

Manipulating Golden Wombs'

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Received 15 December 2020
Revised 6 March 2021
Accepted 6 March 2021

Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this study/paper *Manipulating Golden Wombs'* (2017) is to show the author's non-site intervention of authoritarian – undemocratic maneuvering of both women's and earth's "golden" wombs. The burning fossil fuels in myriads of flame colors, signal the power and distress of Earth's wounded womb, memories of war, environmental destruction and human fatality, and descend to decline as extinguished *Oil Drops* (2017), creating a void. Global warming poses a problem for fossil fuel systems and those who profit from them.

Design/methodology/approach – The title of this paper has been inspired by Cara New Dagget's book, *The Birth of Energy* (2019), posited in the nascent realm of energy "mortalities." Now, confronting a world warmed by sweltering fossil fuels, the book provides us with a direction to thinking energy beyond the "Calvinist view" of everlasting work. Spellbound by *Manipulating Golden Wombs'* (2017), the audience canter around the outer surface of the centrally positioned, circulating luminous "acrylic" oil drops highlighted by hundreds of mono-frequency lamps impregnated with desert biodiversity. A closer look takes spectators through a fiery desert, across the fossil fuel fields into the depths of its scorching oil wells, its womb, as they sense the "real-time" catastrophe that had occurred beyond the gallery wall.

Findings – These artists' objective with their interventions is to "root it to the contour of the [...] land, so that it's permanently there and subject to the weathering," so the audience is "sort of curious to see what will happen to this" (Schmidt, 1996, 225) through the course of time. The works resists the resistance of nature and social culture, as well as of body and intellect by emphasizing the intransience, however complex, of human beings with the ecosphere in which they survive (Novak 2002, 23). The surfacing of the under-surface of the land and ocean life triggers the idea of the private space, which involves role-play, gender norms and the control over women's lives in the capitalist and Gulf societies. Authoritarianism, fossil fuel capital, high-energy use and militarism make the climate politics critical to planetary security. This combustible convergence gave birth to *Manipulating Golden Wombs'* (2017).

Research limitations/implications – Ganz reminds us that devouring less energy appears to be almost unharmonious with the current politics of being "Modern." Sacrificing energy resonances with abstinence at best, and widespread death and injustice at worst. But, consuming an overload of energy is incompatible with a multispecies existence on Earth. Scientists caution "a cascade of feedbacks could push the Earth System irreversibly onto a 'Hothouse Earth' pathway," the consequence of which could be an uninhabitable, unsafe globe for beings (Steffen *et al.*, 2018). Even though it sounds vivid, it is hard to overstate the crisis in the midst of what environmentalists and biologists term as a sixth extinction event (Kolbert, 2014), in line with a "biological annihilation" that paints "a dismal picture of the future of life, including human life" (Ceballos *et al.*, 2017).

Practical implications – It is not only the land's womb that we have hurt; we have miffed the hearts of the water network, and "Othered" and the wombs of many women and most surfaces of the Earth have been penetrated, unconsented! To sustain a biodiverse sphere, to pause the deaths of the planet's flora and fauna and to thrive on Earth, we need to work on renewable sources of energy based on "new collectively shared



Ecofeminism and Climate Change
Vol. 2 No. 4, 2021
pp. 158-168
Emerald Publishing Limited
e-ISSN: 2633-4070
p-ISSN: 2633-4062
DOI [10.1108/EFCC-12-2020-0037](https://doi.org/10.1108/EFCC-12-2020-0037)

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The author sincerely thanks the journal editors for their efforts and time spent in connection with this project.

values, principles, and frameworks" (Steffen *et al.*, 2018). We need to stop Manipulating Golden Wombs' (2017). Are we ready to accept the challenge? (Lau and Traulsen, 2016)

Social implications – Petro-masculinity has multiple global dimensions and manifests in multiple and locally specific ways (Dagget, 2018). This encourages the geographically diverse artists discussed in this paper to embrace alternative visions, to make bold and explicit statements on gender and global diversity, equity and rights. Through history, women, in specific, embodied the entirety of the Ecocene and its life cycle and explored it in the context of their own relationships, health, sexuality, fertility, reproduction, childbirth, illness and inescapably death. The artists' interventions' visual physiognomies and intentions point toward a comprehensive agenda of action that leads to remedial courses toward reinstating the biome to a healthy condition.

Originality/value – Manipulating Golden Wombs' (2017) enacts the historic all-consuming fires, penetrating the "shared environment," burning the fossilized fuels exuding from Earth's penetrated womb. The higher cone-shaped oil drops irradiate the intense dazzling images of oil wells in flames and the desert flora and fauna nestled within the scorching inner arena. This aligns with the private space provided to women. The wombs are smothered in the fuming fires of the Gulf war. The darker, narrower lower oil drops, iconic of the remnants of fossil fuel, are the residual sludge within which the land and water species are enmeshed and ensnared to death. The potency of the enactment of the drops "enables the viewer to see [him/] herself seeing, to become aware of how she perceives the world around [him/]her and in doing so participates in shaping it" (Eliasson, 2009, p. 25) as a form of engagement, which involves an "attention to time, movement and changeability" (pp. 18–21).

Keywords Ecofeminism, Feminist theory, Ecocene, Non-site intervention, Petro-culture, Womb

Paper type Case study

Manipulating Golden Wombs' (2017) [1] is my non-site intervention of an authoritarian–undemocratic maneuvering of both women's and earth's "golden" wombs (Figure 1). The burning fossil fuels in myriads of flame colors, signaling the power and distress of Earth's wounded womb, memories of war, environmental destruction and human fatality, descend to decline as extinguished Oil Drops (2017) creating a void. Global warming poses a problem for fossil fuel systems and those who profit from them. Leaving the Earth's golden womb "as is" and not cashing out on fossil fuels from the earth can mean leaving trillions of monies and profit in its womb (McKibben, 2018). Likewise, not interfering with the Women's golden wombs may affect lineage, patriarchal investment and capitalism. The wombs are telling us that in Manipulating the golden wombs', we anticipate the "politics of the armed lifeboat" (Parenti, 2016). Coastal shores have been distorted into offshore oil-drilling systems, while the "Clean Power Plan", "Clean Air Act" and "Clean Water Act" have been debilitated. 19th century imperialism has turned Earth's womb into a symbolic, material and sociotechnical source of western modern and Arab petro-cultures that encompass the globe [2]. Based on Daggett's (2018) concept of petro-masculinity, boisterous fossil fuel protagonists and climate deniers sustain as, "privileged subjectivities [that] are oil-soaked and coal-dusted." Manipulating Golden Wombs' voices how gender concerns tail, and sometimes head environmental issues, and that both wombs are succumbing to patriarchal violence [3].

The title of my intervention has been inspired by Cara New Dagget's book, *The Birth of Energy* (2019), posited in the nascent realm of energy "mortalities." Now, confronting a world warmed by sweltering fossil fuels, the book provides us with a direction to thinking energy beyond the "Calvinist view" of everlasting work. Spellbound by *Manipulating Golden Wombs'* (2017), the audience canter around the outer surface of the centrally positioned, circulating luminous "acrylic" oil drops highlighted by hundreds of mono-frequency lamps impregnated with desert biodiversity. A closer look takes spectators through a fiery desert, across the fossil fuel fields into the depths of its scorching oil wells, its womb, as they sense the "real time" catastrophe that had occurred beyond the gallery wall.

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American street artist Caledonia Curry's (Swoon) 16-feet tall Greek Goddess *Thalassa* (2014) who wears a horseshoe crab plastron sternum, a ribcage framed with squirming pipefish and crowned with seaweed entangled in her hair, takes me to the profundities of the ocean. Watery ribbons of fish skeletons and amorphous oceanic flora and fauna emerge omni-directionally from her free-flowing form. Swoon's every day-use material encircles and



Figure 1.
Oil Drops (2017) 3 ×
1.5 × 1.5 m sculptural
light-based
installation

Notes: Artists: Artist-art historian Roma Madan-Soni assisted by curator/artist Jasmine Singh and Sneha Soni. Adel Al Yousifi's Kuwait-Iraq post-war photography print on oil drops. Media: wood board, electrical wires, bulbs, printed acrylic oil drops. Exhibited at: Masaha 13, 13-28 February 2017



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Figure 2.
Oil Drops (2017)
Single Oil Drop I
as part of the 3 × 1.5
× 1.5 m sculptural
light-based
installation

flows out from the Goddess's form in the ritual of a gigantic global network of sea and river goddesses, the guardians of the Ecocene. *Thalassa* bespeaks "the language of nature" as she evokes audience nostalgia through their reminiscing of what was destroyed by the "Florida Deepwater Horizon Oil Spill" (2010). As a water goddess, she melts male desires; she "lives in water," threatens to flow away and liquefy masculine virility (Theweleit, 1987, p. 266). Her colossal size defies authoritarian subjugation and "opens up the borders of a hitherto unknown human productive potential, setting in motion streams of money, commodities, and workers" (264). She deconstructs to destruct the capitalist's efforts that work toward accumulation and aggregation, "to prevent the new productive possibilities from becoming new human freedoms" (264). *Thalassa* shows how "womens' bodies are the holes, swamps, pits of muck that can engulf" (264), and therefore, they, possibly more than anybody or anything, enthrone disgust and dread. The authoritarian damming up and drilling of the body of the woman, of land and water, the state and anti-aspirations, is a required to uphold its potency and honor. This can appropriately channelize its vitality into prolific conduits. Excess flow and surplus yearning juices its "energy," letting it leak out into improvident and uneconomical muddy offshoots, threatening to make it soft and "feminine" (Figure 3).



Figure 3.
Oil Drops (2017)
Single Oil Drop 2
as part of the $3 \times$
 1.5×1.5 m sculptural
light-based
installation

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Saudi artist Manal [AlDowayan \(2012\)](#)'s timeworn "fading" black and white snapshots, *If I Forget You, Don't Forget Me* (2012), which feature "mundane" everyday objects that center the lives of proudly posed figures from her personal and her land's past, arouse audience sentiments and nostalgia. They are an iconic reference to the fossil fuel's social history constructed by the portrayed "Mustachioed men with slick side partings [escorted by a hard-hat and paperweight] who were at the forefront of the kingdom's rapid industrialization in the 1940s and 1950s" ([AlDowayan, 2012](#)). Even though the central subject, her father died of Alzheimer's, he stands iconic of the changes made for the global petro-cultures, the Arab world and the Imperialist social structures based on issues of poverty and wealth. Each of them erected by *Manipulating Golden Wombs*. Manal's work shows how innovation and new liberties enabled by the fossil-fueled culture are entwined with gruesome vehemence, which means that to tread on the path of a fossil-fueled living is to eradicate communities and species en-mass. We cannot take comfort that over time, creativity will shed its destructive possibilities ([Grove, 2015](#)) [7]. Hurting the womb entails burying pipelines and aligning heavy industry with deprived colored communities based on the idea of neglect, abandonment and disposal. This hurt womb of mass destruction is then submerged by the carbon democracy

constructed for, and by advantaged communities. Geographic separation of the unseen conduits of fossil-fueled zones from liberal states helps maintain the ignorance of the communities' understanding of fossil authoritarianism. The communities continue to believe and support the "accepted as natural and essential" syndicate of fossil fuels and a liberal democratic identity. The colonizing violence practiced by Anglo-Europeans rebounds with "a terrific boomerang effect" and notwithstanding efforts to remain sightless or be justified, "colonization works to decivilize the colonizer, to brutalize him in the true sense of the word, to degrade him, to awaken him to buried instincts, to covetousness, violence, race hatred, and moral relativism" (Césaire, 2000).

AIDowayan's workshop-based installation *Esmi* (my Name) (2012) seeks a restitution and expansion of women's inclusion, independence and academic growth that has been disturbed by the engorgement of petro-cultures. "In Bedouin culture, women were wage-earners through their weaving and other crafts" (AIDowayan, 2018) until oil money and urbanization were used toward an "intentional erasing" of the female presence. Impassioned women painted their names on oversized prayer beads hung from heavy ceiling-suspended loops to question their missing names in the public domain. It is not on grounds of religious or traditional cultural norms that their identity, the power of their wombs has been concealed by the channels of petro-culture, subjecting them to precarious consequences. "By removing a woman's name, obscuring her face, lowering her voice [...] it becomes easy to dehumanise her" (AIDowayan, 2018). Inspired by *The Unwomanly Face of War* (2015) [8], by Svetlana Alexievich, she created an army of miniature women toy soldiers to remind her audience of the missing women from the oil-based war zones, a consequence of *Manipulating Golden Wombs'* (Figure 4).

Young children and fairies sit in the midst of Kuwaiti mixed-media artist Shurooq Amin's *Pollutoland* (2014). They transform the destructive mantle of oil spillage from the pierced fossil womb oozing through the Gulf waters, into a whimsical scene with fairies and children clearing out the wreckage to help heal their Earth mother's hurt womb. *Pollutoland* points to the superficial beauty of the public façade of the Gulf that conceals the discharge from its private spaces, the wombs of the women and the Earth. The unethical and unnatural amalgamation of oil and water turns into a lethal weapon for all life in the Gulf waters as well as the land. A gendered analysis of climate change and environmentalism points toward the relationship between masculinity and earth's energy, which relies on authoritarian science and security frameworks. This catastrophic convergence leads to multiplied and magnified disasters (Parenti, 2011). Petro-masculinity's "tough" transactions lean toward "the kinds of solutions that are the traditional domain of men and hegemonic masculinity," which lead to a "downgrading of ethical concerns" like justice, health or economic equity (MacGregor, 2009, pp. 223–38) (Figure 5).

Japanese sculptor Sayaka Ganz, based on her Shinto animist conviction that every article in this world has spirits, induces new life into discarded objects and re-creates a 16-foot-long whale, *Nanai* (2017). Ganz (2020) immerses her audience, especially her urban viewers, in a non-site intervention "to provoke a re-examination of our relationship to the natural world." Their encounter with the true wonders of nature, the beauty they behold, transcends their intellects and stimulates their hearts. Her work seeks the larger inclusive perspective of a harmonious global Ecocene, which can overcome the lesser inner disorder. The gaps, holes and breaches visible on a closer look of the whale look smoothened when the viewer observes it across the larger ever-growing perspective, wherein the constituting elements directionally align to establish



Figure 4.
Oil Drops (2017)
Single Oil Drop 3
as part of the $3 \times$
 1.5×1.5 m sculptural
light-based
installation

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communal unity and accord. Through the medium of the whale Ganz reminds her audience to work on common goals toward sustenance and greater Global progression. Ganz uses everyday use plastics in variegated forms and colors to re-fabricate women's and nature's variegated existence and movement. She urges her viewers to be reminiscent of and celebrate variances, and not construct class, color or gender-based barriers. She simulates organic flora and fauna with fossil-fuel waste, to remind her audience about the concern of accumulation, aggregation and excess on the environment and climate change.

Ganz reminds us that devouring less energy appears to be almost unharmonious with the current politics of being "Modern." Sacrificing energy resonances with abstinence at best, and widespread death and injustice at worst. But, consuming an overload of energy is incompatible with a multispecies existence on Earth. Scientists caution "a cascade of feedbacks could push the Earth System irreversibly onto a 'Hothouse Earth' pathway," the consequence of which could be an uninhabitable, unsafe globe for beings (Steffen *et al.*, 2018). Even though it sounds vivid, it is hard to



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Figure 5.
Oil Drops (2017)
Single Oil Drop 4
as part of the $3 \times 1.5 \times 1.5$ m sculptural
light-based
installation

overstate the crisis in the midst of what environmentalists and biologists term as a sixth extinction event (Kolbert, 2014) in line with a “biological annihilation” that paints “a dismal picture of the future of life, including human life” (Ceballos *et al.*, 2017).

These artists' objective with their interventions is to “root it to the contour of the [...] land, so that it's permanently there and subject to the weathering,” so the audience is “sort of curious to see what will happen to this” (Schmidt, 1996, 225) through the course of time. The works resists the resistance of nature and social culture as well as of body and intellect by emphasizing the intransience, however complex, of human beings with the ecosphere in which they survive (Smithson *et al.*, 2012, 23) [9]. The surfacing of the under-surface of the land and ocean life triggers the idea of the private space, which involves role-play, gender norms and the control over women's lives in the capitalist and Gulf societies. Authoritarianism, fossil fuel capital, high-energy use and militarism make the climate politics critical to planetary security. This combustible convergence gave birth to *Manipulating Golden Wombs'* (2017).

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in this writing to embrace alternative visions, to make bold and explicit statements on gender and global diversity, equity and rights. Through history, women in specific embodied the entirety of the Ecocene and its life cycle and explored it in context of their own relationships, health, sexuality, fertility, reproduction, childbirth, illness and inescapably death. The artists' interventions' visual physiognomies and intentions point toward a comprehensive agenda of action that leads to remedial courses toward reinstating the biome to a healthy condition.

It is not only the land's womb that we have hurt; we have miffed the hearts of the water network, and "Othered" and the wombs of many women, and most surfaces of the Earth have been penetrated, unconsented! To sustain a biodiverse sphere, to pause the deaths of the planet's flora and fauna and to thrive on Earth, we need to work on renewable sources of energy based on "new collectively shared values, principles, and frameworks" (Steffen *et al.*, 2018). We need to stop *Manipulating Golden Wombs*' (2017). Are we ready to accept the challenge? (Lau and Traulsen, 2016)

Notes

1. *Manipulating Golden Wombs*' was exhibited as *Oil Drops* (2017), the centerpiece of the exhibit "Harmony in the City." Sneha Soni and Jasmine Singh assisted me in the construction and installation of the work.
2. This is the focus of the nascent field of energy humanities. For more information, see: Sheena Wilson, Adam Carlson and Imre Szeman, eds., *Petrocultures: Oil, Politics, Culture* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2017); Stephanie LeMenager, *Living Oil: Petroleum Culture in the American Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016).
3. This draws upon feminist research within gendered aspects of violence. For more information, see: Laura Sjoberg (2014) "Gender/Violence in a Gendered/Violent World," *Millennium*, 42(2): 532–42; Paul Kirby and Marsha Henry (2012) "Rethinking Masculinity and Practices of Violence in Conflict Settings," *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, 14(4): 445–49.
4. The oil drops image Dr Adel Al-Yousifi's photographs of the aftermath of the Gulf war, the burning fossil fuels of the Burgan oil field, on the land of Kuwait, taken in March 1991. They display the land's "real-time" experiences. Available at: www.evidence.org.kw/biography.php and Accessed last on: August 21, 2020.
5. Due to negative human intervention, the oil drops have depleted as sludge in the desert sand. See Jassim AlNashmi's steel reverse prism in sand, *Oil Memorial* (2017).
6. I quote the PDF version of the text available on Olafure Eliasson's website: www.olafureliasson.net. In the text, Eliasson introduces us to the idea of "Your Engagement Sequence (YES)" to be a crucial component of his work.
7. Jairus Grove inscribes that "history is neither a series of creative destructions nor destructive creativities, as if either creation or destruction could be given primacy as the driving tendency of existence."
8. An oral history of Soviet women in the Second World War constructed by the Belarusian journalist Svetlana Alexievich. She was awarded the Nobel Prize in 2015.
9. Both Smithson and Eliasson disrupt the duality of nature and culture, and body and mind. They both incline toward technology, interdisciplinary art and science-based ecology and crystallography. They focus on the association of the material world and its representations. They reflect in their work the roles of art institutions and the modes of spectatorship.

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About the author

Roma Madan-Soni is an Artist, Art Historian and a Researcher. She holds a PhD in Art History from the University of Wolverhampton. Her art, teaching and research are interdisciplinary, positioned at the node of ecofeminism, feminist art practice, theory and history and contemporary visual politics. Her exploratory work focuses on visual cultures, gender, colonial studies, postcolonial criticism and modern and contemporary art. She is exhibiting her work at the Venice International Art Fair 2021 and Florence Biennale 2021. Her paintings and installations, based on social and environmental issues, have been exhibited at the Dar Al Athar Al Islamiyah, The Scientific Centre Kuwait, MOMA-Kuwait and Masaha 13, Mayinart, Saatchi Gallery, to name a few. Her art has been commissioned by TAPRI, Finland, Routledge Handbook of Feminist Peace Research (2021).

Professor Soni has received research grants and awards from The Scientific Centre Kuwait, Kuwait Foundation of Science, Kuwait Institute of Scientific Research, United Nations Habitat and Arab Open University, among others. Professor Soni has made research-based presentations at the College Arts Association, Nuqat Regional Conference, Jawaharlal Nehru University, Lady Sriram College, Raza Foundation, University of Wolverhampton, Kuwait Institute of Scientific Research, Gulf University of Science and Technology, Dar Al Athar – Yarmouk, Kuwait University: Marine Sciences Centre, American University of Kuwait, Box Hill College Kuwait, American Open University, UN Habitat and Beit Sadu, Near East South Asia Conference-Istanbul, American International School – Riyadh, and NESAs – Atakamul, Kuwait. She has exhibited work and published numerous articles on these topics for the *Journal of Ecofeminism and Climate Change*, *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, *Crafts Research Journal*, *Art & The Public Sphere*, *NECSUS_European Journal of Media Studies*, *Journal of Visual Art Practice and Swasti*. Her chapter "Have we lost our Senses?" will be published in Cambridge Scholars in December 2021.

She has conducted a Design Camp in collaboration with Dr Fahad Dhawi and Professor Jawaher Al Bader for the Nuqat Regional Conference (2019), a workshop with Professor Jolic on TEDx Global Day for Gulf University of Science and Technology (2018) toward seeking sustainable design solutions and a workshop, "Wildlife of Kuwait's Coastal Habitats: The First Forum on Wildlife in the State of Kuwait" at the Kuwait University Marine Sciences Center. She chairs the "Transformative Education Think Tank" for the "Collective Impact Coalition" for Env.earth in collaboration with Konrad Adenauer Stiftung. She mentors and curates the work of "Artronauts," a community of artists and designers. Roma Madan-Soni can be contacted at: sonimroma@gmail.com

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