Strange Brew: Art, Protest, and the Anti-Fracking Movement

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**ABSTRACT** This article examines how contemporary artists respond to the technique of hydraulic fracturing, more commonly known as “fracking.” Drawing on examples of political protest and social activism, with special focus on the ways that artistic interventions challenge energy corporations in galleries and museums, Smith analyzes how artists fuse concerns over the environment with critical aesthetics. By doing so, they explore the problematic relationships between fracking and climate change, waste, environmental degradation, pollution, and public health. In the wake of new data, research, and dissent, it is argued that contemporary art visualizes protest and continues to play a role in picturing the potentially harmful effects of fracking. Accordingly, Smith proposes that artists formulate innovative ways to confront an authoritative fuel industry and translate key issues into new modes of understanding.

**KEYWORDS** fracking, hydraulic fracturing, visual art, protest, activism

Mere opinions, in fact, were as likely to govern people’s actions as hard evidence, and were subject to sudden reversals as hard evidence could never be.

—Kurt Vonnegut, *Galápagos*

There is a scene in the documentary film *Gasland* (2010) in which director Josh Fox visits Weld County, Colorado, to speak with Mike Markham and Marsha Mendenhall about their tap water. Fox, Mendenhall, and the production crew gather in the kitchen while Markham retrieves a sample of tap water offscreen. He soon returns holding a Mason jar filled with water and thick brown sediment before proceeding to flip the jar upside down so that the sediment mixes with the water to become sludge. Mendenhall explains that the energy corporation responsible for extracting natural gas in the area contracted an environmental agency to investigate its impact on their water well. The agency concluded that gas production in Weld County had no traceable effect on the water quality of the well. After a failed interview with Weld County’s Acting Director of Oil and Gas, a public liaison responsible for planning and zoning, Fox returns to Markham and Mendenhall’s home to witness one of the most unsettling images from the film, which has since become one of the most iconic images of the anti-fracking movement: Markham leads Fox to a sink basin with the handwritten message “Do Not Drink this Water” above it, turns on the tap, holds a cigarette lighter to the stream, and appears to set the water ablaze. Since the wide release of *Gasland*, affiliates of the oil and gas industry have made frequent attempts to debunk the information presented by Fox and his film’s protagonists. “GasLand [sic],” states one editorial, is

“politics at its worst, art at its most contrived, and contradictions of fact found around every bend of the river.” Then again, the film is also recognized for introducing penetrating criticisms of hydraulic fracturing practices into the collective conscious.

On the whole, hydraulic fracturing, more commonly known as “fracking,” is a resource extraction process whereby a wellbore is drilled horizontally for miles underground. A mixture of water, sand, and chemicals called “slick water” is then blasted down the drill at high pressure into subterranean rock. This, in turn, opens up existing fissures in the rock, allowing for oil and gas to be flushed up to the surface where it is then collected in storage tanks often shipped to consumers by vast pipeline systems.

Fracking continues to divide individuals and communities in North America and abroad with protests that occasionally explode into violent conflict. On the one hand, proponents of fracking lobby for heavier reliance on natural gas over coal, citing gas’s revenue potential, job creation, diminished impact on public health, and lower greenhouse gas emissions; furthermore, fracking has allowed countries such as the United States to substantially reduce their dependence on foreign oil and gas while producing sustainable energy security for the future. To this end, natural gas in particular is considered a viable “bridge” between fossil fuels and renewable energies that might forge the conditions and infrastructure for eventual decarbonization. On the other hand, the long-term effects of fracking are virtually unknown, and new research suggests that leaked methane from fracked wells in fact elevates greenhouse gas emissions rather than lowers them. Domestically produced oil and gas may be less expensive, but this approach facilitates higher rates of consumption, leading again to increased emissions. Roughly one in five chemicals used during fracking still remain “trade secrets.” Fracked wells requiring up to twenty million gallons of water each put excessive strain on local water tables and seismic activity (earthquakes) have increased exponentially in US states with comparatively higher numbers of wells such as Texas and Oklahoma. Moreover, the residual water often left behind by energy producers can sit in open pit disposal sites and condensate tanks where their strange brew of chemicals and compounds slowly dissipate into the atmosphere. A recent compendium study published by the Concerned Health Professionals of New York and the Nobel Peace Prize–winning


4. For example, in 2013, at least forty individuals were arrested by police in Rexton, New Brunswick, after Molotov cocktails were thrown at police vehicles. More recently, in 2017, protestors clashed violently with police in response to Cuadrilla Resources’ Preston New Road gas extraction site near Blackpool, England.


Physicians for Social Responsibility advises that fracking presents a sizable risk to drinkable water and breathable air, resulting in serious illnesses like asthma, birth defects, and cancer. The controversies surrounding fracking are often so disparate, so contentious, and so incensing that there seems little room to meet in the middle.

In recent years, European nations including France, Ireland, the Czech Republic, Austria, the Netherlands, Bulgaria, Germany, and Scotland have placed provisional bans or full moratoriums on hydraulic fracturing. Considerable protests in Poland, Romania, and the United Kingdom (UK) have further driven the fracking debate into media channels, public discourse, and visual culture. Paris-based artist duo Helen Evans & Heiko Hansen, otherwise known as HeHe, attempted to identify the visual iconography of fracking when they exhibited their sculptural installation *Fracking Futures* at Liverpool’s FACT Gallery in 2013.

For the exhibition, the duo erected a small-scale mobile fracking encampment complete with well, gas flares, and a flowback pit that was rumored to drill directly through the gallery floor. With nearby Blackpool increasing its shale gas operations at the time, even in the wake of two unforeseen earthquakes in 2011, the simulated tremors, noise, and smoke generated by the installation served as a prophetic and sinister rumination on fracking’s increased presence in England. *Fracking Futures* helped to close the visual gap between invisible fracking locations and the communities they affect, allowing for other, albeit spectacularized, ways of seeing; it also helped to stir public discourse in the gallery space between

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individuals on both sides of the debate. Hansen further elaborated on this idea by proclaiming:

You’re always forbidden from going to see these things. There are always fences and barriers; you can’t touch; you can’t come close. It is like nuclear power stations and oil drilling rigs: these are the most sophisticated things ever built but we can’t touch them or personally appropriate them. So there is a role for the arts to say: let’s do it as a performance to bring people closer [Image 2].

Several years later, in 2016, the University of Dundee’s Cooper Gallery mounted a sequel exhibition to Fracking Futures titled HeHe: When The Future Was About Fracking. The polysemic title implies that “fractivism” and its media coverage has waned in our age of short attention spans; yet it also points to the scientific community’s litigious arguments over the potential hazards of abandoned excavation wells. Here, an artificial well hisses the sounds of methane gas emissions, clouds of toxic smog rise from the earth, and noxious liquid can be seen bubbling at the drill site. By further (re)imagining restricted fracking sites, HeHe establishes different modes of engagement with fracking’s possible ruins; in doing so, they trigger ethical responses to environmental degradation and construct phenomenological experiences for audiences that double as a call to action. But in drafting ontologies of fracking for visual discourse, it is entirely reasonable to suggest that its reach extends

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predominantly to art-educated audiences likely familiar with the issue already, posing the tired but crucial question: can art help save the world?

Elsewhere in the UK, London-based artist Louise Oates's first exposure to fracking was Fox’s *Gasland*. “Troubled by the intensity with which the process was being carried out, ” she observes, ”I was also shocked by the seeming blindness of the industry and government to the environmental issues that were arising from the extraction activities.” Further compelled by newly granted licenses for exploratory fracking in the UK, Oates began work on the multidisciplinary project *Notes on Hydraulic Fracturing*. It contains photographic, sculptural, performative, and video elements brought together in a thirty-six-page book of the same name published in 2017 that blurs the lines separating critical aesthetics, research, investigative journalism, and social praxis. Color photographs index various locations in the UK slated for future oil or gas drilling alongside other photographs that Oates sprayed with sodium hydroxide, a corrosive chemical used in fracking during the extraction process. The atrophying pictures were then photographed three years later to create a photograph of a photograph, a *mise en abyme*, revealing hazardous yet strangely beautiful snowflake formations [Image 3]. Also included in the book is a documentary image of *Concrete Casing* (2014), a sculptural object composed of two concrete cylinders; one of the cylinders, which is broken in half, rests on top of the other, several of its pieces scattered on the ground. Harkening back to modernism’s preoccupation with geometric abstraction, the work directly addresses how concrete sheaths used to line drill cavities are subject to cracking and decay, which results in the potential contamination of drinkable water [Image 4]. In a similar way to the work of HeHe, it illuminates the omnipresent cult of secrecy enveloping the fracking industry, its questionable techniques, and the waste it leaves behind so that we might, as Oates puts it, “try to find new ways of representing things that can’t be seen.”

Lastly, the book includes images of three geographical maps assembled using soil collected from exploratory fracking sites in the UK. The maps carefully emulate aerial photographs of fracked landscapes in the state of Pennsylvania, which incidentally distinguishes Oates as an unofficial cartographer of the Anthropocene. The Anthropocene is defined as a geologic epoch when human actions have an acute and prolonged impact on the population, climate, and natural environment; to little surprise, a number of scientists, artists, and environmentalists insist that we are currently living it. Yet the etymology of ”Anthropocene” seems to suggest that we may have committed irreparable harm to the Earth that will

9. The full quotation reads: ”The Gasland film was actually my first exposure to Hydraulic Fracturing. I was troubled by the intensity with which the process was being carried out, the damage it was doing to the land and the people who lived and derived their income from it. I was also shocked by the seeming blindness of the industry and government to the environmental issues that were arising from the extraction activities. Even though at the end of the documentary Fox tells us there are huge reservoirs in Europe and that it’s only a matter of time before fracking develops here I never believed they would actually be pursuing it a few years later. As soon as I heard that licenses had been granted to explore for the gas in the UK I began the project.” See Louise Oates, quoted in Elena Vaninetti, “Notes on Hydraulic Fracturing: A Conversation with Louise Oates,” *Yet*, January 12, 2018, https://yet-magazine.com/post/notes-on-hydraulic-fracturing-a-conversation-with-louise-oates.


eventually lead to mass extinction of all forms of life. The position of fracking in this sequence of events remains a mystery [Image 5].

As suggested, fracking is overwhelmed with serious contradictions between the economy and the environment, between oil/gas and clean water, between industry and individual; however, the link between fracking and indigenous communities is inadequately represented, especially since many reside within lands, reserves, and traditional tribal territories rich with fossil fuels. To combat this neglect and emphasize indigenous stewardship over North American land, artist Gregg Deal, a member of Nevada’s Pyramid Lake Paiute Tribe, produced an influential symbol for the anti-fracking movement: the free, open-source poster PROTECTING OUR MOTHER FOR OUR UNBORN CHILDREN: STOP FRACKING | STOP DRILLING (2013). The original photograph that Deal appropriated for the poster depicts Amanda Marie Polchies, a member of Elsipogtog First Nation in New Brunswick, who sits on the ground and lifts an eagle feather into the air while an armed police presence hovers in the background. This scene was captured during violent protests against shale gas developments close to Rexton, New Brunswick, Canada, and posted to the social media website Twitter by Ossie Michelin. Though Deal’s poster soon “went viral” after the protest was reported by international media, it has since become an important symbol of solidarity for Elsipogtog First Nation and other indigenous communities, and the anti-fracking movement more generally. Deal’s barbed critique stands as a political avowal of land claims to traditional territories, the protection of treaty rights, indigenous sovereignty, and decolonialism; yet perhaps its effectiveness is due in part to its ability to be seen numerous times in many places across different platforms, thereby functioning as a contagion of anti-fracking discourse.12 Scientific, moral, and environmental criticisms of fracking yield particular sets of discursive meanings, yet the spiritual dimensions of fracking rarely play into existing debates. In the poster, by making direct reference to the welfare of “Mother,” Deal pronounces that Earth comprises far more than physical matter—solids, liquids, and gases—in that indigenous worldviews regard it as Mother, the harbinger of all life to be respected, cared for, and defended [Image 6].

One of the most successful examples of fracking-related art is that of artist Peter von Tiesenhausen, who started building a modest eight-foot-long white fence on his property in Demmitt, Alberta, in 1990. Titled LIFELINE,13 it does not actually fence anything in, per se, but exists as a site-specific sculptural installation and durational performance. Instead, he uses the same materials—two-by-fours, one-by-fours, posts, nails, and white paint—to grow the fence eight feet every year until he dies. Tiesenhausen’s property sits atop an


13. At the same time as Tiesenhausen began construction on LIFELINE, Wiebo Ludwig, a leader of the Christian community Trickle Creek, is alleged to have begun a campaign of sabotaging sour gas installations only miles from Tiesenhausen’s property. In 1998, the Royal Canadian Mounted Police charged Ludwig for destroying a Suncor sour gas well a few days after his grandchild was delivered stillborn. In 2012, a year after the release of the feature documentary Wiebo’s War, recording his opposition to nearby fracking sites, Ludwig died from cancer of the esophagus. See Wiebo’s War, directed by David York (Montreal: National Film Board of Canada, 2011).
immense natural gas fairway located in northwestern Alberta and northeastern British Columbia known as the Deep Basin. In the spirit of *détournement*, he began to charge representatives of oil and gas corporations five hundred dollars an hour to speak with him about the possibility of constructing natural gas pipeline projects through his land; this bureaucratic ballet utilizes tactics and strategies that wealthy energy corporations recurrently enact against other, often powerless individuals. In 1996, six years after the creation of *Lifeline*, Alliance Pipeline actively sought to force the creation of a natural gas pipeline through Tiesenhausen’s property. When he stated his claim over the land, the company responded by offering him a huge sum of money to pass through it, which he subsequently refused. Out of options, Alliance was forced to reroute the pipeline, circumventing it around Tiesenhausen’s property at great expense. When asked about the aftereffects of his work and its close relationship to oil and gas extraction in the region, Tiesenhausen replied:

My image is that we are, not unlike mosquitoes in our action, puncturing the earth, introducing an anticoagulant, and sucking out an ichor now accepted to be the prime cause of climate change. Like introducing an epidemic of malaria, we are now knowingly causing future generations extreme hardship [Image 7].

Several years later, Houston-based ConocoPhillips, the world’s largest independent energy exploration and production company, entered Tiesenhausen’s property without permission and damaged two small trees marked as artwork. As a result, Tiesenhausen contacted a lawyer who assisted him in drafting a legal document that would hold the company

accountable for their actions. The suit was later settled out of court with no restrictions or gag orders, and Tiesenhausen’s property was officially acknowledged by ConocoPhillips as a living work of art. Critics of the contract argue that it is not necessarily Tiesenhausen’s intellectual property provisions that prevent oil and gas interests from interfering with his property but rather the prospect of a long, drawn-out court battle that would effectively harm the company’s public image. In any case, Tiesenhausen and projects such as Lifeline move beyond the realm of contemporary art discourse, which often exists in its own discursive vacuum, and function as a strong example of how politically engaged aesthetics can operate in combination with nonviolent protest.

The museological implications of fracking continue to unfold in galleries, museums, and artist-run centers. From Fracking: Art and Activism Against the Drill in New York City (2010) to FRACKED in Eltham, New Zealand (2012), Frackaso: Portraits of Extraction in Eagle Ford and Beyond in San Antonio (2014), and Fractured Territory in Katherine, Australia (2018), artists, curators, and other cultural workers continue to manufacture textures of experience in an uncertain ecological landscape to expand our knowledge of fracking and its dis/contents. Still, there are a number of exhibitions that have openly endorsed and/or support fracking operations conducted by energy corporations, particularly in the

15. Tiesenhausen, email conversation with author, July 18, 2018.
16. Monica Goyal, “No, it’s not Copyright that is keeping a natural gas pipeline off of Peter von Tiesenhausen’s farm,” Aluvion, https://archive.org/stream/AlbertaOilAndTheDeclineOfDemocracyInCanada/Alberta_Oil_and_the_Decline_of_Democracy_in_Canada_djvu.txt.

US, which has led to serious museological tensions concerning transparency, corporate sponsorship, and censorship. At the very least, however, museums such as the The Clay Center for the Arts and Sciences of West Virginia in Charleston, and the Perot Museum of Nature and Science in Dallas, Texas, provide a counterargument to the kinds of anti-fracking discourse that dominate fracking-related artwork—the pros and cons of fracking are rarely, if ever, openly discussed in public galleries or, conversely, corporate-funded museums, leading to a lack of objectivity by those on both sides.

For instance, in 2013, nonviolent protestors could be heard chanting “Keep propaganda out of science!” outside the Perot Museum in reaction to a lively exhibition that demonstrated what hydraulic fracturing is and what it achieves. In the protestors’ opinion, the museum failed to disclose, or at least allude to, the ways that fracking can jeopardize public health, air quality, and the natural environment. “It is almost bizarre to see a major exhibit about energy whose central focus is on fracking and its machinery,” writes Edward Rothstein, presumably since fracking is unabashedly represented while remaining a powerfully divisive issue. “We also get little sense of the controversies and debates that now fuel any examination of the energy issue.”

Paradoxically, the museum asserts in its vision that it intends to become a “resource and catalyst for science learning” while simultaneously hosting a virtual reality experience called “Shale Voyager” that informs audiences about hydraulic fracturing. Upon entering the small theater, audiences are seated in motion chairs that simulate vertical travel down a 6,500-foot borehole. They then emerge horizontally through black rock in Texas’s Barnett Shale before returning to the surface along with the released gas. The potential risks involved in fracking are painfully absent. “Shale Voyager” is located in Tom Hunt Energy Hall, a space funded by a $10 million donation from Hunt Petroleum Corporation, an oil and gas exploration and production company. Despite the fact that the museum was constructed without the use of public capital, it continues to design public education curriculums that serve children, teenagers, and adults. As such, its exhibitionary bias discloses a conflict of interest between the institution’s pedagogical authority and its utilization of corporate sponsorship. Not only does this disclose capitalism’s knack for compromising educational accountability, it also cultivates generational loyalty to the fossil fuel industry from an early age.

Similarly, the Queensland Art Gallery/Gallery of Modern Art in Brisbane, Australia, opened a major exhibition by Chinese artist Cai Guo-Qiang titled Falling Back to Earth in 2013. A prominent element in the show was the inclusion of Cai’s large-scale installation Heritage, which presented ninety-nine replica animals—including kangaroos, giraffes, lions, pandas, zebras, and rhinos—drinking from a pool of clean blue water. “When I first conceived this work,” said Cai, “I thought it would be related to environmental issues that we have here on Earth. But once the work was finished I realised that it relates to broader issues, such as our position within the universe.”

reflection of the issues concerning global water conflict and its effect on bionetworks soon falls into meaningless art-speak; nonetheless, soon after the exhibition’s opening, environmental activist group Generation Alpha (GA) publicly threatened to “poison” the animals on display in direct reference to the fact that independent Australian oil and gas producer Santos sponsored the gallery with a $1.5 million endowment. For GA spokesperson Ben Pennings, “it’s beyond ironic” having Santos sponsor exhibition programming that features drinkable water such as *Falling Back to Earth* at the same time as they frack rural Australia. On the other side of the coin, as budgets for cultural institutions dwindle in neoliberal economies, corporate donations have become elemental to galleries’ and museums’ survivability. Ultimately, though, the water pool and the already lifeless animals were not poisoned by GA, but they did dress one of their members in a koala suit to stand in front of the water pool, drink a “contaminated” cup of water, drop to the ground, and pretend to die. They proved that when artists and galleries beholden to corporate interests flounder, politicized art activism can make a powerful case for the need for safeguarding drinkable water. That being said, while the exhibition was still running, Santos’s coal seam gas project contaminated an aquifer in New South Wales with chemicals, radioactive material, and toxic substances including lead, arsenic, and uranium. For the leak, its damage to the environment, and its threat to public safety, Santos was fined a paltry sum of AUD$1,500 by the New South Wales Environment Protection Authority.

The nocturnal appearance of text-based light projections against the side of the then-new Whitney Museum of American Art in 2015 was staged by art activist collectives Occupy Museums and Occupy the Pipeline. Enormous messages such as “Climate Change: Contemporary Land Art?,” “Warning! High Pressure Gas Line,” and “Fracked Gas Line Museum” insinuated that the $422 million museum, housing some of the most canonical modern and contemporary artworks in the US, lies adjacent to a natural gas pipeline operated by Houston-based Spectra Energy. From the perspective of the activists, the Whitney’s physical proximity to the pipeline placed visitors, the museum, and its invaluable collection in harm’s way. In an open letter addressed to Whitney administrators (and posted to the website Whitneypipeline.org), organizers asked “How can a museum that literally covers up the dirty fossil fuel industry be a beacon for the future of art and culture?” Cultural theorists such as Nina Felshin suggest that activist art like that of the Whitney protest is the “new public art” representing “a confluence of the aesthetic, socio-political, and technological impulses [used] to challenge, explore, or blur the boundaries and hierarchies traditionally defining the culture as represented by those in power.”

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Guerrilla Girls, and a parodic ribbon-cutting ceremony, passersby paid little to “no notice.”

The Whitney protest was somewhat misleading in that the natural gas pipeline does not actually rest beneath the museum’s property, nor did the museum have much of a say in the pipeline’s construction, since it falls under the purview of federal authority; and we can add to this the overwhelming evidence that at the time the museum was seeking a LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) gold certification from the U.S. Green Building Council. By doing so, the museum would restrict its consumption of natural gas energy and would be only the second museum in New York City to earn such recognition, which it finally did receive in 2017. The Whitney pipeline protest suggests that tandem collaborative efforts between political activists, visual artists, and cultural institutions hold stronger potential to deconstruct the place of fracking in the modern world and influence systemic and structural change; in particular, as a united front, they can push for greater federal, state, and municipal regulatory oversight of fracking practices to not only prevent catastrophe, but also hold energy corporations accountable for their actions.

Conversely, the Critical Art Ensemble (CAE), a US-based media arts collective, constructed an art intervention at Nathan Phillips Square in Toronto in 2014 as part of the city’s annual Nuit Blanche nightlong art event, which attempted to embody both the “pro” and “con” in the debate over oil and gas extraction. A Temporary Monument to North American Energy Security consisted of two white oil tanks connected by a pipeline and a large television screen that was reflected in the square’s fountain below. During the intervention, images of blue oceans and mountain vistas overlaid with words such as “HARMONY” and “TRANSPARENCY” appeared onscreen; there were also interviews with energy workers in corporate offices and on drill sites who praised the benefits of resource extraction, giving the look and feel of a standard corporate video commissioned by the energy industry. Soon after, a leak sprung in the pipeline, filling the fountain with simulated oil replete with thick foam resting on its surface. Finally, graffiti writers approached the tanks and spray-painted them with black skulls before emergency management crews rushed in to stage a cleaning of the area. The deeply contrasting visual and sensual experiences served to form a simultaneous affirmation and disavowal of US-Canada energy independence and futures. But what is particularly fascinating about the work is that it presented both sides of the discourse, allowing room for the audience to draw its own conclusion on just where they stand.

According to industry and state data, it is estimated that more than 137,000 fracked wells have been drilled or permitted in more than twenty US states since 2005. Significant gaps in reporting requirements, data formats and, more broadly, strict regulatory oversight

27. Ibid.
assures that exact figures remain unknown to this day.\textsuperscript{29} In Canada, it is believed that more than two hundred thousand wells have been horizontally fracked for shale gas and oil, particularly in the western provinces.\textsuperscript{30} In 2012, Donald Trump tweeted “Fracking will lead to American energy independence. With the price of natural gas continuing to drop, we can be at a tremendous advantage.”\textsuperscript{31} In late 2017, after his Presidential victory, Trump’s Interior Department repealed federal regulations instituted by the Obama administration that sought to place limitations for fracking on public land; as a result, Trump antagonized the Democratic Party, environmental groups, indigenous communities, fractivists, and others while renewing critical public debate over existing fracking practices.

*Gasland* and its sequel, *Gasland Part II* (2013), symbolize a rhizomatic point of departure for artists, curators, cultural workers, and activists whose work unfolds the problematic relationships between fracking and climate change, waste, environmental degradation, pollution, and public health. In the wake of fresh data, images, and dissent, contemporary art persists in playing a key role in picturing the invisible and visualizing protest. Accordingly, it formulates novel ways to confront and challenge an authoritative fossil fuel industry and translate key issues into new modes of understanding.

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