

# Carousel of Possibilities: An Electronic Monument to the Gulf Oil Spill

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## Abstract

This research presents a critical studies focus on the 2010 Deepwater Horizon oil spill, and derives from the postmodern theories of Gregory Ulmer. Ulmer's *Electronic Monuments* combine current events; social, ecological, and political critique; and interdisciplinary studies to produce a hybrid artifact of new media art and electronic communications. Electronic Monuments are educational devices, and operate as a means of raising awareness to invisible sacrifices permeating contemporary culture. The research for this project is aimed at creating a Monument that expresses the Gulf oil blowout through critical and biocultural lenses, and renders new insights on the complex human/petroleum relationship.

Everything that defines contemporary lifestyles—mobility, cheap power, technology, affordable food, and tools to gather and perfect scientific knowledge—depends on a reliable, plentiful supply of petroleum. Oil catastrophes remind Americans of the ramifications of oil dependency, and draw attention to a willingness to sacrifice natural and social systems, and possibly the future, to maintain the lifestyle oil provides. The Monument seeks to enlighten the public to the necessary, unseen sacrifices associated with oil dependence.

This research approaches biological and cultural sustainability issues through a humanities perspective and exposes the hidden costs of the oil economy. The resultant Monument, through web-based images, sounds, and text, makes us aware of our actions, the consequences of those actions, and the connection of those actions to not just the singular oil catastrophe, but to a network of related effects.

## Introduction to Electronic Monuments

According to Gregory Ulmer, "the Internet makes it possible for monumentality to become a primary site of self-knowledge, both individual and collective" (xxi). Ulmer terms this communication **electracy**, and views it as the next evolutionary step following orality and literacy. With the apparatus shift from literacy to electracy, a global solution to societal problems may be possible as electracy will "do for the community as a whole what literacy did for the individuals within the community" (xxvi).

**Abject Sacrifice** – Ulmer uses the concept of abject sacrifice, as theorized by Georges Bataille, recognizing that sacrifice given in place of "some value that is more important to the society" (42) is a necessary counter-balance to a society's surplus.

**New Media Art** – Electronic Monuments acknowledge abject sacrifices hidden below the threshold of society's consciousness. The monuments are created in the medium of New Media Art, or art made using electronic media technology which displays any or all of the behaviors of interactivity, connectivity and computability.

**Peripheral & Testimonial** – Electronic Monuments include two parts. The Peripheral is the proposed physical/electronic manifestation of the monument; it is linked to an existing monument or institution (such as the Vietnam Memorial or SeaWorld) and provides a visualization of the abject sacrifices. The Testimonial portion consists of a website



Ulmer, Gregory. *Electronic Monuments*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2005. Print.

## Research

Research was conducted in the theoretical and statistical aspects of bio-cultural diversity loss and the social, political, and ecological implications thereof.

**Oil Spills** – The Gulf oil disaster dwarfs many other petroleum related accidents in recent history. The petroleum exploration and production sustaining the economy has a normal and unavoidable byproduct of ecological disasters. This research led to the recognition of the magnitude of oil spill events: from 1960 to 2010, 74 major spills happened world-wide.<sup>1</sup>

**Ecosystems** – Theoretical research links the concepts of ecosystems with Bataille's surplus and abject sacrifice. C. S. Holling's ecosystem renewal cycle called contains four primary stages: exploitation, conservation, release, and reorganization.<sup>2</sup> Management systems that generate surplus production either through exploitation or conservation can counter-intuitively set the stage for collapse. The interrelationship between rigid and unresponsive management agencies coupled with society's dependence on oil is causing less resilient and more vulnerable ecosystems, so when confronted with an agent of disturbance, such as an oil spill, the

**Sacrifice** – Abject sacrifice for the oil economy is identified at two sites: degraded marine ecosystems and non-humans killed on highways, or roadkill in the vernacular. This ecological wealth is our "surplus" in Bataille's terms; the sacrifice of this wealth forms our abject sacrifice.

Gulf oil spill casualties:<sup>3</sup>

	Injured	Dead	Total
Humans	17	11	28
Marine mammals	12	115	128
Turtles	537	609	1146
Birds	2079	6104	8183

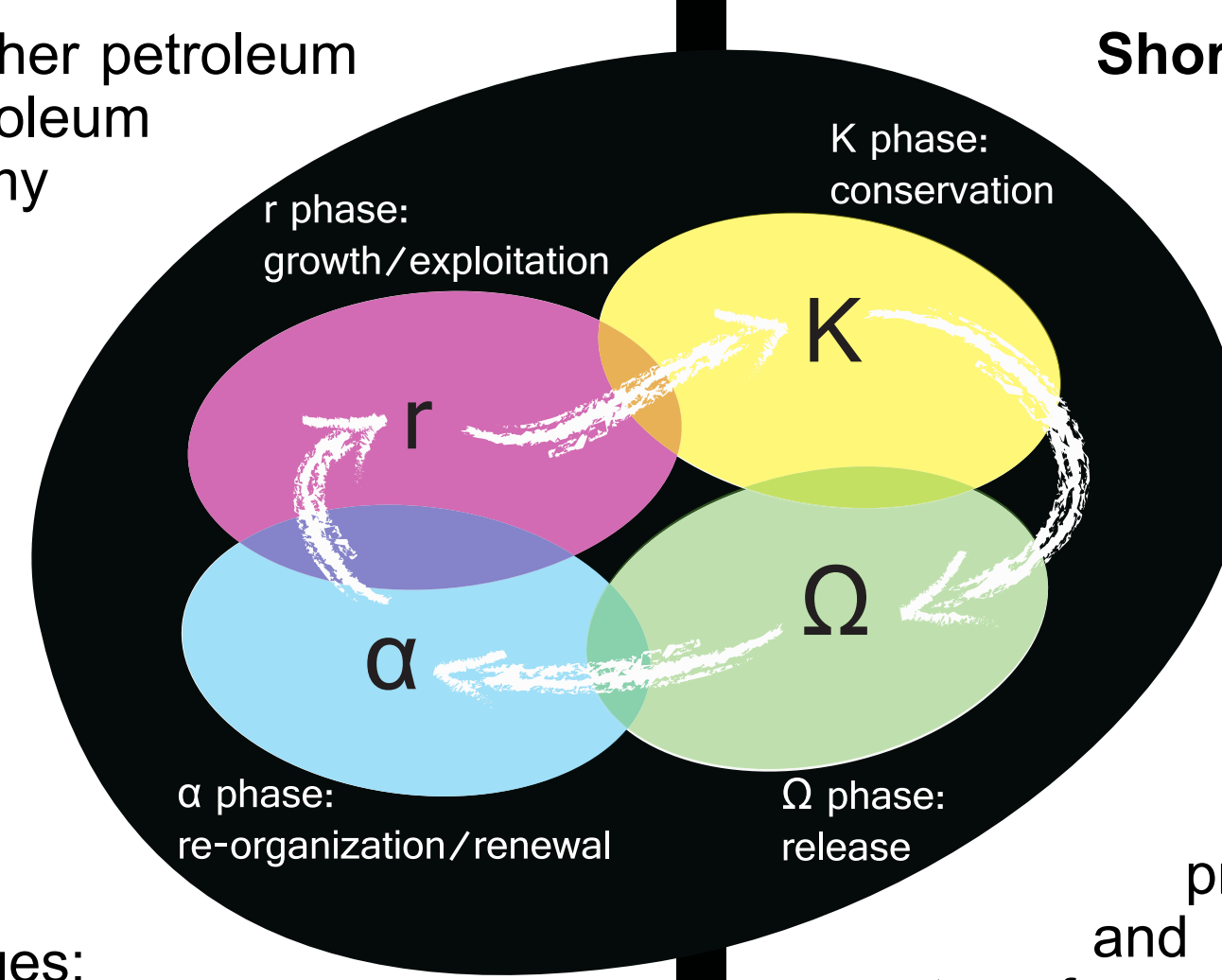
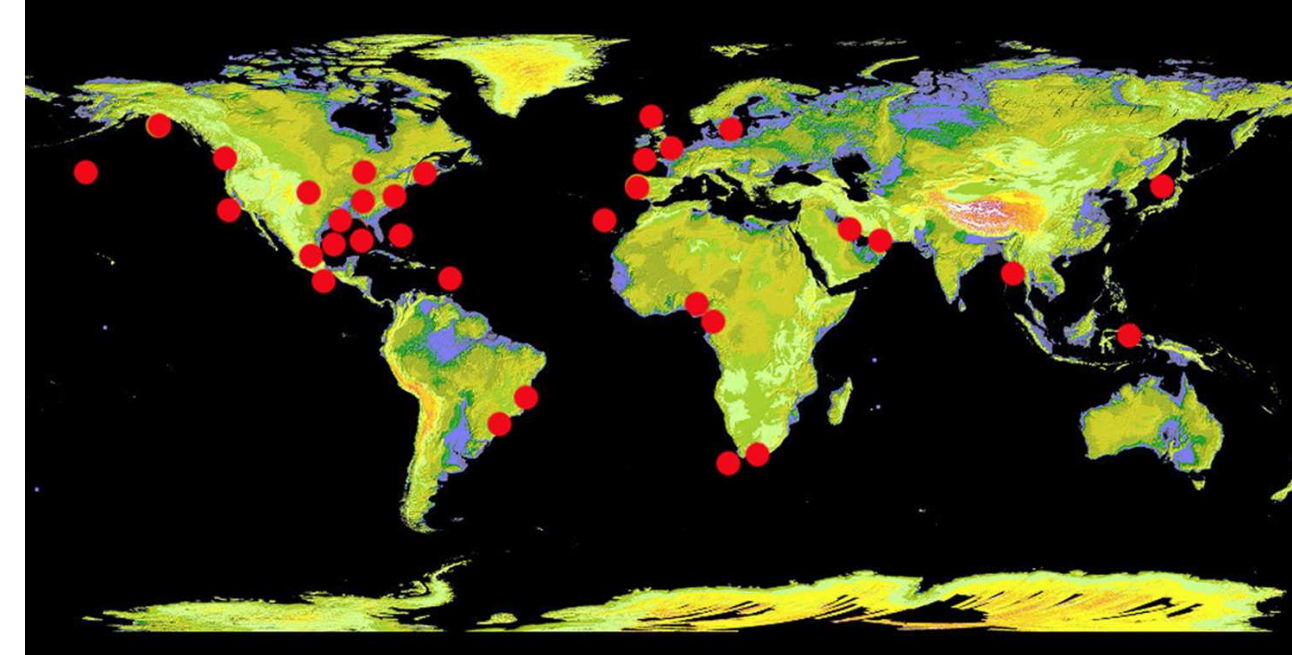
Roadkill statistics: an estimated one million vertebrate species die on U.S. roadways every day.<sup>4</sup>

The necessary sacrifice of our animal kin too often goes unrecognized. The western approach to the non-human is within the context of human values, aesthetics, or utility; this viewpoint ignores the indigenous appreciation of nature for spiritual as well as physical nourishment.

Only by letting go of rational approaches to roadkill statistics or oil well data, and only by accessing a new worldview can we begin to comprehend the true level of sacrifice mandated by human technological culture.

<sup>1</sup> Sovacool, Benjamin K. "The Costs of Failure: A Preliminary Assessment of Major Energy Accidents, 1907-2007." *Energy Policy* 36 (2008): 1802-20. *ScienceDirect*. Web. 6 Sept. 2010.

Zock, Jan-Paul, et al. "Prolonged Respiratory Symptoms in Clean-up Workers of the Prestige Oil Spill." *American Journal of Respiratory and Critical Care Medicine* 176 (2007): 610-16. *HighWirePress*. Web. 6 Sept. 2010.



Testimonial: *Carousel of Possibilities*

The research website gives form to these findings:

**World Map** – An annotated map showcases the worldwide locations of oil disasters. The interactivity and visualization of the oil disaster data is intended to evoke a response of outrage about the amount of damage the petroleum industry has caused.

**Short Film** – *Roadkill: Sacrifices on the Asphalt Altar* provides a visceral translation of the effects of a collapsing ecosystem cycle with images of oil spill victims and roadkilled animals. It is intended to reinforce the binary pair of roadkill and petroleum and make the audience establish the permanent connection. The instrumentation of the movie includes the sounds of oil pumps, burning, explosions, automobile crashes, and oceanic sounds. The driving sound track is interrupted every 11 ½ seconds by the sound of an animal being hit by a car. The jarring thump is juxtaposed visually with a photograph of a roadkilled or oil coated body of a marine animal. This deconsultation presents the audience with scenes they do not wish to see and sounds they do not wish to hear and the invention transforms the idea of roadkill from irrelevant to relevant.

**Symbolism** – Wisdom systems of indigenous groups are applied through syncretism and establish further connections within the testimonial. The practices of the Yoruba of West Africa, illustrated by Robert Farris Thompson's *Flash of the Spirit*, include concepts of nature and divination that have parallels to the roadkill motif of the Electronic Monument and are thus incorporated into the site.<sup>5</sup>



**Earth in Hands** – This symbolizes humanity giving the Earth away to support the use of petroleum. The Earth is being violated in the course of petroleum exploration and humanity does it knowingly.

**Roadkill Totem** – The totem pole gives form to the departed animal spirits produced in the sacrificial oil economy, highlighting the linkages and connections between animals that die on the roadways and those that die from oil production. They live in separate ecological niches but share the same common denominator of the petroleum economy.

The roadkill animal is an emblem of sacrifice, a "flatanimal" signifier of the flatulence of humanity's petroleum-powered, "gassy" transportation system, and a residual by-product of that consumption.

**Third World Nations** – The people of third world countries are also part of the abject sacrifice the monument memorializes. The indigenous tribes of Nigeria, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Darfur and the Sudan have been suffering from years of civil strife, pollution, and impoverishment due to the degradation of local economies and resources. The degradation of these local economies and cultures result primarily from transnational corporations exploiting the land's natural resources.

<sup>2</sup> Holling, C. S. "What Barriers? What Bridges?" *Barriers and Bridges to the Renewal of Ecosystems and Institutions*. Ed. Gunderson, et al. New York: Columbia UP, 1995. Print.

<sup>3</sup> Office of Protected Resources, NOAA Fisheries. *Nmfs.noaa.gov*. Web. 10 Mar. 2011.

<sup>4</sup> Peterson, Jodi, Ed. *High Country News*. 2010. *Hcn.org*. Web. 28 Nov. 2010.

<sup>5</sup> Thompson, Robert Farris. *Flash of the Spirit*. New York: Vintage, 1984. Print.

## Results

Peripheral: *Carousel of Possibilities* Kiosk

The peripheral is an electronic device placed at an existing monument, in this case the Blue Horizon® pavilion at SeaWorld® Orlando, which showcases Gulf region species. This site was chosen because of SeaWorld's commitment to conservation and their celebration of marine life. Western society echoes this celebration of marine life, but it is not willing to give up creature comforts to ensure marine ecological survival.

**Kiosk** – The peripheral will be a kiosk created from a SeaWorld Shamu® car and a gasoline pump. The car is visually represents a primary creature comfort of Western society and the cause of road kill. The design includes video screens displaying footage of the environmental impact and sacrifices made in the pursuit, use, and abuse of oil, as well as the sufferings of Third World countries.

The gas pump represents human dependency on petroleum products. Displaying the numbers of road kill, Third World deaths, and total cost of the world's dependency on petroleum, it updates in real time as humans and animals are sacrificed in the pursuit and use of petroleum products. As each sacrificial event occurs, it reinforces the relationship between humans and their dependency on oil and petroleum products.

**Broadcast Messaging** – For those who are unable to view the kiosk in person, messages will be sent each day via cell phones and Twitter so the electrated world is notified of the count of road kill tied to gas prices. At 8 a.m. each morning a text message, "X number of animals have died on our roadways today; we are N number of animals away from gas prices increasing," is broadcast and once the millionth animal is sacrificed on the asphalt altar, another message will be sent: "One million animals have died on our roadways today; as a result, gas is currently \$5.98 per gallon."

**Research Goal Met** – The preview of the *Carousel of Possibilities* testimonial in December, 2010, provoked stunned and emotional responses from the initial audience, and an observation that the video is "disturbing." This is the goal of the research: to elicit recognition, awareness, and a sense of responsibility. Since human dependence on a petroleum economy will not be solved any time soon, helping oil consumers understand the actual costs involved at least honors the abject sacrifices.



## Conclusion

The *Carousel of Possibilities* Electronic Monument proposal constitutes a form of politically involved New Media Art, with hybridity between the peripheral site at SeaWorld® and the online *Carousel of Possibilities* testimonial. The Internet allows a "space for exchange, collaborative creation and presentation that is transparent and flexible" (Paul qtd. in Graham and Cook 81). The flexibility of the Internet, combined with the physical peripheral monument, provides access to the *Carousel of Possibilities* from various perspectives and allows the Electronic Monument to garner wider audience access and recognition.

Version 1.0 is currently available at <nyfamilyhistory.com/MEorial/> A future version 2.0 would include collaboration and online participation in addition to curatorial text aimed at the non-academic level of visitor. Also, since the installation of the peripheral device at SeaWorld would not be allowed, perhaps a travelling exhibit could be created. The irony being that it would use petroleum products to move between venues.