



Anatomy of Oil

September 15-November 24, 2018

Artists:

Susanna Battin

Kate Kendall

LA Transcendental Listenings

(David Horvitz and Asha Bukojemsky)

Michael Mandiberg

Nina Sarnelle

Molly Tierney

Elia Vargas

<http://www.gas.gallery>
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Dr. Matthew T. Huber is an Associate Professor of Geography at Syracuse University. His book *Lifeblood: Oil, Freedom and the Forces of Capital* (University of Minnesota Press, 2013) shows how oil consumption informed American cultural politics within the twentieth century, particularly how it intertwines with the rise of neoliberalism and right wing populism. We conducted the interview over the phone on August 13, 2018.

One of the main aims of *Lifeblood* is, as you state to, show how “oil became constitutive of a specific cultural politics of life in the United States.” You describe an “entrepreneurial life” as a driving force. Can you begin by discussing the meaning of this “entrepreneurial life” and its connection to oil’s dominance?

I was looking at the way in which oil and the multiplicity of products that come from oil undergirded a certain reconstruction of what “life” meant for a lot of Americans in the middle of the 20th century. I was interested in how gasoline and the multiplicity of petroleum products (plastics, chemicals, etc.) provided a material basis for a specific ecology of suburban life. My aim was to connect the materiality of petroleum to a very peculiar ideology of “life” itself; a highly privatized vision of life; the idea of life being something that you make yourself; life as an entrepreneurial project. When I was working on the book, I remembered that one of the strangest things that I encountered as a young child was the question, “What are you going to do with your life?” This was a normal question to ask little suburban kids, like myself. It’s this very idea that you could actually make something of your life as an individualized privatized project.

I wanted to draw attention to the fact that this way of living required a whole lot of energy to make possible – prodigious amounts of fuel to allow the dispersal of individuals to private single family homes, with yards, etc. For instance, in early industrial capitalism, most people lived close to where they worked. They might be like a mile away from the factory. By 1969, the average American was commuting nine miles to work. And it wasn’t just work. The shopping center, the school, the whole geography of life was spread out and required this

privatized command over space. My argument is that this energized privatism also supplemented particular ways of thinking and feeling about politics.

What role does imagination play in producing “entrepreneurial life”? In other words, how does oil influence what is imagined? I think this also touches on your discussion of “freedom” and its connection to a “privatized sociospatial existence.”

Our conception of freedom in the US is so spatial. At its core “freedom” is the power to decide where you're going to live, which I think for certain populations, is like a birthright. In other words, you are “free to choose” (as Milton Friedman put it) your school district and the right neighborhood that you want your family to be raised in. Of course, there are many people in the US who don't have a lot of choice of where they might want to live. But it's that dream of being able to plant your family down anywhere.

But obviously, again, when you're talking about oil, we're mainly talking about transportation fuel. That's what it powers, in addition to all those other plastics and material products. But really, 70% of every barrel of oil pretty much powers transportation fuel. We're talking not only about this decentralized vision of home, settlement and suburbia but also of the imaginary of freedom, as “the open road”; freedom as mobility; the “road trip”; the idea that at any moment you can just hop in a car and go to, say, a national park. You start looking at how the oil industry itself advertises and projects its importance to American life. It is always this imagery of the open road and a freedom of movement.

I wanted to pick up on imagination, because I think it syncs into one of the tensions within this exhibition - namely, how does one represent oil? I would say that many of the artists in *Anatomy of Oil* are not trying to get at or speak to or show up the “reality” of oil, but rather limbo in abstraction. It's an interesting move - far from the more documentary practices that are generally used to approach the

subject. Given the focus of your research, what would you say are the challenges in representing oil?

That's a tough question. It's interesting to go back to the way it was represented in the heyday of suburban culture in the 1950s. I found this one ad in particular, that's in the book. It's this picture of this elegant couple on their way to a ballroom dance or something. The ad is about synthetic fibers made from oil. They're marching along in their very fancy clothing made from oil. Behind them is a chemical factory. At that time, a chemical factory was a symbol of progress and industrial ingenuity. Nowadays, that ad would not work because we inherently imagine chemical factory as a dirty and toxic landscape. For example, if you think about that HBO show, *True Detective*, I feel like there was this very dark petroleum aesthetic about the kind of landscape in Louisiana with these petroleum refineries and chemical factories. It's a very dark toxic aesthetic. A lot of art and photography is trying to uncover that dark, toxic background to oil, which I think is valuable to understand what the production and refining and processing of petroleum looks like in the sites of production, extraction.

At the same time, I think the fetishization of this toxic imagery of oil often severs it from the everyday in a way. It creates this sense, like, “Oh, that's unfortunate for those people that have to deal with those toxic landscapes.” When, again, one of the points of the book is trying to make clear that most people in the economy today rely on this substance to reproduce their lives and so the question of what do we do with those sites of production should be a larger democratic question of: how do we deal with the problems with energy production, whether it's windmills or toxic oil sites? The point is that those dirty toxic landscapes are part of us – not just part of us in a simple material way, but in a deeply ideological way; to reject them seems too easy. The better question might be: what can we do with them? How do we transform the geographies of production that underlie our lives?

In Los Angeles, the largest urban oil field in the United States, a lot of these companies have gone to

great efforts to actually make these extraction sites as invisible as possible. So, oil is ubiquitous, but it's also seemingly invisible, too. How do you speak to that?

Imagination allows us to envision what is possible. There's some work now - not only in the sciences but in the arts as well - related to a "post fossil" future. Namely, how can we reimagine and reorganize society outside of oil dependence? What are your thoughts about these conversations? What alternatives are possible in the United States, given the economic and cultural history you provide in *Lifeblood*? What would an alternative path look like in everyday practice?

In the conclusion, I tried to push back a bit on the peak oil apocalypse literature which is saying, "Oh, God. We're going to run out of oil, and then everything that makes our life is going to be gone." First of all, unfortunately we're not running out of oil. We keep finding it, and we keep finding way more of it in places like North Dakota. In my view, the real barrier to continued oil extraction is not supply, but climate change. We can't burn this stuff anymore. But if we were running out, it might actually force a much more public and collective type of politics than the type of privatized politics oil made possible. So if there was less oil, maybe people would be forced to live more compact cities, right? I'm someone who, along with Henri Lefebvre, feels that there is something revolutionary in the proximity and diversity inherent in cities. Oil fired suburbia was an effort to disperse that revolutionary spirit. But, more concretely, if people are forced to live in more compact cities, you can have much more exciting conversations about a move towards viable public transportation systems.

The cities we have now are really based upon cars, highways and decentralized living. I read a paper years ago that estimated how many miles of traffic it would take to make a viable public transit system in Atlanta. And I'm not even talking about LA. But in Atlanta, it was thousands of miles. It's totally inconceivable that that could happen.

Obviously, a lot of people when they talk about alternatives to oil want to talk about alternatives to power a car. So, you could have batteries and you could have electric cars. But to me, it's going to reproduce the same type of privatized ideologies of transport that the car gave us. When thinking of alternatives to oil, we probably want to think about alternatives to the car itself; alternative spatial arrangements and alternative politics and ideologies.

The book is really trying to argue that the privatization of oil didn't just make people's lives more private. It made American politics more private (i.e. neoliberal); a politics based upon slashing the public sector; about people wanting to be left alone, and resenting paying high taxes. This anti-public politics was made possible by oil. But if we want an alternative, we're going to have to resuscitate collective-centered politics. When I was writing the book, there wasn't much of a sign that that was happening, but since the book came out, there's this new democratic socialist movement based on using collective power to provide the basics of life to everyone. In contrast, oil-fired suburban politics bases the conditions for success on individual entrepreneurialism. If you fail, it is your fault because your life itself is reducible to your own choices, effort and tenacity. But, of course, this vision makes it morally acceptable to leave huge swathes of the population without their basic needs met for food, health care, housing, and, of course, energy. I think we're starting to see a resurrection of a type of politics that's centered on collective solidarity and the conviction that to create solutions to all our problems of poverty and ecological crisis we actually need to build a mass popular movement.

The Lake Meadmaids originate in Los Angeles. They are born from citrus blossoms of the valley, of the studio backlot recycling bin. They look into each other's eyes and laugh.

Do they know what they've been sent here to do? They had to take some moments to stop and think about it.

It was unclear to them for a long while.

They were mostly busy braiding their hairs for a while - did one get a knot?

They had never seen snow before just lived in golden hues of baptismal brew of seaweed and freeweed.

The sunsets, ghetto birds, higher education for a penny. They washed their hairs in the snow that came out of their faucets. Cold for cold snow and hot for hot snow. It had already melted by the time it came out.

They never thought about what unmelted

snow looked like.

Shampoo was for cleaning, and conditioner was for sparkles. Both the Meadmaids especially loved the sparkles. They were content to be nature's culture. They even wrote about it and had critical dialogues between the ocean and the mountains. Just exit 25 off the 110 southbound, northbound I forget what its called, just look for Solano Canyon its in between two of the tunnels - yeah, like if you were going to ToonTown.

Conversation and critical dialogue and writing made them seem like worth everyone's while. They were worth it too. There was a gardener near the house that manicured his lawn with nail trimmers. The sprinklers would come on at 8am every morning and 7pm every night. The side yard had donut shaped rings of grass leading to the side porch. The chainlink fence, a vine with aggressive pruning that only allowed

leaves to grow every 5 ft which then aligned with each fence post of the chainlink. Potted flowers were placed every 3 ft along the cement walk ways in rows, rendering the paths unusable. There was one cat.

Meaning was found when they filled the 2.5 gallon collapsible jug with melted snow. The container swelled up with the snow, pushed each side out to form a rounded-edged cube with a small red spigot at one side.

It could go anywhere. This melted snow could be anything. It was already square. What more could it be. It could fit snug against more squares of snow. They stacked so well. They could be thrown or handed off. Carried in a kayak or backpack. If one was crossing a border, one might carry one of these squares to pack down or pick up more melted snow along the way. If one ran out of snow, there was always a 76, AMPM, 7/11, Texaco, Valero, Mobil along the way. They'd charge you for ice, but not for the melted stuff. It was this container that made all roads possible, a million roads to the infinite futures, held in the space that only borders had more space

and sky. The travel was easily got. Since fracking made the continental shelf drinkable burnable - no distance was too great. Los Angeles to Miami in a day, Houston to New Orleans in an hour, Nova Scotia to Chicago half. The way was paved, yet very few traveled it anymore, bound to faucets that could hemorrhage open after a week of dry. The Meadmaids lined up the collapsible containers straight. The soft cubes made a line that had to bend at the corners of the room. They bent left and then up, they stacked and curled around themselves. The next time the faucet combined combusted with snow they filled all of them. All of them were tight. Packed. Melted, but hard.

One hundred of them fit perfectly in the back of the truck, a cubic unit of even one hundred. The truck became a bed of the hard melted snow. It looked like a

block of ice with red pepper flakes
dispersed at even intervals. They
drove this block out the 15 and went
into the great basin and they thought
of God and of that kingdom.

They also thought of things that
made up a history of transcontinentalism
The Golden Spike, the Moffet tunnel,
route 66, the Pony Express, telecommuni-
cation, PG and E. Their project
wanted to be so much, but would
reinstate an older code.

When they arrived at the park's
entrance, the toll booth was
abandoned. A hot breeze blew
through the interior of the
sentry box which was collecting
a biscuit colored dust in all its
curious places. They blew
through as well.

Houses of small groupings formed isolated clumps on their map.

The landscape was indistinguishable from all the desert they had spent the day driving through - yet there were signs like, "Echo Pass" and "Marine Harbor" along the road side with arrows pointing east. They followed one down, the road wound around and then turned into the biscuit colored stuff.

They continued regardless aiming their wheels both south and east until they came across something that looked like a slope into what could be water. They looked for the water but couldn't find it. There was a great hole where it once could have been - maybe there was a sketch of it

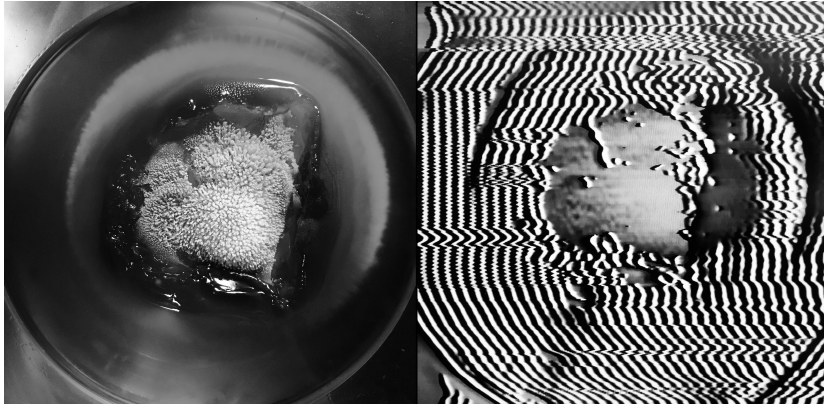
across the belly of this vacancy. That was when they backed the bed of the truck up against the imagined waterline. Tailgate folded down, the Meadmaids unloaded the cubes of melted snow one-by-one. The first Meadmaid would unload it off the truck bed, and the second Meadmaid would grab it by its red handle, loosen the spigot, and would empty the container's contents into the vacancy. The water began to rise, it started from the middle and pushed outwards towards the edges of the many-fingered lake bed. It crawled up and contained the lustrous hues of the sea - aquamarine, cerulean, topaz, seashells that had been crushed under their feet into

the biscuit earth, previously unnoticed, became emblems of the transformation taking place. There were a million or more tiny shells that sought one another to clasp palms with.

In the morning their tails grew back. They had not submerged for several days, many years, and when they entered the lake in the morning to wash the biscuit earth that choked them in a dust storm of the night away, their fish parts reappeared suddenly. The waves lapped the edges of the dry shoreline and the sky drank up. The water pushed out in all directions that the fingers spread, a large blue hand moving out into the desert.

[Meta]rials

Elia Vargas



The material conditions of life impact the capacity of human agency

Likewise, human agency is a complex set of material relationships

Oil is...

A set of conditions forged in deep time

Solar tunnels of now

Light information, delayed

Relationships traced as new objects

New matterings

Relational ontologies materializing new presents

Such a refiguring of oil engages with the power structures and agencies in human and nonhuman spaces, which are many and varied

Oil is...

Forever changed by 1859

The year Seneca oil made the earth 39 feet deep a commodity

Edwin Drake extracted liquid black hydrocarbons

Through salt miners' solar tunnels

Against the rhythm of a percussion drill bit

Encased in metal

Crude oil seeped up

Through the scaffolding of a new commodity

Into industrialization

Against the Anthropocene

To suffocate the whales

With new light

A primordial light

Of latent solar power

Catalyzed in other timespacematterings

Without clock time

Bringing the deep past to the surface

Soaked deep in time

A new material flow

A bifurcation of naturecultures

A fissuring of compressed hydrocarbons

Of oppositional difference

Vectors of mystical healing

Or vectors of commodity transmission

A mythology of gods

A spiritual anointing

Of divinity

Of perfection

Of death

This is a real history of oil

An oil ontology

Troubling a contemporary western tradition of what crude oil is

And how its becoming comes to be

A material history

Of metaphors

This is a history

Whose future

Is in its past

And present genealogies illuminate

New lookings

Deep lookings

At the networks of connections

Various translations

Of matter and meaning

Blinding the eye

From its own intra-action
 Shaping what it sees as much as shaping itself
 This history is the present
 Steeped in oil
 From an incomplete past
 That is always changing
 Constructing the present
 And new path dependencies
 New light information
 From lasers
 Through fibers of glass
 Fracturing intervals
 For new efficiencies
 Destroying distance
 Material transmissions
 As signal
 Refiguring the sun
 And how it matters

Here are some thoughts:

Is energy itself a metaphor? In a western human comprehension of energy, the web of associations that the word contains expands beyond material properties such as solar radiation, hydrocarbons, and other various combustible potentialities. Energy also contains within it an assumed understanding of all the ethical questions which surround energy-use, efficiencies, and extractive moralities. For example, energy is also the assumption of a linear, human contained, trajectory of energy-use; a limited model. Energy is that which powers human cultural edifice. This distorts the possibility that the materiality of energy's substance—crude oil for example, or the paraffin hydrocarbon, or the sun!—has other latent or active potential which does not express itself in this metaphor of energy. That crude oil could be a medical ointment, for example, or that oil pipelines shape new path dependencies, across which new expressions of being play themselves out, do not fall within this particular energy metaphor. All of which begs the question: what conditions propagated such a metaphor? Why isn't deep time, solar radiation, photosynthesis, or transduction part of the constellation of pressures that form current everyday uses of

this word? One possible answer: as a result of complex settling of concepts, in the aim of normalizing procedures, legislation, infrastructure, use, and (cultural or economic) values, certain ideas (all ideas) are simplified in ideologically informed ways that facilitate that ideological purpose. This happens over and over again, continuously, such that metaphors themselves are made up of complex oversimplified networks of metaphors.

Radical metaphors for [meta]rial reworkings:

Things < : > Metaphor

- Life :: Process
- Process :: Life
- Electromagnetism :: Action at a Distance :: Signal Flow
- Material Substrate :: Ether
- Oil :: Solar Death
- Light :: Information
- Information :: Growth
- Pipeline :: Solar Tunnels
- Growth :: Information Embodiment
- Thought :: New Material Space

This letter was printed and distributed to all the homes and businesses within a two block radius of Washington Blvd and 4th Avenue in advance of Nina Sarnelle's Sound for the Long Hole.

Dear Neighbor,

Do you know what lies 9000 feet below your home? Directly below where we're standing right now, where we eat and walk and pick up dog poop everyday? There's another world down there, an abstract, faraway place we've never been. Below us is a zone of real estate so autonomous that it doesn't belong to you, or to my landlord, or to any property management company listed on West Side Rentals. This deep land belongs to Sentinel Peak Resources California, previously Freeport McMoRan Oil & Gas, before that Plains Exploration & Production Company (PXP), and before that Union Oil Company.

In much of the world, citizens can own land on the surface, but all minerals rights belong to the government. Minerals, rocks, oil and gas deposits below the surface are therefore public property, and can't be extracted by private companies or individuals without authorization from the state. However, in the United States and a few other countries, mineral rights have followed a different trajectory of privatization.

Before the 20th century, anyone owning property also owned the unlimited air rights above it, as well as the ground beneath it. This type of complete private ownership is called "fee simple estate." But with the rise of commercial mining and drilling in America, ownership of these different horizontals became compartmentalized and complex. When mineral rights are purchased in the US today, the buyer also obtains the right to drill on the surface in order to exploit their property underground. The surface landowner may not be able to control when the mining takes place, how it will be done and

what will be done to restore the property afterwards. Another complication arises from the fact that oil and gas deposits often flow across large distances underground. This means that owning one access point can give mining companies the ability to extract resources that reach far beyond their actual mineral property "boundaries."

Los Angeles is the largest urban oil field in the country. In fact, the city was built on the wealth of oil and gas extraction, first discovered in 1892 by Edward Doheny, underneath what is now the Echo Park Pool parking lot. Today oil and gas extraction is still very active in some of the city's most densely populated areas, from Beverly Hills to the airport, downtown to Long Beach. As the resources closest to the surface are removed, extraction requires more and more expense, deeper wells, and even the injection of huge amounts of water and toxic chemicals to force the oil to the surface (processes like hydraulic fracturing "fracking", or acidization). As scientists continue to investigate the potential for these invasive techniques to stimulate tectonic activity, how should we feel living in a city one earthquake away from falling into the sea?

The Inglewood Oil Field is hard to miss on a drive to the airport, but many drilling sites in the middle of the city are thoroughly—at times even theatrically—disguised by large warehouses and fake office buildings, a fake clocktower in Pico Robertson, a fake lighthouse in Venice... Journalistic exposés of LA's "secret" oil industry include photos of pumpjacks tucked away in the rear parking lot of the Beverly Center, or the strange derrick-shaped brick tower that looms above the Beverly Hills High School football field, covered with a bright flower pattern that looks like some kind of community mural.

Perhaps it is in this thin veneer where the two defining industries of Los Angeles meet: oil and entertainment. This city knows how to create the perfect façade. From the surgically

sculpted bodies walking down Rodeo Drive to the fake Brooklyn brownstones on the Paramount lot, the value system of the entertainment industry is one based in surface, in appearance. It might sound like, smell like, and contribute to climate change like an oil well—just so long as it doesn't *look like* one...

It's no coincidence that LA is the city chosen to demonstrate Baudrillard's concept of *hyperreality*, this swirling smog of real and fiction in which we walk around every day. As famously pronounced in his seminal text *Simulation and Simulacrum*,

“Disneyland is presented as imaginary in order to make us believe that the rest is real, whereas all of Los Angeles and the America that surrounds it are no longer real, but belong to the hyperreal order and to the order of simulation. It is no longer a question of a false representation of reality (ideology) but of concealing the fact that the real is no longer real, and thus of saving the reality principle.”

So, where does that leave us today, gazing up at the hyperreal palms of Arlington Heights? If you don't move that car by 10am I assure you the ticket will be *real*. This part of the city is home to its very own Las Cienegas Oil Field, a narrow strip that runs directly under my home, stretching from La Brea Avenue to downtown. You may have noticed the green topiary wall that encloses the entire block of Washington Blvd. between 3rd and 4th Avenues. Have you ever wondered what lies on the other side of that wall? The signs are small but clear, if you get out of your car to look:

TRESPASSING LOITERING FORBIDDEN BY LAW - Freeport
McMoRan Oil & Gas.

I must confess for years I hadn't given the site much thought, even when my bedroom window looked out onto an oil rig rising 80 feet above the green wall. But a couple years ago curiosity got to me and I started digging around online. I quickly found that all wells in California are thoroughly documented by the California Dept of Conservation's Division of Oil, Gas & Geothermal Resources (DOGGR). Our 4th Avenue lot is called Good Shepherd.

The deepest well I could find in the records is Well #16, which reaches a total depth of 9514 feet. As the extractable oil below our houses was depleted, the 4th Ave holes were converted from oil producing wells to fluid-injection wells—also known as disposal wells—where wastewater from the drilling process is returned to deep subsurface formations. How strange to live in a landscape scarred each season by more severe drought and wildfire, while millions of gallons of contaminated water is injected thousands of feet below the surface...

An end to oil extraction in the neighborhood sounded like a good thing to me, and in a sense, it is. But studies in the last few years have found that these disposal wells can actually put more pressure on nearby fault lines. According to a 2013 study published in *Science* magazine, when a major quake hits, the resulting seismic waves may trigger swarms of smaller quakes near injection sites like ours.

Now for some better news. As of Spring 2018, the last of the Good Shepherd disposal wells have been completely shut down. Maybe you received the notice in the mail like I did? Sentinel Peak Resources has taken on the lengthy, expensive process of sealing and excavating the wells. And so today I'd like to invite you to join a kind of closing ceremony for Good Shepherd: a live music and video performance at the oil site nearest to our hearts.

Sound for the Long Hole is not a protest, but an attempt to comprehend, concretize, and relate to a distant territory—one that is intimately connected to us, yet impossible to reach from where we are standing. My solo performance will take place against the green perimeter wall. In 40 minutes of music and video, I will show you what I've learned about Good Shepherd: illustrating production data from the site's many historical owners, remembering the legacy of urban oil drilling that exploded a nearby *Ross Dress for Less* in 1985, and measuring out the length of one oil well in twine.

How long is 9514 feet? That's like from here to the Chevron on Vermont.



You're invited. Please join us!

Sound for the Long Hole

Oct 28th 2018 at 7:30pm
Washington Blvd and 4th Ave

The project is produced for the Fall 2018 exhibition
Anatomy of Oil, curated by Ceci Moss

In addition to the live performance, a video will be installed at
Gas, Sept 15 - Nov 24, 2018
For more info visit: gas.gallery



Sincerely,
Your neighbor on 5th Avenue, Nina Sarnelle