which, in the biopolitical regime of contemporary capitalism, privileges and preserves "life." Instead, it would go beyond this self-perpetuating principle to make an alliance with death for the sake of those who already belong to it."[12] In this vein, Monira Al Qadiri's video obtains the visualization of a theater of the dead.

The burning of the Kuwait oil fields is indeed a theater without theater. But Al Qadiri's video captures

Fig. 10.8 Monira Al Qadiri, *Behind the Sun (". . . in a world of beauty . . .")*, 2013, video. Installation view, Theater of Operations, MOMA PS1, New York, 2019. Photo Amanda Boetzkes

a struggle with this deadly exchange. The alliance with the dead that Timofeeva cultivates is at work in the aesthetics of the *Theater of Operations* and the *Crude* exhibitions. But it is also for us who are captivated together as a viewership, allied with the dead, to accept the incision of art into new consciousness of global oil, our lives lived within its regime, and in turn, its presentation of the dead to us as art.