

Not the Last Barrel.

Nearly a year has passed since I held up a sample from the [Last Barrel of North Sea Oil](#) in my hands and told the story of the end of the Oil era in the North Sea. The sample was an exhibit in a ‘performance’ of the [Carbon Ruins Museum of the Future](#), which ran at the official and ‘fringe’ COP in Glasgow in 2021. This post-fossil fuel museum takes some inspiration from a loose-ish school of techniques known as ‘futuring’.¹ Visitors and audiences are asked to consider themselves in 2053, and to contemplate objects formed of the era of late petroculture. The objects have, in this specific and speculative version of the future, become either fossil-free or obsolescent, artefacts of the age of oil now passed into history.² Might this be one example of an engaged, public-facing *After Oil* methodology? One that any one of you (or your colleagues, associates, students, etc.) can attempt? I don’t know, but I’m going to try to extrapolate on this below.

Presenting North Sea oil as history was and wasn’t easy. Not principally because this was—since you ask—*not* a ‘real’ jar of North Sea oil, rather a viscous mixture of sunflower oil and treacle; but more to do with the highly volatile nature of the political ecology surrounding the timing and nature of the demise of a ‘national’ energy source, one alert to its inevitable ends (if perhaps not quite its ‘afters’) since its onstreaming in the early 1970s.³ The method, as we have discovered with experience, trial and error, opens out challenging questions on the credibility and the credulity of the narrative and the balance struck between what might be viewed as realistic and speculative in the tale of the object. A narrative of the end of oil in the North Sea (well, in the *British* sector, at any rate), as with many of the other museum exhibits from around fossil fuel’s world, is actually easy enough to conjure up. (The harder part being the work of persuasive agency.) One of the key skills generated by *After Oil*, after all, has been to make us more fluent in the wide—perhaps too wide?—spectrum of post-oil imaginaries. Here it is:

Even in the early 2020s, despite advanced decommissioning, despite various reports from the UN and IPCC and a series of pressure groups campaigning to prevent the licensing of new blocks and the opening of new fields, industry and government decided to keep their options open. The controversial ‘Cambo’ field, North West of the Shetland islands was granted operational ‘go’ in 2022, despite Glasgow’s hosting of the COP26 talks. This led to cascading protests across Scottish civil society, from schoolchildren to environmental groups to renewable industry advocates – including North Sea oil workers. In the end, all this pressure paid off, with domestic and international forces from numerous constituencies deflating the value of oil stock. The industry shrunk rapidly from 2026 and is now viewed as a historical artefact, though a powerful ‘petro-nostalgia’ is still apparent in places. The ‘Last Barrel’ from which this small sample is taken, was pipelined

¹ See for example Hajer and Pelzer, “2050—An Energetic Odyssey: Understanding ‘Techniques of Futuring’” in *Energy Research and Social Science* 44 (2018). Andrew Curry, ‘A Critical History of Scenarios’, *Routledge Handbook of Social Futures* (2021); Peter Frase, *Four Futures* (Verso, 2016); Naomi Oreskes & Eric M. Conway, *The Collapse of Western Civilization* (Columbia, 2014). For more on Carbon Ruins, see Raven and Stripple, “Touring the Carbon Ruins: Towards an ethics of decarbonization”, *Global Discourse* (2021).

² The future museum concept is not, of course, an original one. There are plenty of examples of such initiatives. See, for example, two recent initiatives: <https://www.museumforfuturefossils.com/overview>; <https://www.museumsforclimateaction.org/>

³ I make the case in a recent chapter on the cultural forms of North Sea Oil that we can read an *After Oil* sensibility in most of it – and, tentatively, most petroculture. Since its inception, depletion anxiety has been as aesthetically registered as it has been politically generative. In general, British society has in a sense always been preparing for it, but climate consciousness has raised the cultural and political bar as to the actual likelihood of this seemingly always deferred eventuality. See “Dynamic Positioning: North Sea petroculture’s backwash”, in Farquharson and Polack (eds.), *Cold Water Oil: Offshore Petroleum Cultures* (2022).

ashore in 2034 and is now in permanent display in the National Museum of Scotland, alongside the flare tips from the decommissioned Murchison platform and the controversial Mossmorran plant, donated in 2017 and 2026 respectively.

Increased futurist fluency, of course, does not mean an ability to predict outcomes, nor does it bely a certain attention to the likelihood of bad ones. A motivating critical element of *After Oil* since its inception has been the determination to sketch out—academically, creatively, politically—possible routes and narratives beyond oil. But this has always been freighted by a historical petrocultural literacy that confirms oil’s zombie like ability to resurrect and regenerate itself. We identified this whack-a-mole tendency from the beginning.⁴ It hasn’t gone away, but I wonder if in many senses the widening divisions over this regeneration is confirmation of the signatures of transition occurring, however frustrating and thwarted, however unevenly distributed? We’ve always been (and remain) *before* after oil in some sense, even—and perhaps especially—when we dare to future it. Almost a year on from the optimistic (you might say naïve, but that is kind of the point - see below) after oil narrative of the North Sea cited above, I am struck by the spanners of unfolding events that infringe upon it. These have exercised a depressing (but, as I say, not unfamiliar) political and economic re-orientation by capital and government preaching the logic of a continuing petroculture. They do so by operating an extant strategy of deferral and delay, using the promissory note of the *eventual* transition, which is always, as we know, just over the hill.

The War in Ukraine has ‘legitimised’ this argument for deferred transition. It has also been a continental pedagogic exercise in the infrastructure and geopolitics of European—and global—petroculture. We might be inclined to argue here that it might offer an opportunity to forge a line in the sand for fossil fuel life. Its ramifications cascade onto already unfolding energy market failure across the continent, which was impacting on the UK’s—the enthusiastically free-market UK’s—domestic energy set-ups and costs with particular severity. Public lessons in energy provision *and* production since COP26 have only accentuated the wider debate—constitutional, economic, environmental, and mostly always ideologically capitalist—over the pace, custodianship, and quality of the transition to renewables. Last week in the UK saw the inception of yet another (the fourth in six years) new conservative government who (in the name of energy security, though this is objectively laughable) immediately used the crisis to facilitate a lightning policy maximising North Sea production and [extend the life of UK oil and gas](#), offering licenses for over one hundred new exploration blocks. They are going *after* oil, we might say. And they are doing so, according to their declared rationale, in order to *delay* ‘after oil’ in order to *get* after oil.⁵

⁴ Best recent sign of differing approaches to ‘After Oil’? Immediately after the recent *Petrocultures* conference in Stavanger, the city hosted the ONS conference, where the keynote speaker Elon Musk emphasised that the “world must continue to extract oil and gas.” <https://ons.no/>

⁵ By this I mean control. Capital’s objectives are clear in the current and ongoing appropriation and capitalisation of the timing, placement and distribution of large-scale renewables projects, where the aim is for a seamless transition without loss for the profit system and its energoculture. (We all know multiple examples of this). It of course involves different modes of state capture. Boris Johnson, who claimed, unashamedly, in a speech in 2020, that “the UK can be the Saudi Arabia of wind power” was, like Alex Salmond (the leader of the Scottish National Party) before him (and from whom he outright stole the phrase) not shy of cloaking this in nationalist infrastructural terms. In fact, the right has a much longer and deeper post-oil (and renewables) interest than might be commonly accepted. Who said, in a speech to the UN General Assembly in 1989, that “Put in its bluntest form: the main threat to our environment is more and more people, and their activities: The land they cultivate ever more intensively; The forests they cut down and burn; The mountain sides they lay bare; The fossil fuels they burn; The rivers and the seas they pollute.” And that we were going to have to move to new forms of energy without blaming multi-national industry or losing faith in the power of the free-market? One Margaret Thatcher. <https://www.margarethatcher.org/document/107817>

They also confirmed the end (in England and Wales) of the moratorium on onshore [fracking](#). This has been deeply controversial but is to now go ahead despite dire predictions from the science and poor projections for the economics. One of the fields to get immediate 'go' was the [Cambo](#) one I included in my sample jar narrative.

This clunkily returns me to the methodology of futuring. With regards the Last Barrel, I got the short-term events correct, but my later arguments for how we got after oil, despite all the political and cultural activism of the last ten years, appear plunged back behind that particular curve of optimism. That's ok. Mistakes are generative, they become part of the method. But this, as we too well know, can appear like Farmer's 'long defeat'. 'After Oil'? In the time in which new frontiers are being opened all round the world, from Canada to Mauritania to Guyana? It's hard not to feel pessimistic about what we as scholars in the Humanities can realistically offer. Novels, art works, cultural and political theories. Pffft. Maybe we should just spend our time in Banff planning our redoubt in the Rockies for when the CO² cheques all come in.....

Yet.

Maybe the fact that recent consolidations of the argument for more oil and gas (even for 'drawdown' or 'transition' oil) in petro-capitalism and energy security proclamations should actually provide some succour for the continuation and expansion of our methods and objectives. Fierce political reactions to proposals of transition, to the 'green crap' as the former UK PM David Cameron infamously put it, are often inured in culture war tactics. That we are seeing proliferating op-eds from prominent Lords and other commentators arguing for continued extraction (and essaying things like the freedom of the petrol car against public transport, etc) might actually be a sign of something more positive for our constituency as we grow it. On the ground of culture, however, it is clear that a great many *After Oil* projects have sprouted, offering opposition.⁶ This might be small gruel, but it's gruel nonetheless.

Here is what I am uncertain about, but I'll float it anyway for you to throw back at me: is not this new wave of petro-sustenance and the means by which it is mediated in fact a sign not of the *failure* of the diverse constellation of projects like *After Oil*, but in fact indication – however modest – of its success, in concert as it is with other such projects? Let's imagine there is an *anxiety* detectable in the dark side of the force. The lurch to extraction is much more easily framed to publics now as a failure of the imagination as it is of political courage and policy direction. I argued a few years back in a keynote at a Petrocultures conference, that maybe the sign we turned up to future Petrocultures conferences had to be taken as a failure: 'great conference, hopefully never see you again!' I don't think the same of *After Oil* (but you might be happy to see the back of me!) It means and demands something different, it has multiple valences for us to work with, as the conclusion of the first collective book argued and as the second iteration—*Solarities*—has shown. The dissemination of this work is perhaps not easy to track but there should be more. I am a believer here—wind, calories, concrete, dwellings, hydro/gen—name your process/infrastructure and *After Oil* it!

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⁶ For example the day the *Guardian* newspaper reported (23rd Sept 2022) the Energy Minister of the UK's decree to his Department that 'Britain must get every last cubic inch of gas out of the North Sea', they also profiled the ['See Monster'](#).

The future uncertain is not a bug but in fact a feature in the strategy of open futuring. Whether it is a falsifying method or an inductive method which suits an *After Oil* epistemology, I simply don't know. You tell me. Maybe it's both. For example, we could hypothesise that there is room to write or curate a fully dystopian or catastrophic Museum of the Future (could we even call it a museum of carbon ruins — will there be any museums in the apocalypse?) Does the concept allow for a socialist version? A militant one? A degrowth one? Or one from the right? Possibly. This is where it can be useful as a pedagogical exercise for students as well as workshops, etc.

One thing that has haunted me in repeat iterations and in public engagement (dependent on the place and audience demographic) is that the narrative perspective can fly somewhat too close to mainstream pro-transition discourse, where liberal injunctions against 'doomism' or indictments against idealistic or utopian futures weigh in. An 'After Oil Realism' might need to consider what is now a shibboleth: the request for more 'hopeful' narratives in transition (usually a sign of the liberal virus!). These have appeared amidst a detectable point of genre exhaustion in the cultural work of after-oil imaginaries (too much post-apocalyptic! dystopia is too familiar! climate fiction is disaster porn! etc.) There's no reason at all for not pursuing a much more explicitly leftist or transgressive narrative for each object or the general framing story. Maybe even a surreal one. But my suggestion is simply— try it! It's not always easy to sell but people are more receptive than you might think.

Or maybe there's an easier and much more comfortable experiment for our particular constituency to do: do it in your classroom. This is an area of impact and effect where it seems to me we *After Oilers* are somewhat weak and impressionistic. I teach *After Oil*. Do you? Shouldn't we all? What modules have we written, taught, conceived which we might either a) share, work on together b) reflect on how we teach it? We often forget in our rush to do the pleasurable research-level intellectual work that our factory floor is full of opportunity. Who teaches large-scale undergraduate courses on *After Oil*? What pedagogic methods and tips and correspondences might we manage here? Should we be doing something like [this](#)?

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Some closing remarks on the methodology. 'Passing' an after oil or a decarbonized object or a 'viewing' into an actual 'after' is an important outcome to note in this short reflection on one specific creative project. Where we are *now* with that movement to the 'after' is what we have been tasked, in part, with wondering, almost a decade after the first *After Oil* school. The particular after-oil imaginary of *Carbon Ruins* (is *after* oil the same as *post*-oil? I think perhaps not) was what we might call relatively optimistic, probably because in places it was based on outcomes from the various SSPs published in climate models and in IPCC reports. What was evident from repeat performances and from engaging with the hundreds of people who have visited the museum and attended performances is that the method and its narrative fabric is *cruelly* optimistic and, to reiterate an anxiety I have above, in several places perhaps even (sharp intake of breath) too *liberal* in its assumption of achieving climate stabilisation (yes, I know) as something achievable and palatable for a wide constituency. There is a fair bit of social conflict in the narrative of each object's fortunes thrown in along the way, but the extent of the compromise on what I personally want ideally to happen and what realistically might move the dial is I guess an instructive element of the impasse. Our backcasting is *deliberately* vague in places, in order to channel the speculative mode and to perhaps engage with politics from that relatively weightless space. (Common reactions: "That will never happen like that!" "This is too optimistic!", "This is really hopeful, but is it utopian?", etc, are very good means to prise open a counterpoint option.) And this is kind of

the point of this exercise, which has different impressions dependent on the audience (from walk-in members of the general public to climate policymakers to cultural theorists and academics).

Lastly. In the performance element the immersive atmosphere is heightened, with the curator and audience discussing exhibits while remaining in the narrative present of 2053. The stakes are deliberately raised by this, in that any prospective slippage by either audience member or curator back to the *actual* present (i.e. the one where petroculture is writ large) seems at first a failure of the performative rules of the conceit but in fact underpins the aims of the method. The *performance* style is in some sense amateur Brechtian: to seek to provoke, and alienate, to hold people in and across two spaces and between two times; to maximise the irony; to use comedy and in places, exaggeration strategically; to compel people to critically analyse the distance between now ('during') and 'after' oil, whatever 'after' might infer. This is usually accompanied by an interrogation of the credibility of the narrative of what happened to a specific object via a speculatively wrought narrative of its fortunes over three decades, though the future time, should you choose to play, is open to consideration and is flexible, as is the geographic and cultural specificity of some objects. Challenge: what would a *Banff* Museum of Carbon Ruins look like? Or a Calgary one? A Lagosian one? Attendees are also invited to make a concession of their own objects and its narrative to the museum – to grasp the concept and to make something of their choosing an object of an 'after oil' condition. To be part of this and to seize the narrative.