

A ride through the Petroleumscape in May 2017: Maasvlakte 2 - Venlo - Autobahn - Cologne - Vienna

by Benjamin Steininger



1. He actually never drives a car is the first thing Piet explains to us when we sit with him in the car. And already when we leave the parking lot of the TU Delft we understand what this means for our tour into by far the largest refinery landscape in Europe. After two kilometers and long before Rotterdam we get lost for the first time, U-turn, then we are stuck in a traffic jam. Apparently, the parallel motorways between Delft and Rotterdam can only be driven in zigzags, partly below the water level for reasons of landscape protection. And Piet only knows Rotterdam as a cyclist, as he assures us again and again. Routes, intersections, turning lanes, the entire repertoire of the automotive petrosphere, everything somehow unclear. Finally, the entrance to the Maas Tunnel. The largest Rotterdam transportation project of the 1930s, a highway sunk into the ground in the middle of the city. At the other tunnel portal we wait for the other participants of the tour, who are also lost. Architects, historians, cultural scientists, who all want to get close to it, the genius loci petrolei.

Googlemaps shows us our destinations. Now it proves useful how well Piet knows his city and the oil in it. Countless markers between here and Maasvlakte 2, gigantic plants from different company empires, construction phases, product groups lurk everywhere. On the maps of the exhibition in the TU-Delft we have already seen that a good three quarters of the port area belong to oil. Almost 50 kilometers stretch between the city and the North Sea. Indeed: What flies past us and the highway is gigantic. Tank to tank, refinery to refinery. Through tunnels, over islands, rather rarely you can see ships, canals from the flow space of the empty highway. But always pipes, process architectures, tanks. Piet reports.

At some point the last island, Maasvlakte 2, virgin land of sand, where you can still see the shells from the car, artificial dunes above concrete barriers. One of three deep-water ports in the world where ships with a draught of 24 meters can dock fully loaded.

Container, oil and ore terminals. How we are going to sail back from here in three quarters of an hour is a mystery to me on the one hand, but on the other hand it is completely clear. Of course it can be done, you just have to step on the gas. Road movie situation at a parking bay. Three vehicles, photos are snapped, astonished people in a lee-re, which will perhaps be further developed. In the distance, the actual destination becomes visible. The tank far in front, opposite Hoek van Holland. Perhaps one of the giant tankers has docked.

Piet and with him my fellow passengers, an Italian spatial planner from London and an architect from Rotterdam, have to turn back here because of me, because I have to catch a train to Central Europe. To where the oil flows from right here. It's too bad that you can't continue chatting comfortably here or even swim a few laps in the North Sea next to the tankers. What Piet has to say about Maasvlakte really does make sense. And Maasvlakte 2 also has a fine beach. Why this tour was scheduled so tightly, why it was not scheduled at the beginning of the conference in Delft or on one of the first afternoons, so that one could have debated afterwards in the circle of participants exactly about this insane infrastructure, is probably a mystery to all who are in the road movie here. Probably also here applies: what is really good, you can not plan.

We just manage to turn around with Piet's Fiat 500 on the road and hang behind a lonely container transporter. The automatic oil converter transmission howls, targeted acceleration seems difficult. What kind of efficiency do these oil converters have and why do we learn so little about them? Piet had bought exactly this car because of Italian friends, but it was produced in Poland, as he whimsically tells us. With speed 80 we are behind the container, there is even a traffic light on Maasvlakte, too strange why this was not a roundabout, but the traffic light has a pleasantly fast pace. Finally four lanes again, the Fiat roars past the truck. Still, only about 110 km/h. The process heat of the Refineries and the CO₂ go via pipes directly to the greenhouses north of the Nieuwe Maas, I learn from the back seat. Another way we all eat oil. With Piet conversation about one of Rotterdam's most important museums, the city has cut it to 40%. He himself has, although he knows so much about the port facility with the oil rather little to do, more with migration and generally with port stories, but he could arrange contacts into tank farm institutions, if one would stop by with a few curators. The Rotterdam architect in the back seat knows the way to the train station, after all. The Maas tunnel and the sunken autobahn do their best. Nevertheless red traffic lights, in front of us on the intersection an end-of-work crash, fender benders, our turning lane is comparatively little blocked. The Fiat howls again, a last, penultimate red light. Five minutes until departure. How good that I don't have to get any more luggage out of the locker. In the morning, I had been briefly annoyed by the fact that lockers behind the QR code locks were unloaded and that I didn't have my ticket with me. A few steps to platform No. 6, there start the trains to Eindhoven. As a cyclist and train rider, Piet knows all the platforms by heart. "We'll be in touch" he calls frantically as he leaves, "run, run, two minutes!"

2. On the platform, the double-decker Intercity. Due to some police measures, the departure is delayed by five minutes. Great, then we could have marveled five minutes further on Maasvlakte! Relief that I have managed the hell ride and will be back in

Vienna tomorrow morning. Flat fields, soccer fields, sometimes even something like forest rushes by. But the connection in Eindhoven is getting tight, the delay in the announcements has not decreased. One asks to hurry up with the change on track 1A, the connection to Venlo waits just so. But where is 1A? A fellow passenger advises going through the underpass, and that's exactly the direction in which a lot of people are running. But that is wrong. When I understand this after ten seconds and run along the long platform in exactly the opposite direction, the train departs at this moment. Too stupid! But I have a thick time buffer in Cologne, until there at 21:31 the night train to Vienna should depart, and the next train to Venlo goes thanks to Dutch clock traffic already after half an hour. But how to continue? If you don't know your way around, you're lost, as is often the case in the Netherlands. Vending machines don't provide any information and there are staff who eloquently explain the QR code barriers, but the young thing doesn't know where there could be timetables, so off to the only counter with people.

Then it becomes annoying. Because despite of the pipelines for the smooth transport of millions of tons of hydrocarbons which run since the 1950s, between Venlo and Mönchengladbach - as I know from the historian's book in my suitcase - the rail cycle here continues to think in terms of national borders. Gap in service, interruption, I can forget the night train in Cologne!

Fuck! I will have to spend Saturday in Cologne, the night train ticket will expire, the regular train trip will come to over 130 EUR even with BahnCard25. And a weekend with a single Sunday is not really one, arriving into a half-sick, strained family, probably still studying for some schoolwork, a stupid prospect. Call to Vienna, I am more than annoyed. Nevertheless, onward in clock traffic, towards the border to Venlo. Surprisingly good internet on the smartphone after all. And just long enough time to think. Because the problem is only 40 kilometers from Venlo to Mönchengladbach. Trains get out of sync here, but pipelines and even highways run without interruption: the petrosphere. How much that might cost? Doesn't matter. Out of the station, it's raining, immediately to the cab stand. The man with the silver tooth says 70 EUR, the Western Union ATM is right next door. The station is obviously on the outskirts, or the city was razed to the ground in some offensive and rebuilt somewhere else, in any case we are immediately on the highway. Also this driver has problems with his automatic, this time Mercedes, somehow jerky. Dutch from Afghanistan, the children work as doctor and engineer, one is still studying. There are great minerals in Afghanistan, but also mujahideen. Wet, green Germany outside, highway exit.

I only know Mönchengladbach from the kitchen radio, Saturday afternoon Bundesliga, Sabine Töpferwien. After the design overkill in the Netherlands, the entrance to this city of 260,000 people looks even shabbier. Helmut Lethen was born here, but it doesn't show. Short irritation before the station, the cab driver can not read the pictograms on the street and wants to turn on his GPS, which I just prevent, because that costs time. Quickly four bills from the wallet and purely into the station. But which track? At least there's a knowledgeable railroad employee here who checks the connection to Cologne on his tablet in no time at all, S-Bahn from platform 9, change in Neuss. Ten minutes until then, I get a beer, there is no snack. Just the shrink-wrapped apple pie and Snickers from the vending machine.

I didn't know that there was such a huge petrochemical plant near. The regional express from Neuss to Cologne passes through for quite some minutes. Probably, quite certainly, I have already caught up with the oil in motion in the pipelines from Maasvlakte 2 to here by Fiat, Intercity, Mercedes, S-Bahn. High pressure does not mean high speed in pipeline traffic.

3. At the station in Cologne short shock, the timetable announces a completely different, earlier departure of the EuroNight train. But that was probably a typing error, as you can see on the platform. In addition: 35 minutes of delay. Then the cab ride was retroactively superfluous, but of course you can't think about time that way. You never know what will happen next. *Ignis mutat res*, as the alchemists but also Isabelle Stengers and Ilya Prigogine say, chemistry is the science of becoming and of open futures. In the time window that is now open, there is half an hour for dinner, fish and chips from allegedly organic potatoes, served at the snack bar by pretty girls who are still worn-out at at nine o'clock in the evening. Somehow touching and disturbing, the busy work effort at stove and fryer and the almost too private, direct physicality in their tight, translucent leggings of some, of course, hydrocarbon-based high-tech leotard.

Then at the platform, the train pulls in. And just stops. "Announce something about overhead line damage", I hear someone in uniform passing by and shortly afterwards the announcement comes. Train traffic at the entire Cologne station has been suspended for an indefinite period. Even the lights at the vending machines go out. I talk to an American in my night train compartment. He knows the Californian Tar pits and oil pumps from his own view, because he is from L.A. And he is an archaeologist and lawyer. Petroscapes, cultural history of oil, nothing makes more sense to him. He wants to go to the opera in Vienna, otherwise let himself drift. Good plan, and we have a long time to chat about it. An hour later, after the display boards, the train doors have also given up the ghost. The compressed air is gone and the compressors are apparently not running on the emergency power from the locomotive. The door jerks back and forth like twitching slaughter cattle, but can be pointed in the right direction like a merely stunned creature. Using compressed air to store power only works for a short time, as Wilhelm Ostwald at 1902 already knew in his great lecture on chemically driven mosquitoes and ocean liners. At some point, it is already half past eleven, another centrally controlled, electrically powered ICE train pulls in over the Hohenzollern Bridge. 100% green electricity for BahnCard customers, the wind turbines and hydroelectric power plants arrive back in Cologne. Germany's after Munich second-largest interchange train station is apparently back on the grid, and the vending machines have juice again.

In Koblenz and Mainz, grumbling Viennese board the train, loudly complaining about the delay and not realizing that it is them and not their delay to wake up sleeping passengers. The night train makes up about an hour, but we are still late in the morning. So be it. I am happy that Saturday is saved, I don't care about the 112 minutes. I will get the passenger rights form right away at the station. Funnily enough, the trainservice companies even contribute by this to my cab costs in Mönchengladbach.

Vienna Meidling station, here I am. Gray-haired guys in leather gear hang out on the running board and take a first morning dump five minutes before the terminus at the main station. On the car train wagon from Hamburg 24 motorcycles, a rich rocker group apparently, who don't care about the codes and rail travel bans of conservative biker

communities. But in fact, they are from Norway, Europe's Texas without guns and with fat pensions for all. Redneck rules seem not to apply to them.

Then the last petroleum slide on this trip: The ÖAMTC helicopter that had overtaken my elevated subway at U-Bahnhof Josefstadt has landed at AKH, the largest hospital in Vienna and Austria. The subway stops and I see the patient being transferred. With sterile equipment and conceivably many plastic cannulas, a larger group stands ready to escort the traffic victim from the helicopter into the care of the operating theatre.

How good: In hospitals, diesel generators provide multiple redundant emergency power.