

# **Petrocultures: oil, energy, and culture**

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## Plastic Vision and the Sight of Petroculture

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### TRANSPARENCY AND SIGHT

This essay addresses the sight of petroculture, which is to say it examines how the global oil industry is represented, and how this, in turn, conditions vision. I challenge the political investment in documentary modes of representation which presume to “reveal” petroculture, proposing that the ways the oil industry conceals its destructive impact cannot be exposed or remedied through tactics of demystification or objective reportage. Moreover, the ubiquity and momentum of global petroculture suggest an aesthetic regime that has anticipated and precluded the efficacy of dissensus, thus neutralizing a longstanding tradition of artistic critique. I propose to remap the visual terrain of petroculture through a study of plastic as it appears in contemporary art and as it characterizes the malleable politics of oil more broadly. Plasticity, I suggest, is precisely the condition that ensures the robustness of the oil industry: what spurs its continual reinvention while pre-empting critical purchase. Plasticity is therefore not simply a material substance that indexes the structure of the industry. Rather, it is a mobile, responsive, and all-encompassing apparatus that orients perception.

Vision is linked to the political conflicts that shape petroculture. On the one hand, criticisms of the industry directed at both corporations and governments tend to focus on what is hidden or obscured from public view. On the other, there is a dogged insistence on the part of oil corporations that their practices and decisions are entirely *transparent*. Take, for example, the following statement in Suncor’s Stakeholder Relations Policy: “Suncor will be transparent

and accountable by engaging regularly, openly and honestly with stakeholders and by reporting objectively on our activities.”<sup>1</sup> This reporting is, indeed, a lively dimension of the company’s publicity. It makes its financial statements, sustainability reports, policies, and other news easily accessible. Visibility, it would seem, is a moot point, for there is nothing to hide. The issue, however, is not simply about the availability of information but, rather, the terms by which the public is capable of interpreting and responding to what it sees.

The transparency and objectivity to which Suncor’s statement refers are empty concepts that subtend a disastrous industry. It is here that a study of the sight of petroculture can lead to a reflection on the relationship between the conditions of vision, practices of representation, and the state of criticism. In the obscurity of the oil discourse, one might think that the place of art is to reveal or even disrupt the terms of its visibility. But given the failure of transparency and objectivity, attempts to visualize petroculture, whether as industry, economic structure, or energy system, fall short. It is for this reason we might look to plastics and to artworks that consider the fabric of global oil and disclose the way in which it conditions the subject and in turn becomes an essential condition. In what follows, I will consider the assumptions that contribute to the sight of petroculture and how these lead to a deeper questioning of the intersection between vision, plastics, and plasticity.

#### CONDITIONS OF VISIBILITY

Although the rise of oil as a primary source of energy has been steadily taking place since the nineteenth century, its cultural centrality has not been evident to many in North America until recent decades, when its peak and scarcity became a motivator and determinant of world events, among them the Gulf War, which prompted the Gulf War oil spill and the Kuwaiti oil fires, and the more recent Iraq War. The *Deepwater Horizon* oil spill of 2010 underscored what these wars already made clear: that oil has become excessively visible, publicly present, and politically charged precisely in the time of its shortage, which has been accompanied by a push to locate new sources and new techniques of oil extraction, such as offshore drilling and fracking. Oil now appears in a profusion of media images

of pipeline explosions, spills, tailing ponds, and monumental “landscapes,” amid headlines of cancers, toxic groundwater, and the ongoing problem of carbon emissions.

Dirty oil has found its way into the world of art and documentary film too. But it would be too optimistic to link the abundant visibility of oil to any real crisis of the industry, as though the revealing power of the media, documentary, and art is showing us the cracks and fissures in this monumental edifice. This tempting assumption is borrowed in part from Heidegger and in part from Jacques Rancière. I will consider each in turn, with a view to redirecting such claims. Heidegger’s position is invaluable if there is to be a remote hope that art can turn the all-encompassing “enframement” of technology into a more profound “unconcealing” of its essence. Heidegger’s reading of art (or the fine arts) through its common root with technology, in the Greek word *techne*, leads him to see a common operation of unconcealing the world in two modes: either the poetic revealing of art or the blind challenging-forth of technology. Both are intertwined but converse aspects of revealing the world. Thus he quotes the poet Hölderlin, saying, “Where the danger is, grows the saving power also.”<sup>2</sup>

But before leaping to the conclusion that art is the saving power of technology, that it has the capacity to invite a true questioning of technology, it is worthwhile to consider Heidegger’s subtle inference that technology produces not just one kind of blindness, but two. First, in its claim to reveal truth, technology prevents a questioning of itself: “in our sheer preoccupation with technology we do not yet experience the coming to presence of technology.”<sup>3</sup> But by the same token, and no less importantly, “in our sheer aesthetic-mindedness we no longer guard and preserve the coming to presence of art.”<sup>4</sup> Technology is accepted, and perhaps even enabled, by an aesthetic predisposition that also conceals. We would do well to question what that aesthetic-mindedness might be in the context of oil politics.

The work of Canadian photographer Edward Burtynsky stands as a notable example of the fine line between an aestheticization of technology and a technique of revealing. Burtynsky is known for his photographs of the main industries of our time within a visual vocabulary that couples documentary with landscape photography (and frequently with the aesthetic of the sublime). His *Oil* series maps the trajectory of the industry from early extraction

technologies to the development of the tar sands, the refinement of oil, car culture, and the afterlife of oil manufacturing. For better or worse, Burtynsky doggedly insists that his photographs are not motivated by any political or environmental agenda. The move from witnessing the industry to taking some kind of action is not prescribed and is to be decided on by the viewer. The photographs articulate the dilemma of industry: they read its destruction and irreparable transformation of the landscape alongside the power and beauty of technological prowess. So in eschewing a pedagogy or moral, Burtynsky's photographs have a currency that rests on the assumption that a revealing is taking place: they presence the technological apparatus shot through with sublime beauty – the co-extant danger and saving power.

But it is here that we might question whether there is some kind of aesthetic operation that obscures rather than reveals global oil. After all, Burtynsky's photographs appear in the midst of a surplus, not a dearth, of visual imagery of dirty oil, most of which make claims to being a form of documentary. This is especially true of coverage of the tar sands, pipelines, and oil spills, with its familiar polarity: on the one side, corporate promotion of the responsibility and economic profitability of the industry with its purported boost in employment; on the other, an exposure of the social and environmental consequences, which are complex and far-reaching.

Two notable examples of artists operating in the documentary mode include Ursula Biemann and Allan Sekula. Biemann's 2005 video, *Black Sea Files*, tracks the construction of a new subterranean pipeline that runs across the Caucasus, pumping oil to Western Europe. The video shows the pipeline in its construction and punctuates the endeavour with a portrait of its human geography, as the artist interviews workers, farmers, prostitutes, and refugees, all of whose lives are governed by its development. The video, she claims, "displaces the singular and powerful signifying practices of oil corporations and oil politicians." The other example is Allan Sekula's photographic series *Black Tide*, which documents the cleanup of the Galician coast after the massive oil spill caused by the sinking of the oil tanker *Prestige*. In a similar vein, it brings that monumental environmental disaster to an individual scale through personalized images of workers charged with the daunting task of repairing the damage.

This genre of documentary appears in the middle of a battle of objectivities: on the one hand, the corporate and governmental deployment of the science and technology of oil sands and offshore drilling, exacerbated by the issue of the employment that oil generates, so that our consumption of oil is visually repitched as productive, prosperous, and even green; on the other, an exposure of the “truth” of exactly the same events, technologies, and phenomena. If the industry is concealed by this polarity – in other words not hidden at all but embedded and misrepresented in an ideologically charged visual field – then what do these ambivalent documentaries do? What can be made of the presumption to witness, to present one objectivity in the midst of other supposed objectivities?

Here is where Rancière enters the equation, as someone who contends that there is no “real world” that functions outside of art, but rather a multiplicity of folds within a common sensory fabric. The visualization of petroculture, whether in art or media, happens within a shared field. What critical art can do is produce a dissensus, or disarticulation from within that field: it questions the self-evidence of the visible and ruptures given relations and sutures new ones to alter the cartography of the sensible and the thinkable.<sup>5</sup> Above all, for Rancière, dissensus is a severing of intentions from consequences, an aspiration that Burtynsky, Biemann, and Sekula attempt to preserve in their insistence to simply show. But one wonders if the concept of dissensus itself is not too often interpreted and codified as crisis, catastrophe, rupture, or contradiction.

Without a doubt, Burtynsky commands a wide and diverse public, and therefore his work has a light power to reveal. No doubt, his work has such widespread appeal that it shows the operations of the oil economy to a public that is probably otherwise uninterested in art or politics. Further, his images bind together that information with the enchantment of digital photography. But the real cartography of petrocultures cannot be subsumed into an external view of either the structure or the system so that the viewing subject is positioned outside or above, as is always the case with a landscape. Petroculture is lived from within, and thus the line between it and the potential for an altered sensorial field is as fine as that between my eye and the plastic contact lens through which I read this page. In other words, dissensus starts from a hair’s breadth. It is not something that we can necessarily “see” as representation, let

alone assemble into a landscape. Rather, it is the way in which we see. Otherwise put, the organization of the senses that subtends and perpetuates petroculture is not a landscape at all. It might be something like Graham Harman's description: "if we imagine the universe as an ocean, it would be an ocean without a floor, but with a turbulent surface of objects."

If the genre of documentary that has emerged with particular intensity alongside the oil industry relies on a hybrid of information dissemination (it presumes to visualize the industry for the public) and aestheticization (in landscapes and portraits underwritten by a sensibility of rupture, conflict, post-history, etc.), the question becomes, do these responses *mistake* the problem? Is the problem lack of information and knowledge that must be corrected, a lack of visibility that must be countered with showing, or a naive sensibility that must be perturbed? Or is the lynchpin of the oil economy, rather, a certain incapacity in the face of knowing, seeing, and feeling, as though our senses have been rendered inert, smothered even? And is this incapacity perhaps due to the fact that oil has already been mobilized as a global mesh, so that any response appears belated? Certainly, if we are to take into consideration the supposed overcoming of peak oil – that through extreme technological measures, we have overcome the problem of its scarcity – then we must consider how that persistence, tenacity, and adaptability is integral to the industry and its visual culture. What I am suggesting, then, is that if we want to access the machinery of global oil, this would not necessarily be, as one might expect, by visualizing its reterritorialization of the landscape or by picturing its technological history. The equipmental being of petroculture occurs as a permeation and proliferation of objects. That is to say, it is by turning to its sub-industry, plastics, that one can see how petrocultures are interwoven with a plastic condition.

#### THE FOURFOLD PLASTIC OBJECT

It is with this notion of petroculture as plastic mesh, not simply sublime machinery, that we can turn to four artworks that summarize the appearance of dozens if not hundreds of contemporary installations that stage accumulations of plastic objects. I would suggest that these works are indicative of an alternative paradigm from the

aesthetics of fracture, entropy, and exhaustion that has been the mainstay of critical practice from *arte povera* to postminimalism, the new topographics, earthworks, and beyond. Instead, these works emphasize material endurance, sensorial fullness, flexibility, and hollow affects.

Among these installations are works that consider the cultural signification of commodities through their accumulation and redistribution, such as those of New York artist Portia Munson's installations *Pink Project* and *Green Piece* (figure 9.1), which make the classification of plastic objects the premise of display. There are artists who consider the use value of plastics as they enter different contexts, as does Song Dong in his touring installation *Waste Not*. There are those who consider the relationship of plastics to exchange value, as does Melanie Smith in *Orange Lush* (figure 9.2). As well, the affective qualities of plastic are frequently on display, as in the case of works by Seoul-based artist Choi Jeong-Hwa, which have titles such as *Happy Together*, *Happy Happy*, *In the Mood for Love*, and *Beautiful! Beautiful life!* (figure 9.3).

Common to all is a conflation of use value, exchange value, and what Walter Benjamin terms "exhibition value," as plastic figures the immeasurable penetration, dissemination, and sedimentation of oil into the world market as plastic object. Thus, the preoccupation with plastic art turns up everywhere from Mexico City to Colombia, Seoul, New York, Beijing, Delhi, and so forth. The phenomenon is not necessarily grounded in the locations where the petroleum was extracted and refined; it is distinctly non-localized and ubiquitous. If plastic art seems beside the point when we're dealing with the magnitude of the oil industry, this is perhaps because we're looking for a structure to disassemble or a limit to expose, rather than a condition in which we're immersed and to which we adapt ourselves.

The practice of incorporating plastic objects in art discloses both the anxiety and excitability that surrounds the oil industry. Plastics are linked to oil for a few reasons: not only are they sourced from petrochemicals that claim 10 per cent of global fossil fuel consumption,<sup>6</sup> but also they are considered a potential resource for oil as well. Since the early nineties, chemists have experimented on a process called "coliquefaction" which combines and heats waste plastics with coal in order to recuperate oil.<sup>7</sup> Plastics are therefore positioned as the most wasteful and toxic of oil commodities, and the



Figure 9.1 Portia Munson, *Green Piece: Lawn*, 2007.

site of the most utopian technological innovation. More than this, it is through plastic that we can begin to fathom the complete permeation of oil into every facet of daily life, as the primary material of almost all objects: commodities, cosmetics, and technological and medical products. It has integrated with or even replaced almost all other substances, too: textiles, clothing, paper, lumber, cork, and rubber. In fact, it is now the fabric of Canadian dollar bills. Plastic brings us to the realization of the global scope of the oil economy, how it is integral to every arena of production, consumption, and sedimentation of human activity. But it also shows the procedure by which oil obscures itself from visibility, in the same way that plastic voids itself of an earthly basis, an inherent form, and a stable value. Further, plastic enacts a temporal condition in which the future is pre-empted, permeated, and its origin evacuated before it arrives (a point to which I will return).

Heidegger follows such a procedure in his analysis of technology: here Aristotle's four causes of an object are folded into one another with neither precedence nor priority but rather with a coresponsibility. The four causes, however, have been misunderstood and overtaken through technological enframement. In a similar vein, the four



Figure 9.2 Melanie Smith, *Orange Lush I*, 1995.

causes of the plastic object disclose the more sweeping condition of their framing assemblage. The plastic object in its state of entanglement does not merely exist on an individual scale. It would be more accurate to describe plastics as both integral parts and signals of a “hyperobject,” to use Timothy Morton’s term. Morton uses the term hyperobject to describe the ways objects relate to one another in vast

meshes, “massively distributed in time and space” so that objects are entities in and of themselves but are at the same time imbricated in a phenomenon of interrelatedness on a scale that exceeds the human field of perception.<sup>8</sup> From this perspective, objects as such are fragile entities that shatter and reformulate precisely within and through hyperobjects. Morton gives the examples of the biosphere, climate change, and the age of the “Anthropocene” to illustrate the ontologically real but imperceptible nature of hyperobjects. Moreover, hyperobjects become visible precisely in an age of ecological crisis. Here, we must certainly include global oil as a hyperobject, for it is not merely a human construction (a resource to be refined and marketed, an economic foundation, an energy system) but also now an integral facet of world ecologies, bird migration, species endangerment, the rise of rare cancers, the uprooting of communities, and other forms of reterritorialization. Only on this scale does the magnitude of oil and its interruptions into daily life become evident. The plastic object in contemporary art stands in for, and is an integral part of, the continual formation, reformation, and distribution of an oil hyperobject. This operation of representation, by which the object connects to a hyperobject (plastic to oil), recalls Heidegger’s four causes, but then exceeds them to point to a form of enframing without origin or destination, with no known beginning or end. The plastic object both obscures and exposes global oil, and thereby sits at the crux of the dilemmas of visibility in which petrocultures are bound.

I want to consider the aforementioned artworks, each of which (with various emphases) take up the plastic object as an infolding of a *causa materialis* (a material substance), *causa formalis* (a shape into which the material enters), *causa finalis* (a context in which matter and form are ushered into meaning), and *causa efficiens* (the gathering of the first three together to effect the thing in its fullness and unity). The four causes, however, are shown as insufficient or rather distorted access points into the plastic object. The plastic object registers without the weight of substance, without a formal integrity or use, and appears essentially meaningless, as though it has been completed and finalized without intention. It is only as a fragment in the hyperobject of global oil that the ubiquity of plastic objects begins to make sense.



Figure 9.3 Choi Jeong Hwa, *Beautiful! Beautiful life!* TINA B project in San Salvatore, 2012.

***CAUSA MATERIALIS***

The work of Portia Munson can be taken as a protracted meditation on the materiality of plastic, as objects cycle from absurd commodity to meaningless thing to excessive substance. Munson is perhaps best known for her *Pink Project*, a 1994 work in the feminist exhibition *Bad Girls* at the New Museum in New York, in which the artist gathered over two thousand pink plastic objects, assembling them into an installation that summarizes a hyperbolic femininity produced and mediated through the dissemination of products: girls' dolls, baby pacifiers, hair accessories, mirrors, fake nails, cleaning products, and so on. In a similar vein, Munson collected and organized hundreds of green plastic objects reclaimed from landfills and yard sales for her 2007 work with the pithy title *Green Piece: Lawn* (figure 9.1). The banalization of green politics is made explicit, as green is shown in the proliferation of objects needed to tend suburban lawns – fly swatters, lawn furniture, garden hoses, yard tools, AstroTurf, bug spray – alongside plastic cucumbers and artificial plants.

A key aspect of Munson's practice is the reorganization of these objects according to new taxonomies, sometimes classifying according to size, shape, and shade, while at other times she resorts to haphazard gathering, mounding, and containing. The 2009 adaptation of *Green Piece*, *Sarcophagus*, immortalizes the objects, providing a geological lens by borrowing the display technique of a natural history museum. A sarcophagus was originally thought to encourage decomposition. But the plastic "flesh" of the objects does not decay; the work is only a perverse and ineffectual recycling. At this stage, the objects cannot be rerouted back into the economy for their use value; they are divorced from exchange, and they cannot renew their shape, for they are encrypted in a banal agglomeration. Plastic substance is held in a tensile mass of objects that flagrantly exceeds ecological systems of growth and degeneration, as well as the economic logic which generates value through exchange.

***CAUSA FORMALIS***

If Munson's work shows the indefinite persistence of plastic substance in excess of human production and ecological balance, Beijing-based artist Song Dong situates plastics among accumulations

of other objects, all primed to be discovered for a latent function. His 2005 installation *Waste Not* at the Museum of Modern Art in New York organizes the entire sum of his family's worldly goods, which his mother had painstakingly saved for decades, adhering to the dictum of the Cultural Revolution to "Waste Not": "Wu jin qi gong." The work is a testament to the impulse to conserve in times of deprivation and poverty, a condition that leads to the amassment of objects of all stripes, so that they may be considered in terms of a possible future utility. The collection of over ten thousand objects included everything from shoes, dolls, crayons, kitchen utensils, and tubes of toothpaste and other toiletries to cardboard boxes and shopping bags. The sheer mass of objects is surprising when considered in relation to the demure size of the family's home, recreated at the centre of the installation. The artist essentially turned the home inside-out, excavating it like an archaeological dig and laying out the objects as artifacts.

Many of the objects were replete with the artist's family history: for example, when interviewed, Song described a pair of shoes worn by his grandfather, his father, his mother, and then finally by him. However, there was also a prominent section of plastic water bottles and detergent containers amid the collection of family treasures. Innocuous as they appear, the plastic objects are still equally weighted among those objects that would have more obvious sentimental value, such as clothes or books. The artwork submitted all the objects to a meticulous classification that included an aesthetic investigation of their existence in a state of abundance. Song describes the process of making the artwork as awakening him to a new sense of richness. Thus, the obsolescent objects produced a sense of plenitude, paradoxically reconstruing an impoverished condition into a form of wealth. *Waste Not* is not simply a family archive, then. It intertwines plastic with the family's stockpile of goods, airing the drive to conserve a standing-reserve of objects that they may be redeployed for as-yet-undetermined future uses. In this respect, the work links the directive to "waste not" with a mandatory adaptability – each home, each family, and each individual is geared toward recovering a value and function for those objects, regardless of their substance, form, or history. Plastic, in turn, is naturalized, taking its place among other kinds of objects, all of which are stockpiled so that they can be contorted to suit a potential function.

In his 1957 essay, “Plastic,” Roland Barthes reflects that plastic was developed because of its capacity to imitate rare substances, such as diamonds, feathers, fur, and silk.<sup>9</sup> He links it specifically to the rise of bourgeois culture and its claim to a new form of wealth. Plastic is in fact celebrated precisely because it is infinitely transposable. While luxury objects such as metals or precious stones still recall their earthly source, plastic is the paradigmatic material to signal the departure from an assumed origin, and thus, an instance of the fundamental evacuation of the referent. It so perfectly encompasses the transformation of materials into commodities, it is, in Barthes’s words, “wholly swallowed up in the fact of being used.”<sup>10</sup> Plastic disappears precisely because of its usability: it does not fall into dysfunction; it merely waits to be recomposed into a new shape. Moreover, it abolishes the hierarchy of substances, because it can effectively replace them all.

One might therefore suggest that plastic has an equalizing effect that neutralizes the link between substance and function, between objects and their *causa formalis*. In Song’s work, this transposability is epistemic – it is not just the objects that contort to any possible function, but people who, under political and economic duress, carry out these contortions themselves and obscure the demands on them by naturalizing them, turning them into cultural practices, rituals, a personal ethic, and eventually art. Plastic objects converge with a plastic subject.

#### CAUSA FINALIS

Song’s work points to the fact that the plastic object has become a “thing,” an entity and a phenomenon above and beyond its matter and form. It is employed, deployed, recycled, reviled, celebrated, and more. It is what it is through the relations of intentionality it cultivates by declaring its usefulness, flexibility, and desirability. Heidegger calls these relations the *causa finalis*, a telos that is not so much an aim or purpose as an aspect or context in which a thing’s form and matter become co-responsible for one another, making the thing what it is. What, then, is this *causa finalis* that gathers the plastic object into a generalized plasticity? It becomes apparent in works of art that plastics are expressly consolidated through exchange. One might even say that the plastic object is the material trace of

globalized oil capital. To return to an earlier point, what plastic shows is that oil is not simply a localized industry and petroculture is not exclusively bound to the substance of oil, with all the sensorial associations of an exhausted and dirty fossil fuel industry. Rather, it ushers in a new paradigm of economy that makes demands and shapes the subject in unprecedented ways.

Mexico City-based artist Melanie Smith encapsulates the co-extensiveness of the plastic object and a plastic condition that has inserted itself into the visual field. Since the early nineties, Smith's work has addressed what has been called an everyday phenomenology of capitalism in Mexico. Executed between 1995 and 2003, her series of installations, *Orange Lush*, is comprised of bright orange plastic objects, among them life preservers, extension cords, buoys, cheerleaders' pompoms, water wings, flip-flops, lightbulbs, balloons, and water rafts (see figure 9.2, above). In short, *Orange Lush* is a collage of blissful associations with the tourist industry in Mexico. The relationship to sensual pleasure is secured by the smooth surfaces of the objects and their abundance of colour.

Orange takes on a particularized significance as well. Smith comments on the invasion of Mexico City with cheap orange-coloured commodities in the 1990s, when inflation caused the devaluation of the peso and, after bailouts from the US and the Bank for International Settlements, the market was flooded with foreign goods.<sup>11</sup> *Orange Lush* can therefore be read in conjunction with her series of photographs of sites of commercial exchange, such as *Super Soya* and *Commercial Mexicana Mixcoac*, a café and a shopping centre that are peppered with orange signs, products, and price tags. *Orange Lush* is underwritten by the gratification of shopping and buying, reorganizing the photographs of sites of consumption into their post-consumer corollary, an assembly of objects gathered together without context, function, or purpose. In this way, orange acts as an archaeological stratigraphy for market activity.

Yet in their rich colour, the objects of *Orange Lush* trigger layers of conflicted associations. Smith explains her preoccupation with the colour orange in terms of its relationship to authority: orange is the colour of road signs, for directing the flow of traffic, forbidding entry, marking danger, as well as for advertisement and attracting the attention of consumers. In this regard, the intense colour designates the objects as both authoritarian warning and cheap product. They

deliver two imperatives simultaneously – to “obey” and to “buy” – in such a way as to conflate the impulse to comply and the desire to consume. In its state of sensorial plenitude and semiotic slippage, the plastic object embodies the fraught terms of exchange in which inflation empties money of value, the need for plastics is prefabricated, and the objects multiply and massify in the marketplace.

*Orange Lush* visualizes what Jean-Luc Nancy calls the *glomus*, the pervasive and suffocating double of the global condition. If globalization has produced the conditions of possibility for a shared world beyond the confines of the nation-state, it has equally generated a frenzied circulation of all knowledge and representations of that world in the form of commodities, which proliferate, accumulate, and foreclose the possibility of imagining a world to come.<sup>12</sup> Smith’s work pictures a global market in this hypostasis and closure, a random assemblage of plastic commodities gathered from the buoyant activity of economic exchange. It visualizes an economy as aesthetic sensibility – not just to picture an industry but to link the dissemination of plastics to jubilant accumulation as a worthless double of profit that is gathered together as visual wealth. Orange plastic is an objectification of petroculture, then, but more than this it is also its modality of contorting value, desire, and sensation. Smith’s works take a specific resonance at this time when peak oil has not only reached a maximum visibility but also, as Allan Stoekl argues, the concept of oil’s peak now undulates.<sup>13</sup> That is to say, the scientific fact that oil is non-renewable and that it has run out has been subjected to the distortions of a highly suspect political and scientific discourse that would challenge and misrepresent the limits of oil in order to ensure its continued supremacy as a primary source of energy and profit. The abundance of plastic objects in the visual field appears in conjunction with a crisis of objectivity.

#### CAUSA EFFICIENS

By what agent is plastic produced and circulated as worthless, purposeless, and directionless commodities in such a way as to visualize the malleable critical discourse and ineffective visual field that plagues contemporary petrocultures? By no agent at all, by no direct cause, and certainly by no conscious “presencing” of a truth about oil. To the contrary, plastics are effected by a self-propagating,

flexible, and resilient condition: plasticity has overtaken the terrain of questioning about oil, economy, environment, health, and well-being. Indeed, it has replaced any expression of concern at all. And, in turn, plasticity has been overtaken by global oil.

Consider Choi Jeong-Hwa's *Happy Happy*, a 2010 installation consisting of a towering column of bright corkscrew-shaped balloons that stood in the atrium of the Shanghai Exhibition Centre during the SHC (Shanghai Contemporary) art fair. The colourful centrepiece appeared to both embody the tenor of the venue and lightheartedly embellish on its themes, a spectacular public event that markets leisure, pleasure, and spectacle. The title of the piece, *Happy Happy*, underscores its affectation, while the repetition of the word curiously alters the sentiment – it is hyperbolic, simplistic, childish, automatic, generic. Moreover, if the balloons encompass the fullness and plenitude of happiness, they also bring this sentiment to its catharsis, as balloons randomly pop and fall to the ground in dribbles of burst plastic. Viewed in terms of the popularization of urban and world art exhibitions, the work is a ludic and eye-catching sculpture that is neither profound nor critical. Viewed from the perspectives of its material, the industry that generated it, and the economy it inadvertently indexes, the work captures the subtle way that plastic has intervened on the affective dimensions of cultural activity and disarmed any visual expression of protest or resistance to the oil regime. Like a contemporary Andy Warhol, Choi Jeong-Hwa presents a literal *Exploding Plastic Inevitable*. If one were to shift attention slightly from the array of festive balloons to the sharp rise of pipeline and drilling explosions, the total dissemination of plastic into nearly every market good, and the seeming inevitability of global warming, with all of the ecological disasters it causes, *Happy Happy* is a chilling reflection of the general denial that accompanies any imagining of the future global oil brings.

#### EXPLODING PLASTIC INEVITABLE

A shift has taken place, then, from the appearance of plastic objects (an appearance that takes form in their ubiquitous presence and the visual modality they proffer) to an overarching mode of being. This mode is characterized by discursive contortions, a requisite cultural

adaptation to a primary axis of energy-oil profit, the failure of visual realism and the rise of a sensualized plastic aesthetic, and a crisis of objectivity whereby information and “knowledge” have become groundless and prone to appropriation by the hyperobject of a self-perpetuating petroculture. The plastic condition forecloses the future and comes to rest on a new understanding of “plasticity.”

The new formation of plasticity, however, is an inversion of its association with Hegelian philosophy.<sup>14</sup> Plasticity is the term Hegel uses for the dialectical movement of thought, as substance and Idea collide and shape one another, metamorphosing over time. The plastic arts have a privileged position in exemplifying this activity over the course of history, from architecture to sculpture to painting and beyond. More profoundly, plasticity is a tensile figuration of time itself, in the sense that the Idea seizes, moulds, and shapes the future, while equally being malleable and receptive, so that it achieves individual precision as it comes into being. Catherine Malabou explains that plasticity is essentially the anticipatory structure of the dialectic; it *is* the future. But here, the future occurs in a “philosophical face-to-face between two temporal modalities”: between teleological circularity and representational linearity; between what is actual and what is potential; between the retrospective and the prospective.<sup>15</sup> Thus, she explains, the reader of Hegel waits for what is to come (according to a linear and representational thinking), while presupposing that the outcome has already arrived. In short, plasticity is this dynamic temporal system in which a time ushers in its future, a future that configures its history, that imagines its past as the future and its future as coming to pass.

Crucially, Malabou redeploys Hegelian plasticity with a view to distinguishing it from its ideological forms. This is especially evident in her account of neuroplasticity. Plasticity here is not just about the Idea and substance co-shaping one another in the abstract, but about consciousness and its specific moulding of the brain. This consciousness, though – a consciousness of our very plasticity – has been put under pressure by a “bad plasticity” (for want of a better phrase), a plasticity that enables the restrictions of the economy by encouraging a flexible subject in a system that neurologically maximizes desirable behaviour and a general “positivity.” Malabou is especially adept at explaining the continuities between neuroplasticity, with

its emphasis on adaptability and a “feedback model” of subjectivity, and the latest form of global capitalism as a decentred and networked organization reliant on a pliable neoliberal subject.<sup>16</sup>

Important to Malabou’s recovery of plasticity is that it is also a philosophical disposition, a speculative attitude to the possible configurations of the future coming to pass, and to the unknowability of the specific materialization of the event in the future. Plasticity is heterogeneous and cannot be contained by its particularity at any given moment in history.<sup>17</sup> In this regard, Malabou recovers the association of plasticity with plastic explosives. The dialectic might effectively take shape through the explosion of given forms. In fact, that is precisely the result of the polarizing energies of dialectical oppositions. But can plasticity be rescued from its ideological double? Especially when its connotation with explosives and the radical dispersal of thinking is itself sublated and prefigured in the rise of explosive oil disasters, the future of plasticity appears to have already been overtaken by its opposite, an exploding plastic inevitable: the predetermination of a future oil regime and its reification through a mesh of plastic objects.

## CONCLUSION

The sight of petroculture that we face is one in which plastic and oil combine in a common aesthetic and economic regime. Together, they produce an episteme, invading substance, ways of being, the terms of exchange, and systems of signification. This becomes evident when we consider how the oil industry relies on techniques of transposability that we can associate with plasticity: to turn sand into fuel, waste into energy; to reformulate the scarcity of oil into an accumulation of profit; to spin environmental disaster into job opportunities and turn environmental science into mere “politics”; to fabricate the moods with which we should perceive this energy source. But rather than a true plasticity, as a taking hold of consciousness, petrocultures are afflicted by an ideological moulding, a plastic condition that self-perpetuates, not simply in the proliferation of plastic objects but as a hyperobject. In this condition, the senses are both saturated and muted, affects are prescribed, and criticality loses purchase. Thus, the question to be posed is, what kind of vision can recover us from plasticity and plasticity from us?

## NOTES

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