

Traces

How Art & Oil Can Mix

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1: Introductory summary of the projects

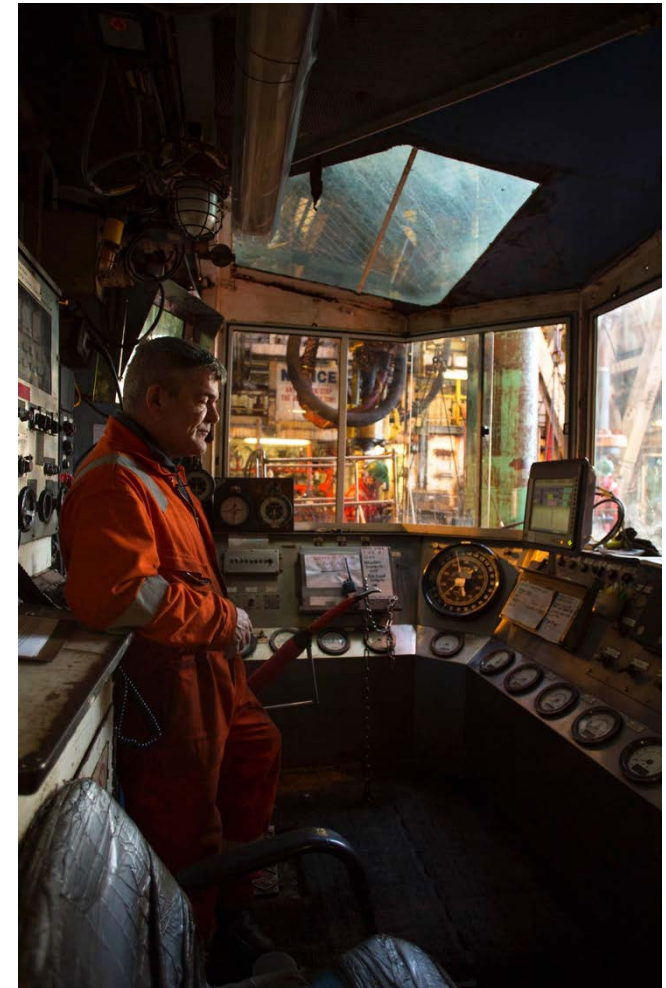
Traditionally, heavy industry has impacted and shaped the identity of the communities that have surrounded it. Industries such as ship building, steel, and coal mining to name a few, have all cast long shadows over the places that have proudly affiliated parts of their identity to these industries, often even after they have left. With the case of North Sea oil production however, the physical edifice that casts that shadow stands not in the centre of a community, but invisibly over the horizon. With its workforce being raised not from not a single local community, it is instead gathered from all around the world, forming a new temporal community onboard any given installation.

Whilst that shadow can be felt and seen in other indirect ways, the invisibility of offshore oil production creates a unique social structure for those who are within it. A sense of group identity based on their shared experience develops amongst those who live and work there, alongside a sense that only those who have lived it truly understand what it is like.

These social structures and communities found within the workforce of the North Sea oil industry are typically under-documented. Due to the various barriers, logistical and political, both real and imagined, their histories (with a few notable exceptions) have mostly gone undocumented. The imagery we see from this industry typically exhibits a level of polish and an adherence to corporate identity, which often doesn't reflect the lived experience of the workforce. The disconnect between these curated images and the weather-beaten reality of life on a North Sea asset often leads to a feeling of invisibility amongst the workforce.

Over a two-year period, a collaborative project between Robert Gordon University (RGU), Marathon Oil and latterly Rockrose Energy sought to address this. Placing art students from a variety of disciplines amongst their workforces. The artists were engaged to document the communities they encountered both on North Sea platforms as well as within the supporting onshore workforce, and to produce artworks that responded accordingly to what they found.

The resolved outcomes resulted in multiple exhibitions, both onshore and onboard North Sea installations with books and postcards also being published. All with the aim of giving the workforce a space to reflect not only on their own experiences, but also to share these with colleagues and family.





The projects with more open briefs resulted in artwork produced in a broad range of mediums including, sound art, painting, sculpture, drawing and graphic design.

2: Historical precedent

There is a quiet tradition of sending artists to places you wouldn't expect them to be. To have them go and to report back what they have seen. Whether it has been instigated by the artist themselves or they are invited by a host organisation, it is often instigated because an event out with the status quo is occurring. Something that a more expected form of journalistic reporting, for whatever reason, is not the best approach. A shift that requires a more poetic hand or eye to capture and communicate.

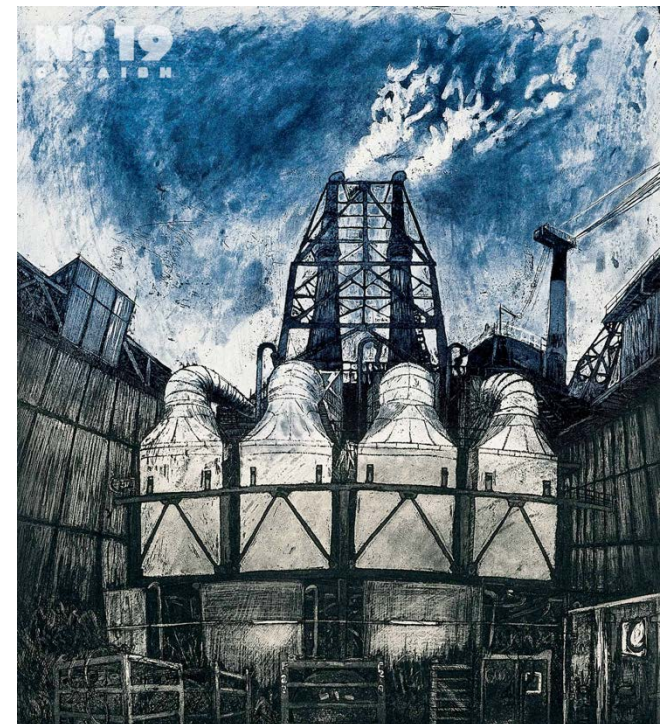
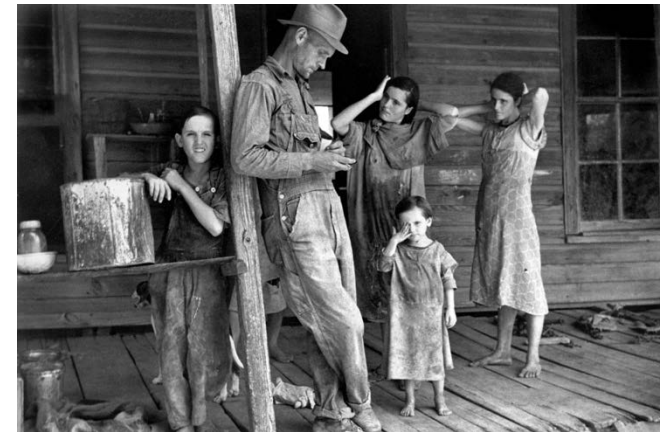
Sometimes a place and its everyday events are so extraordinary in scale and outside of most peoples lived experience, that they are noteworthy enough in and of themselves to be documented. Compelling enough for the artist to need to send dispatches back, and to show others what they have seen, felt, and witnessed.

Artist photographers, Dorothea Lange and Walker Evan's work documenting depression-era Midwest American rural and farming communities for the Farm Security Administration (FSA) are perfect examples of an artist being sent to bear witness. The events and the situation in the Midwest were well publicised in the contemporary press. But when Fortune Magazine looked to cover the situation, they chose to send James Agee, a poet (not a journalist) and Walker Evan's to tell the story of those living through that tumultuous place and time.

Whilst the need for this work was created by historic events, there are many examples of artists becoming resident within a host company or organisation during their daily business. For example, "Whose Utopia?" By Chinese artist Coa Fei, was the result of a 6-month residency at an Osram light bulb factory in Foshan in southern China from 2005 to 2006. This residency followed in the footsteps of the Artists Placement Group, who during the 1960s sought to place artists within non-arts based organisations. The artists involved became part of the salaried workforce and were tasked with responding artistically to the situation as they found it and with an open brief.

But within the context of the North Sea oil industry, Sue Jane Taylor is the most important example of an artist documenting the physical and social aspects of North Sea working life. Producing a body of work over a 20-year period, her subjects range from fabrication yards and support vessels to platforms and candid portraits. Her etchings and paintings showing a unexpectedly tender view of those who call the North Sea home for 6 months of the year.

So whilst the placement of artists within heavy industry is far from normal practice, it is certainly not without precedent to draw on when planning a project of this kind.



3: Case Study

3.1: Introduction

During this period of collaborative working between RGU, Marathon Oil and Rock Rose Energy, a series of three core art projects were commissioned involving a total of 14 artists. Each project had its own scope and presenting a unique set of challenges. Some projects had more prescriptive briefs than others, such as to produce a body of documentary photography resulting in a book. Other project briefs by design, were deliberately much open to individual interpretation. This allowed for a broad range of resolved works in numerous mediums to be produced over the cumulative body of work.

For the purposes of this essay, we will focus on Project Traces. Traces was the first project to come out of this period of collaboration, it involved four students and took place over a 6-month period in 2018. The commission had a directed brief, which originally directed the students to produce a body of photography documenting the Brae Bravo platform in the run up to its decommissioning. The project brief was eventually extended to include the production of multiple exhibitions and the publication of a photography book showcasing the body of work produced.

3.2: Student Selection

The students who were commissioned to work on the project, were selected through a treatment and pitch model. With students presenting their treatment live to a panel of academic staff and oil company partners. This allowed for the panel to ask questions and to get a sense of who the artist was and whether they could work comfortably within the context of a North Sea installation. From the numerous pitches, a small cohort was selected for each individual project. The small numbers commissioned were crucial for the success of each project, as it allowed the vital mentorship and support of the students to be given to the level that was needed by the individual. This mentorship was provided by RGU academic staff as well



3.3: Student Mentorship & Acclimatization

To help ensure the students were able to fulfil their individual potential within the scope of the project as well as safeguarding the potential for the project itself was reached. The artists were supported by both academic staff and colleagues from Marathon Oil. This mentorship was not only limited to artistic direction, it extended to project management and professional soft skills as well. The project provided a unique opportunity for the students to develop their own transferable and professional skills. To this end, they were involved as much as possible in the project management, decision making and logistics of the project.

This support and exposure to professional working practices was done in a phased manner. Weekly planning and progress meetings were held with weekly tasks allotted to the involved staff and the students. Over time, the tasks assigned to the students increased in complexity and the degree of responsibility. This slow raising of the bar allowed the confidence of the students to grow in line with the difficulty of the tasks they were presented with. The tasks started with simple presentations of progress to producing work plans, sourcing vendors, and chairing meetings. This element of the project produced some of the greatest impact for the students involved. The increase in their own self-confidence that they experienced due to the real-world working environment they were placed within was immeasurable.

The selected students also underwent a series of “acclimatization exercises”, this was to help prepare them to visit a North Sea platform and carry themselves in the safe and professional manner required by the location. These exercises included visits to onshore yard sites and support vessels at harbour. This allowed the students to experience the same health and safety culture and to engage directly with the same workforce they would meet offshore, but within a mentored and supported environment.

One of the most important events prior to deployment to the Brae Bravo was an oral history gathering event held for members of the retiree community associated with Brae Bravo. This event allowed the students to not only practice their soft skills at interviewing and building rapport with people they have been sent to document. But more importantly, it humanised the workforce for them. Prior to their involvement in the project, the students had no experience working within the oil industry, they were coming in cold. As such, they held some preconceived notions as to who that workforce was, notions that time and again proved to not match the reality they found. This event along with the other acclimatization exercises shifted the needle in how the students viewed and crucially approached the project prior to their deployment to Brae Bravo. And arguably without them the project would not have been as successful as it was.



4: Deployment

4.1 Logistical & administrative support from host company

Once the students were selected, the process in which they prepared and travelled to the Brae Bravo needed to be finalised. They required the same health and safety training as any new start employee to allow them to travel and work offshore. This included the BOSIET training and medical certification required to allow them travel to the platform, but also the necessary liabilities insurance to cover their work whilst onboard.

The simplest way to ensure all of these requirements were met, was for the host company to employ them directly on short term contracts. The contracts issued were originally designed for engineering students on placement. Being under contract placed the students under the company's insurance policy, so no additional policies were required.

However, being under contract also made any work product produced by the artists the property of the host company. To allow the artists the ability to showcase their work out with the project, an agreement was met where the artists would have limited rights use for an approved portfolio of one hundred images. This allowed each artist to have a broad range of images that they felt best represented their work within the project. So whilst the scope of work to be carried out by the art students was vastly different than what these contracts were intended for, the contracts aligned perfectly with the needs of the project.

4.2 Open communication with host company

Throughout the project open and regular communication between the Staff of both RGU and Marathon Oil. This candid line of communication was crucial in tracking the artists development. This allowed the supporting staff on both sides to identify and resolve any issues relating to the project as well as how to best support the artists individual development throughout the project.



4.3 Phased deployment

When it was time to deploy the four artists to the platform it was decided that a phased approach would be best, with two pairs traveling with a week separation between. This would allow the artists to meet different crew rotations, but also allow the photography from the first trip to be reviewed prior to the second pairs trip. This would give an opportunity for all four artists to critique the work produced and identify any areas that were missing from the first tranche of images.

This creating of two sub-groups ensured that each artist had peer support during their time offshore. This pairing also allowed them to work in quite sophisticated manner when meeting and interviewing members of the platform's workforce. Allowing them to adapt who was leading an interview or taking portraits based on who had greater rapport with any given person.

This staggered deployment also diluted any risk relating to the projects success. Whilst the artists would be chaperoned whilst exploring the plant on board the platform, there would be no academic support mentoring and ensuring they gathered enough of the correct material for the projects success. The support and mentorship provided through the acclimatization exercises and the group critique of the first tranche of images provided a suitable safety net if one became required. As it transpired, the support and training the artists received prior to their deployment to the Brae Bravo proved more than adequate. With the artists proving themselves more than capable and ultimately fulfilling their ambitions for the project.





5: Resolution & Impact

5.1 Resolved Outcomes & Archive

The original scope of project Traces was to produce a photographic archive documenting Brae Bravo and its community in the run up to decommissioning. But as this archive was being produced, it became apparent that this body of work was deserving of a more formalised outcome. In consultation with the artists, the scope of the brief was expanded to include the production of a photography book and exhibitions.

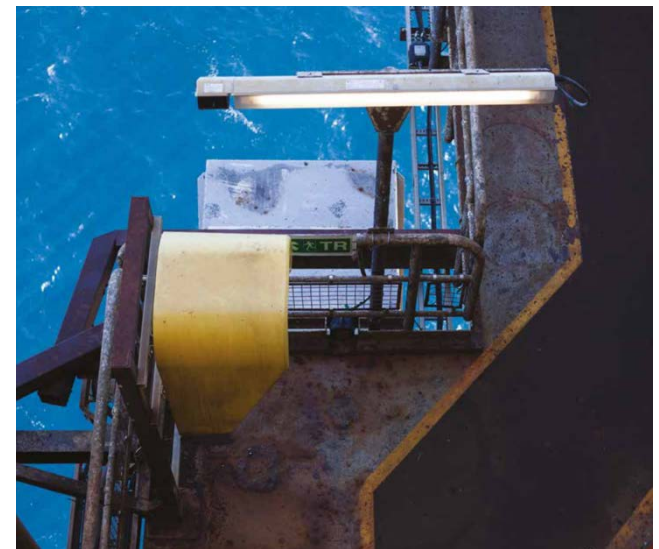
This additional design work allowed space for the artists to create a final resolved work that was a more successful than a simple image archive. The book allowed the images to be collated in a manner that created connections and highlighted core themes. These themes were used to select a core body of images to build the photography exhibitions around.

5.2 Workforce Impact

To ensure the project had the greatest impact for those who were the subject of the project, the book was gifted to the workforce and the exhibition was held on Brae Bravo and within the main onshore offices. This would give the greatest possible opportunity for as much of the workforce as possible to see and engage with the work. Gifting the book to the staff allowed them to spend time with the work on their own time and in their own space. To connect with the images and to reminisce and share those stories with their families and colleagues.

Duplicating the final exhibition on Brae Bravo and the office placed the work in the environment the work was about. It placed the work in a space where contemporary art is not typically encountered and with a community that traditionally might not engage with contemporary art. But placing the work in their house made the work more approachable and relevant, allowing the community to gather and see themselves reflected in work.

As a result of this, it was noted that the moral on the platform was significantly higher than what was expected and experienced on similar platforms during decommissioning. Whilst this cannot be solely attributed to the work of the artists, they were specifically thanked on multiple occasions for their work and the beneficial influence of their efforts.



5.3 Student exit trajectory

As well the benefit to the moral and wellbeing of the workforce due to project Traces, the project had multiple benefits to the artists academic performance and career trajectory upon graduation. All four of the students progressed at an accelerated manner and achieved an academic level that was above their past academic performance. As well as academic performance, two of the four students entered graduate level employment in their degree specialism within the year of graduation as a direct result of the project.

6: Conclusion

The arts and the oil industry are not often comfortable bed fellows. Most commonly oil is the patron of high-profile art exhibitions or prizes and more and more frequently this results in negative press for both parties due to protests or artists not wishing to participate in sponsored events. Art (and rightly so) needs to be able to freely question the actions and place of the oil industry within wider society. To shine a light on the industries responsibility and duty of care to the environment and the wider society that is adversely impacted by the industries actions.

This friction creates a sense of suspicion and unease between both camps. But as the collaborative work exhibited through projects such as Traces and the subsequent projects demonstrate, the relationship between oil and art does not need to be binary. It does not need to be either an exercise of artistic protest or corporate patronage as a form of culture washing, but that there is a third way for the two to interface. Through genuine collaboration between the oil industry and artists a more open dialogue can be established, one where the arguments and constraints that both sides are working within can be understood by both parties. A manner of working that creates genuine understanding and positive cultural enrichment for all involved and not merely as window dressing.

