While perusing aerial photographs of the Athabasca bitumen sands, I hear the sounds of road construction outside. Turning from scenes of shining black flows attended by various machines, I look down from the second-storey window to road-resurfacing workers and machines pouring an oily river of black asphalt. The overlapping images serve as reminder of the reach of remote extraction sites into everyday life, of oil constituting not simply a resource but, as Imre Szeman notes, a part of the social ontology underlying industrial capitalism (quoted in Melathopoulos 2010). In Alberta, where the petroleum industry is deeply infused into the social and cultural imaginary, oil companies and provincial governments have together shaped discourses of prosperity, identity, and citizenship for generations. This chapter outlines ways in which oil money has sustained a conjunction of cultural, political, and economic power as it flows through networks of fine art, community entertainment, cultural institutions, and artistic practice. In that context, I inquire into how practices of visual arts “can be integral to political dialogue filling the vacuum left behind by the limitations of representative democracies” (Plessner 2012).

In a petro-culture, key characteristics of which are manifest in Alberta, our understanding of objects and events is deeply informed by oil energy, which shapes not only everyday life but also its representation and content. At present, the entrenched association of the oil industry with a certain configuration of social power supports an adversarial rhetoric that posits critical analysis and challenge as being against the common good. The coincidence of government and industry interests raises questions about the limits to public political participation. If cultural expression is a dimension of democratic citizenship, what role can the visual arts play in both constructing and resisting dominant claims of the centrality of oil to the public interest and to provincial identity? Over the
long integration of the oil industry into the complex social and environmental imaginary of the province, both the private and public sectors have supported the arts and cultural production, helping to shape a rich community capacity for critical thought and expression. However, the ongoing loss of public funding for cultural production at both federal and provincial levels, coinciding with steady surges of taxpayer-funded oil industry promotional materials, suggests that this potential wealth of voices is becoming increasingly muffled.

The following discussion first considers visual expression as potentially challenging the legitimation of oil as the central medium not only of energy but of regional identity, prosperity, and quality of life. Drawing on contemporary reportage, public relations statements, policy documents, and exhibition statements, the second section traces the relationship of Alberta governments and oil industry players to cultural development in the historical contexts of province building and the advent of neoliberalism. The analysis considers the potential for contestation and complicity in a province where culture remains integrated into the political and economic conditions of its production. Although a comprehensive survey of relevant cultural production is outside the scope of this chapter, I present representative examples of work in fields of visual arts, including installation and performance, in both institutional and everyday urban space and touch on the role of the Internet in expanding audiences and enabling participants in visual production. A central concern here is the instrumental role taken by the arts and cultural production.

Culture, Citizenship, and Consensus

The public sphere includes the cultural body of ideas informing public debate, as well as the media and spaces of public interaction. In practice, public influence on state decisions through debate is kept, through political institutions, in an orderly balance between social stability and change. When channels of communication fail, though, citizens no longer identify with the system and no longer give it legitimacy (Castells 2008). The understanding of visual cultural forms as part of these mediated networks of communication is particularly important as traditional spheres and spaces of citizenship shrink or vanish. Artists potentially fill a role that was previously taken by a political class involved in critiques of assumptions that steer public policy, helping to liberate thought from the status quo (Latour and Weibel 2005; Miller 2011). Szeman notes that art practices may activate a waning political will by “reminding
publics that social life is something to be created and celebrated rather than feared or endured” (cited in Robertson 2006, 13). Commenting more straightforwardly on this potential role of artistic production, an Alberta rancher reportedly called the arts “the sharpest knives in the drawer” of creative democratic tools (quoted in Robinson 2012).

Visual culture, then, participates in discourses of everyday life that produce a set of common assumptions and tacit beliefs underlying public communication. Discourses are understood here in general terms as systems of ideas and practices that construct our understandings of the world and that mediate social and cultural identity, economic development, and social consensus around relations of power. Image-centred discourses and narratives, which Appadurai (1996, 35) calls mediascapes, shape notions of reality in this way and interact with ideoscapes, which are often directly ideological. However, visual imagery is so ubiquitous in our society that, like the network of pipelines under our feet, it can go unremarked as a vehicle of important social and cultural understandings. Creative visual production outside of political and commercial realms has the capacity to visualize or embody the absent or the invisible, whether metaphorical or literal. Such works can potentially break into systems of ideas that seem to be “matters of fact” and complement dominant claims to truth, intervening across boundaries of space—by bringing the far into the near, for example—and of time by reminding us of overarching values and long-term imaginaries.

Modern government arts policies have historically been based on ideals of the democratization of culture, whereby state arts funding, for instance, cannot support elite aesthetic tastes or political agendas but must serve the general public interest. All citizens have access to existing cultural resources and legacies; cultural programs and products are considered public goods. The concept of cultural democracy involves a more radical participation of citizens in cultural production and challenges the insistence of dominant powers that ordinary people remain passive consumers of the cultural status quo. Overwhelmingly, international neoliberal market economies have effectively defined cultural products as commodities and services labelled entertainment, tourism, and knowledge production (Mulcahy 1991). While citizenship historically emerges around civic rights, in the context of neoliberalism, a mass-mediated culture shapes notions of identity and subjectivity in terms of individual opportunity and commodity consumption. Arguments for cultural citizenship in this context broaden a concern with inclusion, belonging, and
cultural identity to include potential for creative expression: that is, producing and manipulating dominant meanings of images in order to participate in the presence and volume of voices in public space (Miller 2011).

Critical theorists have called for devalued people and knowledge to engage in cultural participation to produce, as Horkheimer and Adorno (2002) put it, “authentic” art that emancipates citizens from the dominance of instrumental rationality that supports capitalist regimes. However, in practice, the knives usually don’t travel far from the proverbial drawer for long. Revolutionary art movements have been repeatedly absorbed into established structures, the avant-garde tied to elite power with “an umbilical cord of gold” (Greenberg 1939, 38). Alternative cultural imaginaries are absorbed into mainstream systems of exhibition and marketing (Fisher 2009, 9).

Since Alberta governments have corralled culture into ministries also variously responsible for multiculturalism, sport, parks, recreation, tourism, and “community spirit,” the visual and performing arts have their highest profile as a leisure consumption activity provided by oil wealth. As such, the arts, including visual representations and messages, serve as selling points for provincial destinations and align with economic discourses of creative commercial innovation and civic competition (Harvey 1990, 346–49; Robertson 2006, 12–14). In a petro-state, where state and corporate interests interlock to effectively shape the cultural imaginary, the impacts of oil on democratic society are usually sufficiently normalized as to be hidden in plain sight. Where government revenues accrue without requiring citizen legitimation through tax dollars, or even citizen political engagement, a political culture of “dependence, passivity, and entitlement” ensues (Karl 2007, 21). Alberta, where the Conservatives held power for over four decades, has historically had some of the lowest provincial voter turnouts in the country (Takach 2010, 154–58). ² What political and economic relations rule the distribution of public funds to the creation of culture? What role, if any, have the visual arts played in the development of local cultural citizenship? As discussed in the following section, the state participates in an uneasy relationship with arts and culture, its support varying with changes in cultural and economic policies.

**The Spirit of Alberta: Public Cultural Policies and Corporate Investment**

Discourses and narratives are constituted not only of specific content but also of the externalized meanings of objects and phenomena. Oil extraction
operations and sites such as the Athabasca bitumen sands have been framed in narratives that have effectively fossilized over several decades of capitalist political power. They are further embedded in histories of Canadian visual culture in naturalizing discourses of industrial capitalism since the late 1800s, with artists, governments, and industrialists connecting resource extraction and nation building in photography, paintings, and majestic murals (Hodgins and Thompson 2011, 394). In the 1970s, industrial images such as a giant bucket wheel used for bitumen extraction adorned postage stamps as a natural component of a collection also featuring hockey, wilderness, animals, and politicians (Davidson and Gismondi 2011, 65). When Stephen Harper, in 2006, compared the “epic” Alberta bitumen sands project with iconic structures such as the pyramids or China’s Great Wall (“only bigger”), he placed oil extraction in the historical framework of established dynasties of power and public legacy (Canada, PMO 2006).

With respect to community and regional arts programs, Alberta governments have invoked cultural development as an instrument of province building since at least the 1920s. Goals of economic diversification rationalized related activity and infrastructure in the next decades. Associated ideals of social progress emphasized democratic access to culture, in part to counter stereotypes of the region as a frontier resource base (Whitson, Wall, and Cardinal 2011). The major oil strike of 1947 in Leduc launched a rapid expansion in cultural spending, and 1970s oil prosperity underwrote the Lougheed government’s innovative funding programs on the principle “that the province’s wealth had something to offer the spirit” (Knecht 2010, 21). Related cultural policies are largely responsible for the building of a significant community of artists and for nurturing audiences in both rural and urban areas (Fraser 2003).

State commitment to cultural funding has predictably risen during boom times and wavered during periods of economic recession in oil markets. However, as the influence of neoliberal ideas has expanded, cultural production that falls outside market processes, like other spheres of civil society, effectively draws power away from political toward economic frameworks. The state exists primarily to protect individual and commercial rights and must exert a minimum of power in a society that is driven by the pursuit of profit with the consequence of the commodification of all spheres of activity (Steinhauer 2009, 7–8; Thorsen 2011). In the economic downturn of the 1980s and early 1990s, described by former Edmonton city councillor Michael Phair as “a particularly dark period of benign neglect (bordering on hostility)” (quoted in “The Sharpest Knives in the Drawer” 337
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Babiak 2008b), the Klein administration slashed cultural and social program funding while paying large subsidies to the private sector and collecting the lowest oil royalties anywhere (Steinhauer 2009, 7–8).

Despite rising provincial revenues in the 2000s, the paths of oil wealth and cultural investment have diverged. In 2011, for example, funding for the Alberta Foundation for the Arts ($35 million) was less than 0.1 percent of the total $38 billion Alberta budget; the wealthiest jurisdiction in the country ranked sixth among provinces in its per capita funding in 2011 (Professional Arts Coalition of Edmonton 2011). However, in 2008 the province had the highest level of private sector support of the arts in the country (Alberta 2011, 49). While neoliberalism assumes that economic, political, and cultural realms remain discrete, they are in fact inextricable from each other. Discourses of neoliberalism tend toward privatization, and rhetoric of family and community devolve cultural activity from the responsibility of the state or collective action to consumer activity. For example, the three-day provincial arts festival called “Alberta Arts Days” underwent a name change in 2012 to “Alberta Culture Days.” The original focus on artists expanded to include “family-friendly” experiences such as heritage and multicultural events and performances by youth organizations (Hayes 2012; Kuhl 2012). Ideals of diversity, like those of family, align with the status of the arts as a medium for increasing cohesive community and quality of life. Government spending from general revenues tends to go to facility infrastructure such as museums, while lottery funds remain the source of arts funding for contemporary cultural production and critical voices (Wall 2013). Again, the amenities of entertainment and nonconfrontational activity are an unobjectionable perk of a comfortable society. Nevertheless, the trend reflects an ongoing pattern of the withdrawal of government from the provision of platforms for critical expression and for cultural citizenship as participation in production.

Although cultural funding directed to the arts is distributed on an arm’s length basis, political strings tend to trail behind, as suggested by responses greeting state funding of films critical of the bitumen sands operations. In the name of economic diversification in 2008, the province increased the budget of the Alberta Mutimedia Development Fund (AMDF, now the Alberta Media Fund) from $20 million to $34 million (Gill 2006). Since that date, AMDF funds have contributed to the production of films including Downstream (2008, $67,000), Dirty Oil (2009, $54,000), and Tipping Point: The End of Oil (2011, $239,083) (Platt 2011). Controversy followed outrage that, in the words of a Sun

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News columnist, Alberta pays millions to counter negative images of the oil sands while it funds directors “who don’t even bother to hide their anti-oilsands agenda,” with “every penny potentially damaging the province’s economic engine” (Platt 2011). Leslie Iwerk, director of *Downstream*, argued that her work exposed the “province’s own truths” and cost far less than efforts “to sugar coat and cover up far more than this film could ever reveal” (Christian 2010).

Shortly after the release of Iwerk’s *Downstream*, Alberta’s minister of Culture, Lindsay Blackett, awkwardly suggested that ministry investment should instead “show Alberta in a better light, to create an economic diversification” in order to avoid “a negative impetus on this province” (quoted in CBC News 2008a). A week later, he retracted comments about possible censorship in response to an outcry, asserting instead that his job was “to protect free speech, and [that] trying to exercise creative control over movies would be hypocritical” (CBC News 2008b). Three years later, Alison Redford, at the time campaigning for party leadership, emphasized that independent funding processes “protect our freedom of speech and protect our citizens from government–led propaganda,” adding that she encouraged potentially fruitful debate toward “positive change” (Platt 2011).

The subject of censorship arose again in 2012 when Edmonton artist Spyder Yardley-Jones exhibited a collection of work, combining graphics and text, that critiqued the environmental impacts of the bitumen sands. Designed to provoke discussion about issues rarely raised in the mainstream media, the satirical work included images of Mother Earth being assaulted by the Harper government and an image with sexual innuendos of government complicity in the whims of Big Oil. Protesters objected, not to provocative challenges to the industry but to government funding of the exhibit, on the grounds that the metaphorical images, taken literally, offended taxpayers’ social and moral standards (Di Massa 2012; Ramsay 2012). A year later, Fort McMurray residents protested singer Neil Young’s assessment of the area as resembling Hiroshima, and a local radio station banned his music from their broadcasts (CBC 2013).

Similar charges have been regularly levelled at publicly funded art in the past, of course, but the points to consider here are that local cultural producers are explicitly associating their critique of the oil industry with democratic expression and that challenges to that process under the imprimatur of defending public coffers and morality are, at least briefly, considered to be acceptable by community members and leaders. Meanwhile, a 2011 provincial delegation to the Middle East to promote bitumen sands investment met with
Sheikha Hussah Al-sabah to plan the exhibition of her art collection at the new Art Gallery of Alberta (Alberta, International and Intergovernmental Relations 2011). International exhibition capacity was a selling point of the gallery design, but government use of the nonprofit facility to ameliorate oil industry partnerships is striking in a context of ongoing funding cuts for local artists and organizations. As international neoliberal market economies effectively define cultural products as commodities and services, the “Spirit of Alberta” cultural policy (Alberta, Culture and Tourism 2008) and the Alberta Chambers of Commerce (2014) called for greater private arts investment to supplement government funding. In its 2014 policy brief on the arts and creative industries, the Alberta Chambers of Commerce argued that the province’s arts sector “can work in tandem with the economy” (1) and recommended that the government leverage existing funding through, for instance, an expanded system of matching grants to attract private donations (3).

As ideologies of neoliberalism have advanced since the late 1970s, arts organizations have increasingly fostered relationships with private donors. Oil industry money funds major Canadian institutions. As art historian and consultant Barry Lord puts it, “Where there’s oil, there are museums. . . . Where our energy comes from determines our values”; it is surplus energy, he says, that “makes our culture possible” (Lauder 2012). An understanding of cultural expression and development in Alberta must include the seminal role of the oil industry from its early days in Alberta. Eric Harvie and Samuel C. Nickle, petroleum entrepreneurs of the 1940s, not only accumulated important art collections but later established key public cultural institutions, the Nickle Arts Museum and the Glenbow Museum, respectively. Following World War II, multinational oil interests increasingly collected and commissioned industrial images rather than more traditional fine art subjects. Pictures of golden grain fields dotted with drilling rigs, for instance, visually associated the oil industry with established mythic dimensions of Canadian and Albertan identity, much as had the public works and visual culture of an earlier era.

In the 1950s, the largely foreign-owned Imperial Oil, eager to associate itself with Canadian history and nationalism, not only collected Canadian art but commissioned public relations work by prominent artists, including prairie scenery un tarnished by oil rigs (Lerner and Williamson 1991, 360; see also Art Gallery of Ontario 1959). In 1951, the Canadian Bank of Commerce, then as now invested in oil, commissioned a collection of Alberta artist Roland Gissing’s paintings of oil extraction sites (Foran and Houlton 1988, 44). These and other
collections were displayed in public galleries and corporate buildings, further helping to integrate the oil industry into the complex social and environmental imaginary of a progressive province. Such images reflected the merging of political and economic interests in that oil extraction activities were normalized as central to regional identity and prosperity. By the late 1980s, corporations were the fastest-growing sector of Canadian cultural support as neoliberal economic priorities shifted corporate involvement from direct patronage to influential partnerships with public institutions. Today, major oil companies hold professionally curated art collections that are regularly loaned to public institutions in return for promotional access, including facility and event-naming rights (Setterfield and Schabas 2006).

Benefits to the oil industry extend to public perception of industry providing amenities and infrastructure once accruing to the state, including access to culture and quality of community life. In 2000, when Petro-Canada found its large collection too expensive to maintain, the company reported that it would “unlock” its hold on some of the country’s best art through donations to public institutions (CBC News 2000). Enbridge’s support programs are motivated to provide communities with “inspiration and beauty,” and Suncor has partnered with Fort McMurray area civic institutions to construct an eponymous performing arts centre. Other corporations including Syncrude, British Petroleum (BP) Canada, Enbridge, Chevron, Imperial Oil, and Enmax sponsor prominent organizations such as the Alberta Ballet, the Royal Alberta Museum, the Glenbow Museum and Archives, and the Art Gallery of Alberta, as well as youth programs (Hunt 2014; Nestruck 2012).

There is no question that public benefits have accrued from such interventions and that artists and organizations have been enabled; the history of cultural development in Alberta would inarguably be bleaker without corporate involvement. At the same time, urgent questions about the future of oil dependency and environmental impacts demand a long-term view. As arts and culture associations provide oil companies with social legitimacy, symbolic capital, and established audiences, fossil-fuel dependency is normalized in contexts of pleasant aesthetic experiences in public spaces. The idea “that it is therefore normal to continue to burn fossil fuels subtly seeps into our imaginations” (Thomas-Muller and Smith 2012).

A recurring critique of government cultural funding is that its instability discourages long-term planning and the development of a thriving culture. But the distribution of corporate funds is often contingent on shifting commodity
prices and competing claims to resources. In the wake of a global recession and spreading environmental concerns about the bitumen sands, some companies redirect public relations funding to higher-profile conservationist groups (Van Herk 2009). In 2008, Syncrude abruptly ended its substantial arts funding in Edmonton primarily in order to prioritize new marketing featuring conservation activities; diverted funds would have proved useful when, after hundreds of ducks died in its tailing ponds in 2008, it paid a $3 million fine in the form of donations to several environmental research and conservation organizations (CBC News 2010b; Saxe and Campbell 2012; “Syncrude Announces” 2012). Epcor and Enbridge stepped in to sponsor Syncrude’s abandoned arts groups and Imperial Oil made an unprecedented donation of $300,000 to the Art Gallery of Alberta (Babiak 2008a). However, Epcor ended its agreement with Calgary’s Epcor Centre in 2010, and provincial government funding was withdrawn in 2013, leaving the performing arts facility with a critical financial deficit (CBC News 2013, 2014.)

In 2008, Syncrude donated $1.8 million to Fort McMurray’s Keyano College to begin the Aboriginal Trades Preparation Program, aimed at training First Nations people to work in the oil industry (“Canadian Oil and Gas” 2010, 3). In 2012, the college abruptly laid off twenty faculty and staff from its arts programs, calling them “under-utilized” to the point that supporting them would undermine new engineering and business programs (Thomas 2012; see also Moher 2012). Low enrolments meant loss of government funding. Critics viewed the transfer of classroom space to new engineering technology and business degree programs as a provincial strategy to prioritize trades and industrial programs and a “devaluation of arts programs” (Yogaretnam 2012). The college’s pledge to serve the broader interests of the community coincides with consistently falling support for arts education from a provincial government that bases its funding primarily on enrolment numbers and that increasingly stresses goals of job training. Programs to extend oil jobs to Aboriginal people will provide positive employment opportunities to individuals, but in this context, the consequent loss of other opportunities for artistic expression and employment further shuts down potential channels of cultural citizenship through critical creative training.

Meanwhile, oil companies continue to invest in high-profile professional Aboriginal artists, including Joane Cardinal-Schubert, George Littlechild, Alex Janvier, Bill Reid, and Jane Ash-Poitras, as well as in cultural artifact collections. Arts organizations and programs are also targeted: for example, Enbridge, at
the same time that it is negotiating a controversial pipeline over Indigenous lands, is the sponsor of an Aboriginal youth writing program (Enbridge 2014), and Syncrude sponsors the Travelling Exhibition Program (TREX), an Alberta Foundation for the Arts program. Through TREX, professional and amateur painters from First Nations communities have exhibited their work. Two recent exhibitions, “Creator Paints the World . . . the Colour of Our Voice” and “Our Wilderness Is Wisdom,” have focused on the human relationship to land and wilderness, through which Aboriginal artists can “speak our truth” amid louder voices (AFA 2011, 3; see also Arndt 2012; for “Our Wilderness Is Wisdom,” see AFA 2012; Synrude Canada Ltd. 2011, 23).

Despite the wide resistance to the bitumen sands project by some Aboriginal peoples (chapters 2 and 6, this volume), the corporate support of First Nations artists points to the fact that oil companies often sponsor or purchase art overtly critical of the status quo. One reason they do this is because “cutting-edge” art aligns with narratives of the sponsors’ creative innovation and unbiased social responsibility (Giroux 2005, 31–32). Another is that in a relatively wealthy society, the accommodation of tolerated forms of social critique tends to undermine art’s potential for social change since “the arts contribute less as a force for social change and more as a vehicle facilitating the reproduction of existing social formations” (Kenyon 1996, 33). In other words, cultural capitalism, whether underpinned by oil resources or other commodities, tends to absorb ideological conflict rather than give expression to it. As spaces of cultural citizenship come to exist primarily inside institutional walls, corporate cultural partnerships become the norm (Bewes and Gilbert 2000).

Together with the federal government, Enbridge sponsors Aboriginal Arts and Stories (formerly the Canadian Aboriginal Writing and Arts Challenge), a youth arts competition. Aboriginal Arts and Stories, a program of Historica Canada, has as its mandate to “build active and informed citizens through a greater knowledge and appreciation of the history, heritage and stories of Canada.”5 The project has widespread endorsement and participation by Aboriginal cultural leaders, but a group of opponents attending an Enbridge meeting in 2012 included Trevor Jang, a previous contest winner. Jang had appeared in Enbridge promotional material and renounced the corporation for using him as a “native poster boy” for the company (quoted in Healing 2013).

I now turn the discussion back to broader dimensions of visual culture and consider aspects of display and performance in public space and their implications for cultural citizenship through narratives of belonging and identity.
Associated at various times with images of wilderness scenery, agricultural abundance, and the Wild West, the notion of “being Albertan” resonates today with the oil and gas industry. In 2010, the Canadian Association of Petroleum Producers (CAPP) mounted a public relations campaign called “Alberta Is Energy,” and the Alberta Enterprise Group likewise asserts that the energy industry is “what makes us Albertans” (Haluza-DeLay 2012, 2–3). Both the public and private sectors are deeply involved in the construction of meaning and consensus in these terms. In 2006, the Province of Alberta contributed a display to promote “Alberta’s culture, quality of life and natural beauty” to the prestigious Smithsonian Folklife Festival in Washington, DC, an event conceived as an “educational exposition of living cultural heritage” featuring “community-based cultural exemplars” (Alberta, Alberta Community Development 2006).\(^6\) Alberta displayed information on exports, investment, and tourism; innovation in oil extraction methods was linked to powerful motifs of historic frontier heroism. Looming in the midst of sideshows of cuisine and music, the central display featured a spectacular eighteen-foot-tall model of an oil sands haul truck parked on the Mall as part of the major section on the bitumen sands (Trescott 2006). In challenging the authority of the ministry to define cultural identity in terms of the energy industry in an international exhibition, the Canadian director for the Natural Resources Defense Council implied that the exhibit was a symbol of the “destructive environmental disaster” occurring in Alberta (quoted in Freeman 2006). In response to related criticism, the curator of the exhibit denied that the depiction of Alberta’s living cultural heritage was, in essence, “an ad for the oil industry” (quoted in Freeman 2006).

CAPP and the federal Canadian Museum of Civilization announced a $1 million, five-year sponsorship deal in 2013 in support of the museum’s planned exhibits celebrating the 150th anniversary of Confederation. The museum’s president pointed out that inadequate government funding made such partnerships necessary, while the lobby group’s president confirmed the oil industry’s motivation of self-promotion. CAPP was previously involved in controversy after it was revealed that sponsorship of another federal museum exhibit had been accompanied by pressure to portray the industry in a positive light (Cheadle 2013).

Advertising and public relations are often indistinguishable in discourses of Alberta oil, as the provincial “brand” is contested and reconstructed. Contentious public debate carries on in what are essentially battles over discursive authority to associate cultural identity and expression with corporate...
activity in public spaces. Objecting in part to BP’s investment in Alberta’s “dirty oil,” as well as to the 2011 Gulf of Mexico oil spill, the activist group Art Not Oil vehemently protested the corporation’s long-standing sponsorship of the Tate Gallery in London. The group staged another protest event in early 2015 addressing Shell’s sponsorship of a Rembrandt exhibit at Britain’s National Gallery (Thomas-Muller and Smith 2012; Werth 2015).

In 2010, the American organization Corporate Ethics International, as part of its Tar Sands Campaign, launched multimedia advertisements under the tagline Rethink Alberta. The short videos contrast provincial tourism-campaign images of natural beauty “with disturbing images of oil-covered birds, contaminated tailings ponds, and industrial pollution” (CTV News 2010). Alberta retaliated in print and billboard media in the United States in an attempt to change “negative public perceptions of the oilsands” (CBC News 2010a). Corporate Ethics International, like Greenpeace and other activist organizations, relies on private donations, while the provincial government’s international public relations campaigns are funded by taxpayers, rendered complicit by association. Those taxpayers did not manifest any substantial objections to the government’s PR campaign, contrasting sharply with numerous complaints about government funding for a major new provincial art gallery in Edmonton around the same time (Wall 2011, 25).

Interventions in Petro-culture: Spectacle and Performance

To this point, I have suggested that oil capital has underwritten long, if capricious, state support of cultural production and consumption and has enabled decades of direct patronage and sponsorship of the arts by the private sector. Within this complex, the arts have, to varying extents, served instrumental purposes for both sectors. In the period of the late 1990s and early 2000s, art production increasingly supported neoliberal strategies. Defined as the creative or culture industries, the arts were economically viable resources to be exploited, and funding was provided according to instrumental outcomes (Robertson 2011). Art production also continued to challenge the status quo (Robertson 2006, 11–12), with visual art in particular providing powerful oppositional tools. As suggested above, visual disruptions of singular perspectives, whether visual or ideological, force us to rethink previously fixed meanings. A survey of the proliferating forms of artistic critique of the industry is beyond the scope of this chapter, but it is worth noting that the production of spectacle
is particularly well situated at the intersection of art and politics (Boyd and Duncombe 2004; Debord [1967] 1995).

The spectacle experience is particularly powerful, both cognitively and emotionally, in art and performances that mingle elements normally opposed in social categories, such as the dirty, or contaminated, and the clean, or pristine. The concepts of “dirty oil” (i.e., unethical oil) and “clean” corporate patronage point to ideological associations, while sensory creative productions also effectively engage a range of physical senses. Tactical media strategies, including performance-based interventions and installations, have dramatized the eroding of protective boundaries between notions of “here” as pristine and under control and “there” as toxic and chaotic (Forkert 2008). Artists and activists, for example, have inundated the Tate Gallery entrance with gallons of oil-like molasses (Nayeri 2011), covered valuable wildlife paintings with pools of black oil paint (Fong 2008), installed binoculars on a Vancouver beach showing a 3D view of a catastrophic imaginary oil spill at the site (Vancity Buzz 2014), and staged a mock oil spill outside Vancouver pipeline company offices (De Souza 2012).

Mainstream gallery exhibits are typically more subtle and metaphorical in their approach to critique, but some do include overtly didactic pieces such as large immersive environments of slag, sand, and tar replicating oil extraction sites. Mitch Mitchell, for his 2009 installation in Edmonton, “Tar Plane Wayfarer,” constructed forms out of newsprint, asphaltum, and carborundum from the bitumen sands to immerse viewers in remote visual and olfactory realities (Fung 2009). In Toronto, Allison Rowe’s interactive gallery installation “Bringing Home the Tar Sands” and a mobile “Exploration Station” familiarized viewers with bitumen extraction substances, models, and information (Harbourfront Centre 2010). Canadian sculptor Mia Feuer exhibited an installation in Washington, DC, during political debates about the Keystone XL pipeline. Inspired by bitumen, the work includes an “ominous black skating rink” that “may or may not be a metaphor for oil’s grip on Canadian politics” (Nikiforuk 2014).

Alberta artists Sherri Chaba, Lyndal Osborne, and Brenda Christensen, to name a few, have exhibited work, including installations, that brings home the impacts of oil on everyday life and landscapes (Peter Robertson Gallery 2012; Ryan 2012; Willerton 2011). Like the filmmakers noted above, Mitchell, Osborne, and Chaba have each received provincial funding in the form of purchase by the Alberta Foundation for the Arts, the government entity responsible
for distribution of grants and support to artists. Such acquisitions, though, remain low profile, proceeding quietly without public discussion or regular display, and are rarely noted by anyone outside the arts community; the likelihood of controversy is remote. Public funding has also supported exhibitions with topical themes addressing the history, significance, and challenges of the oil economy. “Black Gold,” an exhibition organized in 2013 by the Art Gallery of Alberta for TREX, featured six artists whose works “shine a spotlight on the oil industry in Alberta” and invited viewers to reflect on “the diverse and complex environmental and social issues associated with the extraction and use of ‘black gold’” (AFA 2013, 4).

Artistic photography has possibly had the widest reach among viewers of work that merges documentation with aesthetic, emotional impact. Szeman and Whitehead (2012, 54) note the attempt by critical photographic realism to reveal the “largely hidden dynamic of globalization: the system of oil extraction and production that is the lifeblood of capitalism.” Photographer Louis Helbig argues that art can provide “cultural touch stones” to help articulate our relationship to toxic spaces normally omitted from both industry narratives and from standard Canadian nature iconography (quoted in Gismondi 2012; see also Cezer 2012). Edward Burtynsky’s renowned views of industry include a series of bitumen sands images in huge aerial views of the “big picture” and the stunning scale of a complex “landscape that cannot be comprehended from the ground” (Punter 2010). Burtynsky’s body of work traces entire systems, including the cycle of oil from extraction to consumption, pointing to complicit links of consumers with production conditions and impacts (Shimshock 2008).

In contrast, focusing on the immediacy of a landscape with immediate material consequences for local life, photographer Andriko Lozowy’s work constructs a roadside, shifting view of local environmental experience (Patchett and Lozowy 2011). Edmonton artist Brenda Christiansen has produced paintings of everyday oil culture in Fort McMurray. Anya Tonkonogy portrays the story of oil’s impact “through the faces of those people whose livelihood depends on what the Great White North has coursing through its earthly veins.” Visual art by Susan Turcot and a 2013 film called Oil Sands Karaoke, directed by Charles Wilkinson, both take a holistic approach, addressing the nature of labour and daily life by industry workers (“Visual Arts” 2014; McGinn 2013). Kristopher Karklin of Fort MacMurray and Calgary creates large staged photographs based on his experiences in the “sensory-deprivation-like environment of oilsands work camps” (Hunt 2015).
Figure 13.1. Anya Tonkonogy, *I’ve Been Doing This for a Long Time*, 2010. Oil on birch panel, 20 x 30 in. Courtesy of the artist.
The subjective point of view has also proven effective for oil companies’ public relations materials, which tend to feature close-ups of people flyfishing and canoeing on restored industrial lands, Aboriginal cultures and bison, community philanthropic projects, and happy workers in the field or at gas stations (Friedel 2008). Aware of the public relations value of the personal scale, Shell Canada offered artists access to a refinery during a closure for maintenance to create works portraying individual workers’ crafts and stories (Cooper 2013). Whatever their intrinsic merits, such products serve to domesticate extractive activities and integrate the benefits of toxic oil further into cultural imaginaries of the natural, pristine, and nurturing dimensions of Alberta landscapes.

One of the few Canadian collective actions by artists, as opposed to environmentalist groups, occurred when prairie artists and musicians appearing in the National Arts Centre’s 2011 Prairie Scene! Festival opposed sponsorship by Enbridge Pipelines in light of the company’s successive oil pipeline spills. The letter argued that “the National Arts Centre should choose sponsors that help to promote its values as an innovator in community programming” and that the Enbridge partnership “tarnishes that image with the company’s disastrous environmental record.”8 One of the best-known public protests against oil industry cultural involvement in Alberta was mounted by the Lubicon Lake Cree in opposition to the Glenbow Museum’s 1988 exhibition “The Spirit Sings: Artistic Traditions of Canada’s First Peoples.” Shell Oil, a major sponsor, was at the time conducting disputed drilling operations on Lubicon land. Another issue was lack of consultation with Aboriginal groups concerning the exhibit’s production (Devine 2010).

As environmental impacts cross a “conceptual threshold . . . from slow change to slow catastrophe,” some see a unique “opportunity for a social justice movement to truly articulate a different vision” (Doubleday 2008, 33). Underscoring a comparable lack of substantive influence on oil industry operations in areas directly affecting their lands, First Nations artists have acted outside mainstream cultural institutions. Raising awareness of, and funding for, opposition to the Enbridge pipeline project, West Coast artist Roy Vickers produced T-shirts bearing the slogan “Oolichan Oil Not Alberta Oil” and an oolichan fish—a mainstay of traditional West Coast cultural life—against a background of water darkening in layers to black (Drews 2012). In 2010, a group that included children and First Nations elders produced a painting for public exhibition in open spaces of protest; funds for this initiative were provided by Foreign Affairs, Trade and Development Canada. The canvas, measuring

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thirty-five by twenty feet, depicted a First Nations face enmeshed in a mosaic of images, including the BP oil spill, pipelines, dead ducks, deformed fish, and gashes in the earth (BC Council for International Cooperation 2010; Schambach 2010.). Cultural performance at marches and demonstrations—incorporating traditional ceremonial dress, drums, and chanting—remains the most visible public expression of collective Aboriginal direct action in the mainstream media (Postmedia News 2012).9

Activist interventions occurring in urban corporate and retail zones are a form of democratic representation that reclaims the space by redefining it as a more complicated narrative of public life and citizen activity. Artist Peter von Tiesenhausen, whose rural property displays scores of his earthworks and sculptures, exercised similar powers after fighting years of legal challenges from oil and gas interests determined to drill his land for its rich natural gas reserves. Taking the creative step of copyrighting his property as art in itself, which would make compensation costs for destruction much more prohibitive (Fung 2010; Jaremko 2006), he redefined the meaning and value of his land using legal discourse in an attempt to place it beyond the reach of the petroleum interests that have long had the upper hand in decision making. Presumably to avoid the risk of a drawn-out legal battle and bad publicity, natural gas companies have left Von Tiesenhausen and his land in peace (Goyal, n.d.).

In a framework of plural claims to truth, the production of meaning may be best democratized through dispersing understandings across enclaves of knowledge and practice: public and private, economic and aesthetic, literary and scientific (Gordon 2012; Stern and Seifert 2009, 33–34; Stevenson and Dryzek 2012). Opposition to the environmental effects of bitumen sands extraction, for example, links climate activists, audiences, scientists, Indigenous communities, and producers across continents (Fend 2001).10 Kester (1999) suggests a “littoral art” or middle space between discourses of art and activism and across disciplinary bodies of knowledge, vaulting the sharp divide between official, institutionalized fine art and activist or amateur production. In this ethos, the artwork or project is not a discrete commodity, artifact, or object but a medium of socially engaged practice that can transgress dominant meanings.

Virtual Public Space

As Jay Smith puts it in chapter 3, “in a globalized world, the spaces of politics are being transformed. No longer is politics solely centred around the institutions
of the state.” Since new technologies of power cannot be identified with territory or centralized apparatus, the classic opposition of domination and resistance is also dispersed in a society which has become a multitude of mobile subjectivities (Hardt and Negri 2009, xiii-cvi). As has been posited by a plethora of observers, the Internet has a demonstrated capacity to link oppositional, democratic interests as well as to connect imaginatively with distant sites and forms of knowledge. As new digital tools and technologies such as YouTube and social media are available for dissent, narratives expand and splinter in contact with a broader range of participants who are able to develop faster tactical responses and meanings of messages (Jenkins 2011). International artists steadily produce works in visual, cinematic, literary, digital, and performative media that critique and challenge the ecological impacts of the fossil fuel industry and its involvements with cultural institutions (Aidt 2013).

To illustrate, it was community members rather than oil companies who publicly objected to the 2012 Spyder Yardley-Jones exhibit of satirical images (Di Massa 2012). Responses are markedly different when very similar images make the leap from small gallery spaces to comparatively huge audiences online. In 2012, Enbridge released an animated video promoting its pipeline proposal with a series of pastel, romantic images of families, communities, and forests. Postmedia News cartoonist Dan Murphy adapted this utopian narrative by adding intermittent eruptions of oily black goo redolent of pipeline spills. After Enbridge reportedly threatened to withdraw advertising, the publisher pulled the piece off its website (CBC News 2012). Even more telling was the cancellation of federal government funding to Canadian artist Franke James, whose text-adorned graphics, which are very similar to those of Yardley-Jones, critique the oil industry and its political wingmen. In 2011, when Canada was negotiating a European trade deal while fighting European objections to “dirty oil,” a federal grant supporting a European show of James’s work was cancelled because her message was “not in sync” with government messaging (James, quoted in MacCharles 2011)—an event she documented in “Banned on the Hill (and in Europe!”) (James 2011). James reached a much larger audience by publishing an online series of pipeline images titled “What Is Harper Afraid Of?” (James 2012; see also LaFontaine 2012).

New media have inarguable value for cultural producers, whether amateur or professional, and thus expand the resources of cultural citizenship as they vastly expand audiences. However, dominant economic and political interests also adapt to new channels, and autonomous communication is under
increasing stress. Sharp though the knives of virtual culture can be, those of other media need not become dull as means of dialogue. Public spaces, for example, can function as media for display and performance, as well as exhibition, in ways that enhance their potential for building social relationships and reimagining politics as part of everyday life. And conventional gallery spaces remain important media for exploring aspects of petro-culture, including the Athabasca bitumen sands. A few examples of recent international art exhibitions examining the impacts of oil include an Ontario show called “Perspectives on Canadian Tar Sands and the Northern Gateway Pipeline,” a New York City exhibit titled “Petroleum Paradox: For Better or For Worse?” and a show in Texas called “Necrocracy” that examined fossil fuels in terms of our ongoing dependency on dead forms of life.” These and many more interventions in the visual discourses of oil energy across multiple media all have potential to contribute to a littoral public repository of knowledge and action.

Cultural Citizenship and “Peak Imagination”

The notion of a divide between a humanist approach to culture as having intrinsic value and a market-driven set of criteria for its existence has become blurred, if not collapsed, in the context of contemporary capitalist societies. Both the private and public sectors enable production at various levels, provide spaces of consumption, and legitimize the arts as commodity and as public goods, at least within certain boundaries of social cohesion, entertainment, and individual expression. A political culture that supports the arts benefits from association with long-term humanist values, including cultural identity, social cohesion, and free expression. Support by industry bestows direct and indirect public relations value amounting to economic strength. In practice, democratic values of cultural identity, cohesion, and free expression have been associated through the cultural realm with the needs of industry for deep embeddedness in political decision making. Cultural and corporate citizenship tend to overlap. At present, the emancipatory potential of cultural production is compromised by the steady withdrawal of public funding from individuals and organizations, along with a rise in public spending on the production of ubiquitous public relations imagery defending the oil industry.

Is oil wealth a positive force for democratic cultural development and expression? Is there any sign that art has successfully changed the course of politics or economic growth? Again, cultural production and citizenship are
long-term processes, and it may be most useful to think about the arts not in terms of direct impacts of products or images but as a complex of practices and knowledge that are building or undermining consent to the status quo. On the one hand, government and corporate support of the arts in Alberta has produced not only a rich body of work but also several generations of artists and cultural activists questioning authority on a number of fronts. On the other hand, the fulcrum of effective change is the perceived legitimacy of the speakers. In a wealthy jurisdiction that is largely content with the status quo, the arts tend to be relegated to the status of entertainment, festival content, and cultural capital. They remain delegitimized both as serious occupations and as options for productive communication by nonprofessionals; funding cuts to arts education, as well as to practice, suggest the difficulty of collectively overcoming these stereotypes. With continually accelerating international attention to the impacts of Alberta’s oil industry, however, the meaning of cultural citizenship in the province is perhaps less limited to its designated borders or to dependence on state or corporate permission. LeMenager (2012, 69) reminds us that, after all, we have not yet reached “peak imagination.” The historic electoral victory of Rachel Notley and the New Democratic Party in 2015, displacing a four-decade political monopoly by the Conservatives, signals the determination of Alberta citizens to imagine new ways to reach that peak.

Notes

1. The study of petro-cultures is relatively new, but expanding. In 2011, the University of Alberta established the Petrocultures Research Group, which conducts and supports research into “the social, cultural and political implications of oil and energy use on individuals, communities, and societies around the world,” in order to “observe, assess and analyze the multiple and complex impacts of the development and management of the oil industry and of energy more generally.” “Petrocultures,” 2015, http://petrocultures.com/about/.

2. Turnouts were especially low in the provincial elections of 2004 and 2008: 45.12 percent and 40.59 percent, respectively (Elections Alberta 2015).


8 The group, calling itself Prairie Artists Against Enbridge, expressed their objections in a letter of 25 January 2011 to Christopher Dearlove and Rosemary Thompson, of the National Arts Centre. By accepting support from Enbridge, they argued, the NAC “associates itself with the company’s irresponsible corporate behavior.” The letter is available at http://pipeupagainstenbridge.ca/news/prairie_artists_against_enbridge.
9 For example, the fifth annual Tar Sands Healing Walk, sponsored by the Keepers of the Athabasca, took place on 27–29 June 2014 (http://www.healingwalk.org/home.html).
10 One example of an attempt to bring together “creatives, scientists, and informers” to produce an international “cultural response to the climate challenge” is the UK-based Cape Farewell project (http://www.capefarewell.com/about.html).

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