





# ART & ACTIVISM, WATER & OIL, THEN AND NOW

**Jane Trowell** reflects on 30 years of arts group Platform, this year's winner of CIWEM's Arts and Environment Network AWEInspiring Award

**A**s I write, an audience of six people are participating in a piece of invisible theatre in London's Square Mile. They are part of Platform's *Oil City*, 'a spy-thriller for the post-Occupy age', and are being led through the streets of the corporate world in a sophisticated mix of fact, fiction and activist immediacy. It's our latest artwork, which addresses oil, finance and climate change, commissioned by Artsadmin. *Oil City* is edgy, made for now, full of experimental elements, yet it also has a long history, one could even say a 30-year history...

From the start of Platform in 1983 there has been the central notion that art as activism is a potent force for tangible change. When a group of students came together 30 years ago to create something that would tackle urgent political issues, what drew them was this: for those involved in politics to think more creatively, and those involved in art to think more politically. And to work on it together. As a 1987 manifesto put it: Platform is 'a theatre group that does not believe in directors or actors; a political group that does not believe in leaving politics to politicians. It exists to heal the division of creative artist from passive audience, the division between specialist disciplines... By thinking, acting now, we all draw the maps of the future.'

The times urgently required it. If we think now is bad, four years after Thatcher's election was politically

a very extreme time in Britain. The first privatisations of state-subsidised services were being rolled out, causing shockwaves and dividing the country. The 'old Left' was split and fought itself into disarray. The formerly strong trades unions were bitterly embattled with a government that delegitimised them at all points. At the same time, radical feminists, anti-racist activists, gay rights campaigners, union and community organisers, and a strong anti-nuclear movement, were also making history by rejecting the dominant narrative.

In this pressurised context, effectiveness was key. Platform held the belief that the arts – when done well – could affect people more deeply, and more rapidly than other means. So far this is not news. What particularly drove Platform was that this depth of feeling should lead to social and environmental change. We weren't interested in art as representation, but art as intervention and action.

We were not alone in this aim – political theatre companies such as 7:84, Welfare State International and Red Ladder, and arts groups such as Artists Placement Group and the Art of Change, had inspired the early members. Another big influence was the theories, environmentalism, and art, of Joseph Beuys, Die Grunen and other alternative 1980s German movements. But one thing stood out: Platform didn't want to be pinned to any particular form of

creativity, nor operate within known arts contexts such as galleries or theatres. We wanted to consider only what was the most creative and effective means of fostering social change, wherever that should take place. In the language of those early members: 'Any medium [is] a tool for cultivation. If the digging is best done through performance, we'll perform; if it needs a talk, we'll research and talk; if it needs a meal, we'll cook it; if it needs direct action, we'll be there. Our work is not fiction or entertainment, it is building society...' (1987 Manifesto)

But how to find the most creative and effective means? In-depth research was central. We wanted a systemic understanding of the forces, facts and issues to create the strongest most irrefutable case. This would then lead to astute decisions on what artistic and activist means should be used. It was a time where rapid responses to dramatic political events were absolutely essential in terms of political solidarity and movement-building. But at the same time, Platform's practice insisted on a research-based analysis that must underpin action. This analysis could also be shared widely in its own right alongside the art process. By bringing together researchers, activists, campaigners, and artists in this spirit, Platform hoped to provoke change that would endure, and promote visions that could catch on.

An example from the 80s was



*Addenbrookes Blues*, which was initiated while Platform was still a university-based group. Platform's members worked closely to support cleaners at Cambridge's Addenbrookes Hospital who were striking against the onset of privatisation of cleaning services. This campaign also took the form of a performance which, with the support of trades union NUPE, went on a tour of Britain to spread the word and fundraise for the strikers, including TUC headquarters in London. The work had another political aim in its attempt to undercut privilege in terms of the hierarchical split between the university and Cambridge town. At the time, it was pitifully unusual for any student activists to engage in a sustained way on local issues, but early members of Platform wanted to think systemically about change while acting locally.

By 1989 Platform had long-since survived university, had new members, and had moved from working in Brighton to London. In London, we began a long enquiry into the impact of London ecologically and socially, at home and in the wider world, an enquiry that still continues today. How did the newcomers address the metropolis? We started by stripping human-made London off the land to see what lay there before the human intervention. By examining this territory as a watershed – as a valley of 56 rivers and streams – we could come to understand nature, history, culture, economics and politics from a rich angle with lots of potential metaphors. In 1986, the democratically elected Greater London Council had been abolished along with six other metropolitan authorities – what better metaphor for a buried democracy than the sewerised, buried rivers of London? We could also come to understand how London, as a global trade city and centre of imperial and neo-liberal power, had 500 year-old roots.

We could begin to think in big timescales. Let's unbury the rivers, let's rediscover ecology in the city, let's recover democracy. Our popular project *Still Waters* on recovering London's buried rivers won a Time Out Award in 1992, and led to a whole slew of renewed interest in the Thames' tributaries that continues today. Just this morning I read about a pioneering project: the River Moselle, a tributary to the massive River Lea in east London, has been



By examining this territory as a watershed – as a valley of 56 rivers and streams – we could come to understand nature, history, culture, economics and politics from a rich angle with lots of potential metaphors

de-culverted in Lordship Park, in the London Borough of Haringey. It was never a sewer, but this is an act of hope for the future of nature and humans. It was also an act of hope for the past, funded as it was in part by the Heritage Lottery Fund. Other daylighting and decanalising projects on culverted rivers have been enacted on the Quaggy, Roding, Wandle, Brent, Ravensbourne. When we started talking about this in 'Still Waters' it was a still a very new conversation. Now, time for the sewers...

A series of arts-ecological initiatives on community urban renewables along the River Wandle in Wandsworth and Merton gained major national, even international impacts: St Joseph's Primary School was the first school in a western urban context to receive electricity powered by a local river. It caused a rolling media sensation, partly because it revealed the complete unsustainability of London's fossil-fuelled energy consumption, partly because of the complete cross-sectoral collaboration between artists, hydro-engineers, river-lovers, local activists, musicians and the local school that was involved. It was even visited by Vice-President Al Gore's special advisor on environment, Gary Lawrence.

In a 1993 manifesto we said: 'Imagine

living in a society which did not dominate the Earth. What would a town or city look like? Would roads be dug up to reveal buried rivers? Would its energy be drawn from the valley it is situated in? Would it cease to mine every continent of the world?'

In the same year, Platform decided to pick up on a new concept coming out of the Wuppertal Institute in Germany, that of the 'ecological footprint'. Studying this was to up the stakes on what we hoped to achieve. This concept was not yet in common parlance and in the project *Homeland*, a commission from London International Festival of Theatre, we wanted to change that. We researched how electricity came into the city. We researched the corporate businesses that profit from it, and impacts on the communities from which the key resources of coal, copper and glass come. We made links and set up a participatory installation over ten weeks in a huge pantechonicon to test out whether the notion of the ecological footprint could gain traction. 'Whose lands? Whose hands' was the mantra. Hundreds of conversations later the diagnosis was clear: this was to be the defining framework for us over the next few years, in the name of the environment and social justice. All we needed now was a good way in.

That way in was oil. 1995 saw the execution of Nigerian writer and campaigner Ken Saro-Wiwa and nine other Ogoni activists who were campaigning against the despoilation of the Niger Delta by western oil companies. 1995 was also the year of the struggle over the safe disposal of the Brent Spar oil platform. Both events caused international outrage and controversy. Climate change was increasingly on the agenda and the fossil-fuel driven economy was just beginning to come under the public gaze. Oil represented everything we were concerned about and so we announced a ten-year project and set to fundraising. By 2004 we had done more than 12 creative projects and campaigns, all aimed at exposing the injustices of London-based oil companies, chiefly Shell and BP, and with the wider aim of systematically delegitimising the fossil-fuel economy.

In 2005, we launched an international public art commission to mark ten





Sokari Douglas Camp's Battle Bus, winner of the 2005 public art commission to Remember Ken Saro-Wiwa

years since Ken Saro-Wiwa and the others' executions and to put the issue of environmental justice in the Niger Delta and Britain's part in it on the map. *Remember Saro-Wiwa* – a collaboration between Platform's environmental campaigner, media strategist, curator, educator and acclaimed artist Sokari Douglas Camp, Diaspora Ogoni in London and links in Nigeria – was backed by a strong coalition including Amnesty International, Index on Censorship and English PEN. The strategy of using an artworld convention – the commission – led to huge media coverage, which we framed to draw people to the issue of Shell's complicity in this ongoing devastation. This was art as movement-building and led to the next seven years of campaigning and some major coups. Sokari's *Battle Bus* is currently in residence at the Bernie Grant Arts Centre, London, and our Nigeria campaign has entered a new phase. We are setting to work on ideas for 2015 – the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Ken's death.

As for now, you could take yourself on an artist-created audio-tour *Tate a Tate*. You will wander through 'Tate Britain', 'Tate Boat' and 'Tate Modern' guided by soundworks that will animate the issues behind BP's sponsorship of Tate, and possibly make your blood



Imagine living in a society which did not dominate the Earth. What would a town or city look like? Would roads be dug up to reveal buried rivers? Would its energy be drawn from the valley it is situated in? Would it cease to mine every continent of the world?

boil. You could read our comprehensive glossy publication, *Not if but when, Culture Beyond Oil*, which brings together the views of artists, affected communities, activists, curators, thinkers and Platform on why we should strip oil sponsorship out of our culture. You could show your support for our plans for a year-long campaign in 2015, making another big intervention through the arts, culture and activism about the situation in the Niger delta, 20 years after Ken's execution. You could come to a showcase by our youth project *Shake! Young voices in arts, media, race and power*. You could

hear from them how they connect the murder of Ken and the others, with the murder of Stephen Lawrence. How they analyse environmental racism here and abroad. You would be deeply inspired by their performance-poetry and their videos on justice, environment, corporate power and freedom.

As Ken Saro-Wiwa said in a Channel 4 television documentary a year before his execution: 'It's not an ego trip, it's serious, it's politics, it's economics, it's everything. And art in that instance becomes so meaningful both to the artist and to the consumers of that art.' ●

#### Jane Trowell, Research Associate / Education, Platform

Platform thanks CIWEM's Arts and Environment Network for the honour of this year's AWEInspiring Award. Nick Reeves' strident and visionary leadership on environmental issues, and his capacity to link these to the arts and culture made him a formidable ally for Platform. Such a man is unusual and he will be deeply missed. Platform is developing a group of 'Sustainers' to help financially underpin our work. To show your support at any level, contact [tanya@platformlondon.org](mailto:tanya@platformlondon.org) or give direct at <http://platformlondon.org/donate/> <http://voicesthatshake.blogspot.co.uk/>