

Oil industry in Scotland: making photographs, making demands



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Introduction

Photographs can solicit powerful emotional responses and are often used to draw people's attention to issues or to raise awareness of demands. This course takes a look at how one set of photographs, used as part of a particular demand, was created. It looks at the process of producing images by exploring a series of photographs made with the intention of affecting the way a globalised industry is seen and understood. The industry in question is the oil industry based in Aberdeen, on Scotland's north-east coast, an industry with global ramifications. The course reproduces several pictures researched and made by Owen Logan in collaboration with the history project Lives in the Oil Industry, based at the University of Aberdeen.

Following this series of photographs, you will listen to audio that explores stories about people who have worked in the oil industry, or whose lives have been affected by it.

This OpenLearn course is an adapted extract from the Open University course [DD205 *Living in a globalised world*](#).

Learning Outcomes

After studying this course, you should be able to:

- describe how photographs affect a globalised industry
- understand the global dimension of the Scottish oil industry and how that has affected the local population.

1 Capturing the oil industry

The oil industry is perhaps the archetypal globalised industry. Dominated by a few multinational companies, it is highly centralised at the level of corporate power but, like corporations, investment and trade in the oil industry are also highly mobile. The long reach of the global oil economy is a consequence of the distance between the location of significant oil reserves and the location of the major markets for oil. The reserves of oil currently expected to last more than fifty years are all in the Middle East; most of the nations needing large amounts of oil to fuel their economies are not. The global market in oil straddles this distance.

Many countries with either small or no oil supplies of their own – notably the USA, China and several countries in Europe – need steady and guaranteed supplies of imported oil. Since so much of the stability of these economies and countries depends on this fuel, they also have political reasons for trying to ensure the reliability of those supplies. The most obvious demonstration of this, many would contend, was the invasion of Iraq in 2002 by a coalition of countries led by the USA. Some commentators at the time argued that this war was an attempt to control the price, conditions and distribution of the most important economic resource on which the USA depended: oil.

The significance of the oil industry in Scotland is due in some measure to the way it is part of the political and economic relations that span the globe. This makes a place like Aberdeen very dependent on distant events. In terms of making photographs that draw attention to this dependency, it is the global extent of the oil industry that poses challenges for a photographer. How can the full dimensions of the oil industry be adequately represented in a photograph? Like many other global phenomena, the oil economy cannot be made visible to a single camera's eye. Moreover, what is shown in the mass media is patterned in particular ways. An example of this is the representation of poorer countries, but images of global industries are also mediated. The life of an oil platform is mostly invisible to the general public buying petrol at their local garage, and the complex role of the oil industry in so much of global economics and politics is rarely shown. As the news photographer Susan Meiselas has remarked, 'the larger sense of the image has been defined elsewhere, in Washington, in the press, by the powers that be, and I can't, we can't, somehow reframe it' (cited in Ritchin, 1989, p. 438).

These two problems – the challenge of visually portraying an activity of global extent, and a desire to address relationships and activities which are largely invisible in the global media – have encouraged several photographers to use the technique of montage in order to portray the oil industry. Montage combines two or more images into one; cutting and splicing in this way can bring things that are usually kept apart into close and often startling proximity. The 'War Scrapbook' by Logan at the end of [Section 2.2](#) is an example of a montage. In this way, montage can make the relationships among distant places and people visible in new ways. Logan's aim in using montage in his Oil Lives photographs is precisely to try and reframe how we see the global oil industry.

2 Making photographs that make demands: an extract from the Oil Lives images project

2.1 Activity 1: Oil Lives

Oil Lives consists of a series of photographs of an individual and some written text based on interviews with them. Two of these series are reproduced in this section, with Logan's 'War Scrapbook' in between them. Take some time to look at the photographs and to read the words accompanying them. Try to work out first what parts of the photographs have been brought together from different originals. What do Owen Logan's decisions about how to picture the industry and some of its workers suggest about how he sees the industry?

2.2 Activity 1: Bob Ballantyne

electrician – Piper survivor – community education worker



Bob Ballantyne

© Owen Logan

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The late Bob Ballantyne survived the 'Piper Alpha' disaster that took the lives of 167 oil workers in 1988. Always a strong trade unionist, Bob never liked the nickname 'Tigers' that is used for off-shore workers. Union supporters often refused the nickname and would call themselves 'pussycats'. Bob was critical of the 'macho' culture within oil companies and spoke of the way it reflects powerful anti-social values at work in the industry.

Unlike the Norwegian oil industry, the development of the UK's North Sea sector was given over to private enterprise. Bob compared the UK and Norwegian approaches to the North Sea industry as being 'the difference between exploitation and exploration'. Bob became a prominent activist against the Occidental oil company following the explosion on Piper Alpha and testified at the Cullen enquiry, which found the company to be 'negligent'. However, the company was never prosecuted and many of the people affected by the Piper disaster still feel that real justice was never done.

Bob went on to work in community education. He died shortly after these photographs were completed.

