

Art Not Oil: shedding light and shadow on the oil industry (and beyond) since 2004

It may be hard to discern, but there's a rumble of resistance to Big Oil's widespread programme of arts sponsorship. Here, Sam Chase dissects the anaesthetic effect of corporate sponsorship, focussing on the London's mainstream art world, and the way BP and Shell use that sponsorship to buy a 'social licence to operate'. He also tells the story of Art Not Oil from its 2004 origins to the present day, ending with an upward glance into the project's future.

Sometimes it's hard to be an oil company. Charming children's drawings on petrol station leaflets about tiger saving and CO₂ cutting just aren't enough anymore. BP, Shell and (to a lesser extent here) Exxon, Total, Texaco et al have realised that they must stamp their logos onto as many unarguably Good Things as they can in order to maintain market share in a new, apparently more compassionate consumer age. So in come 'partnerships' with liberal newspapers and sponsorship deals with highly respectable cultural institutions such as galleries and museums.

Far ahead of the pack in the rebranding stakes, and exerting a kind of stranglehold over Grade A London cultural institutions, are Shell and BP. So beginning with the latter...

On July 24th 2000, BP had its old 'shield' logo towed away, unveiling instead its shiny new flower-like helios logo and 'Beyond Petroleum' catchphrase. It cost a hefty seven figure sum (£4.5m, some say), and catapulted the company into the lead in the race to present a questioning, responsible, compassionate oil company, committed to moving up and away from dark and dirty crude.

All spin, of course - after all, it was promising to pull 5% more oil out of the ground every year on the one hand, while dressing up in the warm rays of solar possibility on the other.

At the same time as its rebrand, BP went into overdrive on the sponsorship front. Having taken on sponsorship of the National Portrait Gallery's Portrait Award from another company with reputational issues - Imperial Tobacco - in 1991, the beginning of the 21st century saw BP become the leading sponsor of institutions at the top end of London's cultural establishment. Now, in 2010, it has relationships with the National Portrait Gallery, Science Museum, British Museum, Natural History Museum, Royal Opera House, Tate Britain, National Theatre, National Maritime Museum, National Gallery and Almeida Theatre. It is also staking a great deal on its role in the 2012 Olympics, of which it is both Oil and Gas Partner and a Sustainability Partner, as well as main sponsor of the 'Cultural Olympiad'. (Shell also plays the same sophisticated game with its sponsorship of the South Bank (particularly



the National Theatre and Royal Festival Hall), Natural History Museum, Science Museum and National Maritime Museum.)

Despite the prominence given to corporate sponsors, in 2007-8, private investment made up approximately 13% of the total income for cultural organisations in the UK, that is £686.7 million. Of that, over half - £382 million - came from individuals; (source: Arts & Business.) The art establishment, many artists, oil companies, politicians and some visitors may well tell you that this sort of corporate patronage is a damn good thing. 'Surely it can only be good for them to channel some of their profits into the public good,' they say. The institutions themselves are effusive to the point of obsequiousness in their public statements of thanks, pointing with some justification to the drastic cuts in public subsidy that have left gaping holes in their budgets.

So what's the problem? (Pt. I)

'Climate change is claiming 300,000 lives a year and costing the global economy \$125bn annually, with the damage set to escalate rapidly, according to the first study of the immediate effects of global warming. A further 300m people around the world are seriously affected by climate change through, for instance, malnutrition, disease or by being displaced from their homes, according to a report from the Global Humanitarian Forum.' (*Financial Times*, 30.5.09).

When it comes to really addressing the climate crisis, time is dangerously short. There is now incontrovertible scientific evidence to back the assertion that we as a species are perilously close to unleashing a series of climate-related disasters that could make the existence of all but a few tenacious 'weed species' extremely unlikely. But even if there was no such thing as such a crisis, we know that life for communities and ecosystems unfortunate enough to be perched on top of oil and gas reserves becomes a curse that is more than an enough to compel people in the west to act in solidarity with them. So while there are compelling reasons of pure self-interest for us to cut the carbon, there are also compelling reasons which spring from both our duty to do right by each other, whoever or wherever we are, and to do right by every thing that lives on this planet, which we are all somehow beautifully and intricately connected to.

BP: Burning Planet

* Fossil fuel-induced climate chaos hit Europe in August 2003, killing tens of thousands of mostly older people in record-breaking temperatures. 150,000 may have died worldwide.

* *Beyond Petroleum?* 'BP replaces [oil & gas] 2008 production by 121% & aims to grow annual output through to 2020'; (BP Press Release March 2009)



* 'BP profits soar 148%', *Guardian*, 28.10.08. 'Oil giant BP today beat analysts' forecasts as its reported a 148% surge in third-quarter profits to top \$10bn (£6.5bn), boosted by record oil prices.'

* 'BP and Shell have discussed with the government the prospect of claiming a stake in Iraq's oil reserves in the aftermath of war.' *Financial Times*, 11.3.03.

* In 2007, BP bought 50% of the Sunrise oil tar sands field in Canada. Tar sands are most polluting of all the fossil fuels. 'Canadian wilderness set to be invaded by BP in an oil project dubbed "The biggest environmental crime in history"', *Independent*, 10.12.07; www.tarsandswatch.org

* 'Exposed: BP, its pipeline, and an environmental time-bomb', *Independent* (26.6.04) on BP's US-inspired and protected Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil & gas pipelines, which will produce over 150m tonnes of CO₂ each year for 40 years, causing untold damage to the world's climate; baku.org.uk

Illustration by Jamie Brown; www.jamie-brown.co.uk

* 'BP slated for 'systemic lapses', *FT*, 18.8.05; 15 workers were killed and 500 injured in an explosion at BP's Texas City refinery on March 23rd 2005.

* 'BP doubles corporate ad budget in \$150m bid for greener image', *Times*, 28.12.05; BP invests less than 3% of its annual budget in solar & other renewable energy sources, much less than it ploughs into advertising and PR like its sponsorship of the Olympics, Tate, NPG, NHM etc.

* 'BP commands undue influence at the European level and that European energy security and environmental protection have been compromised through a false perception among decision-makers that what is good for BP is also good for the EU.'

<http://www.corporateeurope.org/climate-and-energy/content/2009/01/bp-extracting-influence-eu>

* BP Solar announced the cutting of 620 jobs in April 2009, in an attempt to cut costs by 25% by the end of 2010. It expects to double manufacturing and sales this year compared with 2008.

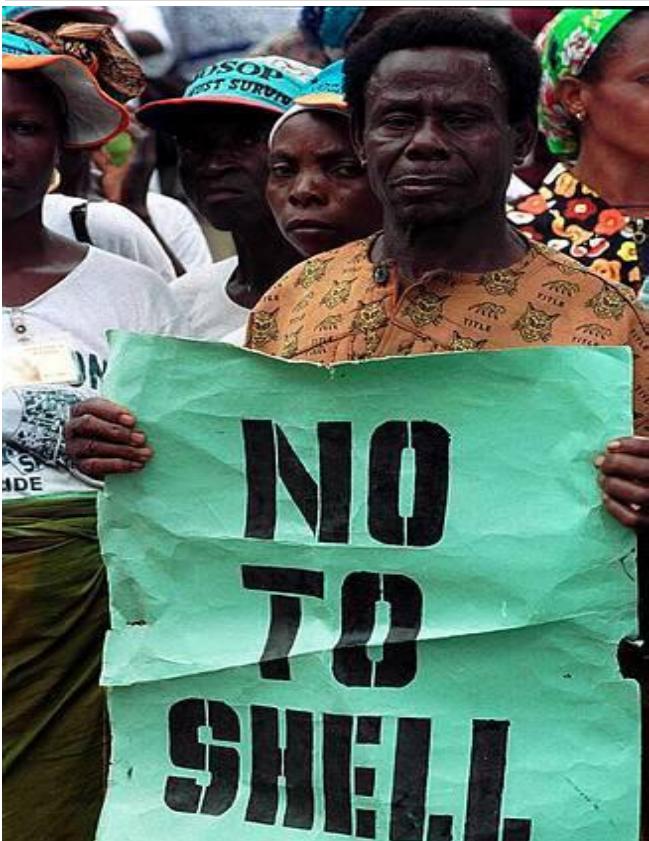
* 'Oil gushes into Arctic Ocean from BP pipeline', 265,000 gallons, to be more exact. *Independent*, 21.3.06

Shell sells suicide on the forecourt

* 'Shell rapped by ASA for 'greenwash' advert': "Oil company's claim that its work in Alberta's tar sands was 'sustainable' is branded 'misleading' by Advertising Standards Authority", (*Guardian*, 13.8.08); www.carbonweb.org

* In the 3rd quarter of 2008, Shell made £72m per day.

* Shell's planned refinery/pipeline project in NW Ireland, threatens a pristine ecosystem, not to mention the homes and livelihoods of the inhabitants. A spirited local campaign is resisting the project; www.corribssos.com



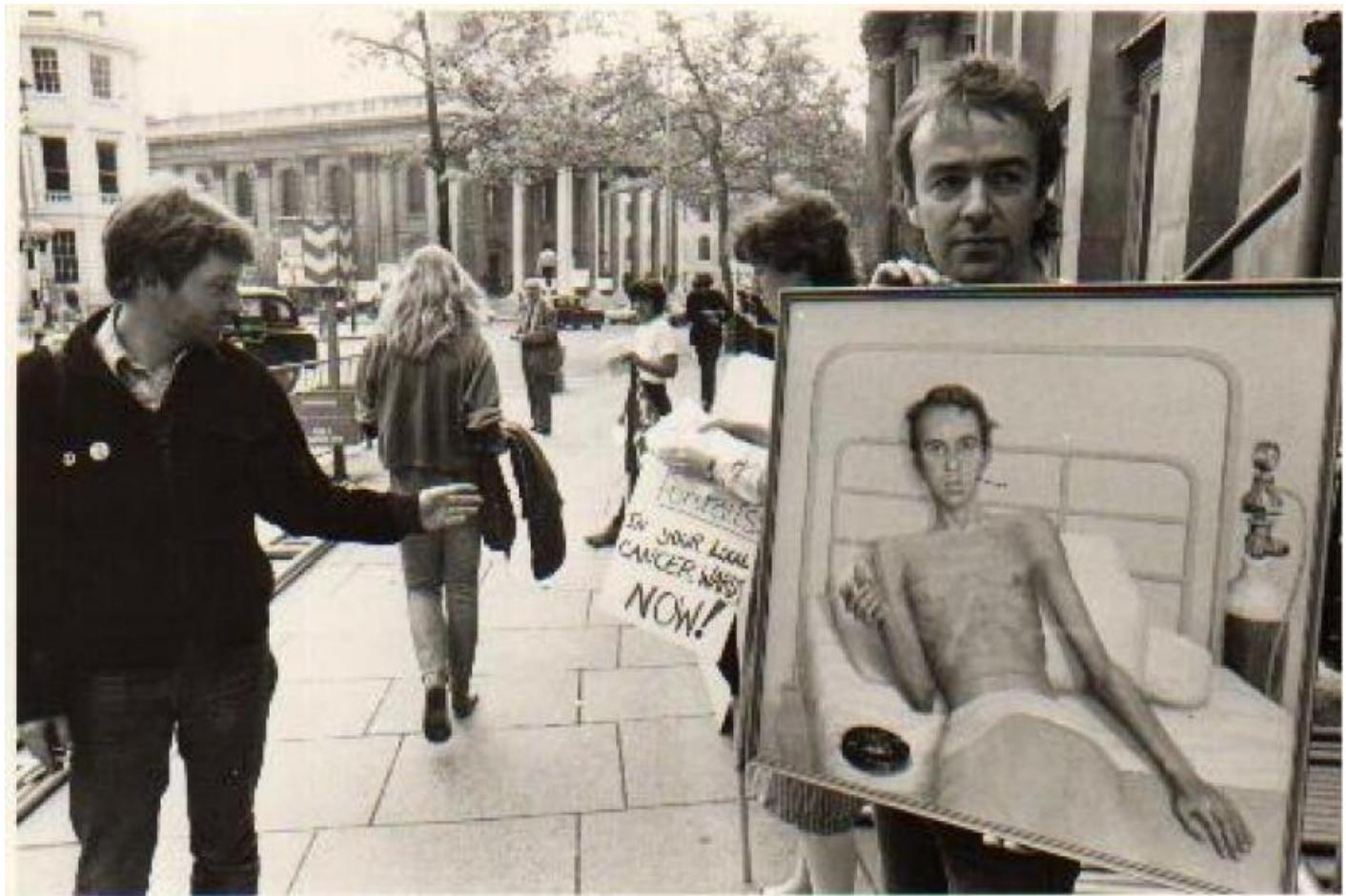
www.shellguilty.com; www.wiwavshell.org

* Lastly, Shell's Sakhalin development in Russia is threatening the survival of the Western Pacific Grey Whale; www.pacificenvironment.org
Photo: Adrian Arbib; www.arbib.org

Yet, in the face of all this damning evidence, Shell and BP are still often regarded as good companies. They still possess their 'social licence to operate'.

Big Oil's 'social licence to operate'

Taking BP's relationship with the National Portrait Gallery (NPG) as a case study, it's worth beginning in the 1980s, throughout which the NPG's Portrait Award was sponsored by Imperial Tobacco. Initially, all was well, but the NPG gradually realised that its reputation was taking on water through its association with cancer sticks. The gallery's provision of part of Imperial's 'social licence' was finally withdrawn in 1992 with a half-hearted retrospective of its tenure.



'Winner of the Lung Slayer Award': This portrait, of a 34-year-old man with emphysema, was a rejected entry in the 1984 John Player Portrait Award (formerly the Imperial Tobacco Portrait Award), National Portrait Gallery, London. An alternative exhibition was held on the footpath outside the gallery; <http://www.medfac.usyd.edu.au/museum/mwmuseum/index.php/Chapman>, Simon Fenton

The NPG had, in effect, been allowing Imperial Tobacco to maintain the unlikely illusion of its wholesome corporate character. Then it offered this service to BP for a few thousand pounds a year, a fraction of the oil giant's overall PR budget, and for this amount BP had its logo displayed as bold as brass on a poster advertising an apparently unarguable social and cultural good. BP has provided sponsorship of £1.25 million over the period 2006-11, with additional support (approximately 34-40%) for events and marketing. The contract for BP sponsorship is scheduled for renewal in 2011 (as it is with Tate Britain) and

negotiations will commence in 2010. Up in the BP boardroom, where there's really no need to massage the truth with greenwash oil, they must have been delighted at the bargain they'd pulled off, since without such reputational assistance, the company could possibly and very swiftly go the way of BNFL, Monsanto or Exxon in terms of public disaffection.

The NPG's image enhancement is invaluable in delaying the moment when people who are increasingly worried and angry about the state of the planet finally take action. As such, BP sponsorship acts as a dangerous and duplicitous form of social control - a control that is making ecological collapse ever-harder to avoid. It is of course true that oil is woven into all levels of western life. It's also true that as one of Britain's biggest companies, BP is in almost every pension fund and investment portfolio. So it's hardly surprising if people feel perplexed or hypocritical when they feel moved to act against it, but if we leave the shift away from fossil fuels to those who never used them, surely nothing will change for the better?

What's the problem? Pt. II - cash in, freedom of expression out

The paintings that are chosen as Portrait Award finalists often pack an emotional punch. Disappointingly, winners often go on to paint figures from Britain's ruling class, following a time-honoured tradition. BP and Shell support institutions that are embedded in the British establishment - solid institutions that may foster challenging art, but rarely challenge the status quo, let alone agitate for a fundamental transformation of it. These institutions are managed mostly by white men, and governed by often government-appointed Trustees (again mostly white men) from business and the aristocracy, as well as a few artists who may be political on some level, but who can be counted on not to rock the boat.



Case study: Lord Kerr of Kinlochard

- * Director of the National Gallery, London since 2002
- * Deputy Chairman of Royal Dutch Shell plc since 2005
- * Shell is a 'Corporate Benefactor' of the National Gallery
- * Shell is a 'Diamond Level' (£30,000p.a.) Corporate Member of the Natural History Museum, and sponsored the Wildlife Photographer of the Year exhibition 2007-8.
- * Director of mining giant Rio Tinto since 2003
Rio Tinto is an 'Emerald Level' (£15,000p.a.) Corporate Member of the Natural History Museum
- * Director of The Scottish American Investment Trust plc since 2002
- * Chairman of the Court and Council of Imperial College, London (which supplies more graduates to the oil industry than almost any other college) since 2005

There have always been artists prepared to stand their ground and produce work that challenges the status quo, such as Goya, Diego Rivera, Judy

Chicago and Guillermo Gomez Pena. However, those with the power - from the church, through kings, queens and industrialists to today's corporate patrons and sponsors - have been the major employers of artists for centuries. It follows that the artist in this system has to bend to fulfil the employer's needs. Fair enough, perhaps - after all, she has to eat. But what if hidden within that patronage and sponsorship is a cancer of censorship?

Since Margaret Thatcher demanded that the arts earn a living or die, corporate sponsorship has ballooned, fostered by organisations such as Arts & Business. We are now immersed a supercharged neoliberal era where the public and the private are blurring into a grey murk. The pragmatists in the cultural strongholds might say 'this situation was triggered by tough government cuts - it's bite the bullet time: you either take corporate cash, or you shut galleries.' And who are the keenest corporations camping out at the front of the queue? Well, the more you have to hide, the more cash you set aside for sponsorship, so that means the least loved of the FTSE blue chippers: Big Oil, Big Pharma and banks as well as little known financial services and other companies trying to inflate their public profiles. And they all love having somewhere fancy to take their clients for drinks. Clearly, any real solution to this situation is going to be impossible without deep systemic change.

Sponsorship
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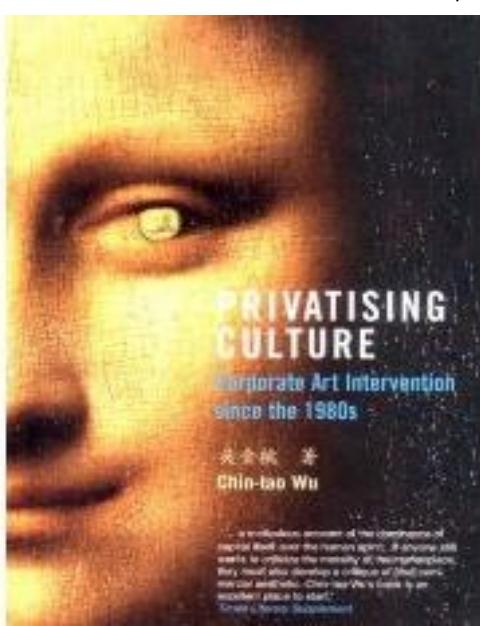
and many
we take
something as
amorphous and
human spirit
commodification of art,

Don't talk to me about
climate chaos, human rights
or worker safety -
THIS IS ART !

www.artnotoil.org.uk

has now taken its
alongside many
of British life
been fundamentally
next to no debate
Take a bow CCTV,
everywhere,
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of knowledge, of public space, of giving a damn
about our collective future and the ecological
crisis we're all facing?



Research carried out by Chin-tao Wu for her invaluable book *Privatising Culture* found that corporations exert a quiet control when buying as well as sponsoring art. And it doesn't seem too much of a leap to conclude that artists seeking mainstream success are likely to create work that, while sometimes being 'shocking' in the sense of being violent or sexually explicit, never really bites the corporate hand that feeds it. Of course, there are still those who take great pleasure in biting the well-manicured

corporate hand, but they entertain no illusions about becoming a big wheel in the art whirl. Then there is an exception to prove the rule: artist Hans Haacke, whose 'incisive, unflinchingly political works expose systems of power and influence and often court controversy', says the (BP-sponsored) Tate. 'While many of his works have examined the ethics of multinational corporations he has equally turned his attention to power relations in the art world itself.'

When we first dipped our toe in unknown curatorial waters in 2004, we had little idea of the breadth and breathtaking quality of a great deal (though definitely not all) of London's - and the world's - politicised and ecologised art. What we did know was that it would be dead boring just to say 'no to oil sponsorship' (and 'no to capitalism, while you're at it') without somehow bringing our own fiery, scattershot, luminous, chaotic creativity to the party...

Art Not Oil: what's occurred

This story is perhaps best begun in 2000, when a coalition of international groups and individuals gathered in The Hague with the intention of disrupting the (what it saw as) dangerously corporatised UN-climate negotiations, and also of kickstarting a global direct action-based movement for climate justice. Soon after that, London Rising Tide (LRT) came to be, being a post-oil, post-capitalism, direct action-favouring bunch of wishful thinkers. LRT decided that of the myriad climate criminals based in Carbon Town, BP would be the primary target. After all, the company was threatening to build enormous gas and oil pipelines through Azerbaijan, Georgia and Turkey (see *BP box, above*), and an inspirationally diverse alliance had come together to fight those plans. Gradually, taunted by posters in the tube flaunting BP's

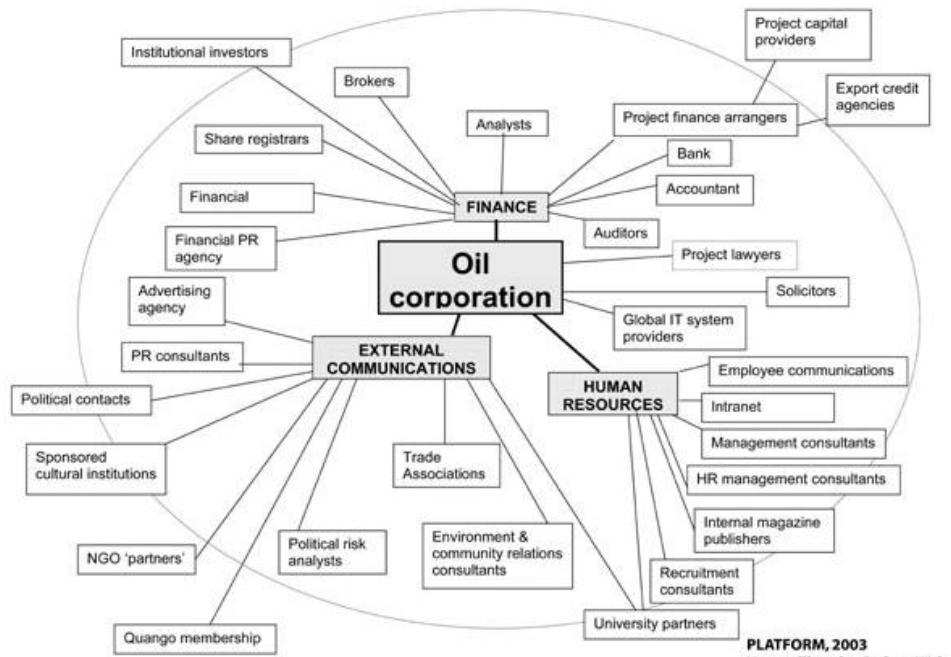


sponsorship of the National Portrait Gallery's Portrait Award, and inspired by the invaluable research and analysis of PLATFORM, LRT started to focus on oil sponsorship.

LRT began to stick to BP like a leech, or rather, to stick leechlike to those companies and institutions satellitising around the mothership that is BP. The

theory goes like this: BP is Britain's biggest company. It's well-resourced, well-respected and its employees are mostly ridiculously loyal (considering the amount of lay-offs they've had to put up with). Those that orbit around it, though, are often smaller, more vulnerable either economically or in terms of public relations, and its employees are more liable to be receptive to our worldview (especially if we present it accessibly and non-judgementally).

Pic: London Rising Tide at the NPG, June 2003, (note natty banner-matching picture frames!



PLATFORM's innovative Carbon Web; www.carbonweb.org

LRT 'celebrated' BP's Annual General Meeting (AGM) in 2003 by holding a 'Carnival Against Oil Wars and Climate Chaos' and alternative AGM outside. Several concerned members of the public also entered the meeting in order to make absolutely sure their concerns hadn't been swamped by the mile high tide of greenwash that had engulfed the Oil Festival Hall (OFH) for the day.



Lead banner at LRT's 'Carnival Against Oil Wars and Climate Chaos', RFH,
24.4.03

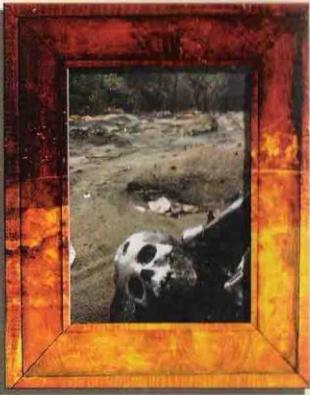


The Royal Festival Hall rebranded, (2005)

The main event of 2004 was 'Greenwash or Us: the 1st Annual Exhibition of Resistance to Big Oil and the Corporate Hijacking of 'the Arts''. This was a squatted Camden (50 Chalk Farm Road, to be exact) shop, transformed into an 'art not oil' exhibition of paintings, photographs and sculptures to coincide with the BP-sponsored National Portrait Award, held at the National Portrait Gallery (NPG) in June.



'Greenwash or Us' (aka ANO Mk I) exhibition, Chalk Farm Road, summer 2004



photograph by Giselle Dohr

"We all stand before history. I am a man of peace, of ideas. Appalled by the denigrating poverty of my people who live on a richly endowed land, distressed by their political marginalization and economic strangulation, angered by the devastation of their land, their ultimate heritage, anxious to preserve their right to life and to a decent living, and determined to usher to this country as a whole a fair and just democratic system which protects everyone and every ethnic group and gives us all a valid claim to human civilization, I have devoted my intellectual and material resources, my very life, to a cause in which I have total belief and from which I cannot be blackmailed or intimidated. I have no doubt at all about the ultimate success of my cause, no matter the trials and tribulations which I and those who believe with me may encounter on our journey. Nor imprisonment nor death can stop our ultimate victory."

Ken Saro-Wiwa
murdered by the Nigerian government and Shell, 1995

Greenwash Or Us

Exhibition of Resistance

June 14th - 21st 2004

Monday 14th 7pm
Press & public preview of 'art not oil' work

Tuesday 15th 8pm
Unravelling the carbon web

Wednesday 16th 4pm
'Greenwash or Us' street party
from BP HQ (1 St James' Square SW1)
to private view of Portrait Award finalists
(NPG, St Martin's Lane WC2) Inc. David Rovics set

Thursday 17th 7pm
Affected communities night: speakers, films & slides
from West Papua, Scotland, Colombia, Nigeria...

Friday 18th
Live music night

Saturday 19th/Sunday 20th
Your event here?

Monday 21st - summer solstice
Award winner announced at big NPG party,
our closing do & DIY portraiture, paint a postcard
of solidarity, food-not-fossil-fuels, radio,
street & park events and joyous chaos!

Details, updates & gaps filled in:
www.londonrisingtide.org.uk

LRT, part of the Rising Tide UK network, takes creative action to combat the root causes of climate chaos and to help build movements for social & ecological justice.

Tel: 07969 786770 - london@risingtide.org.uk,
c/o 62 Fieldgate Street, London E1 1ES.

See also burningplanet.net, risingtide.org.uk, nonewoil.org & www.agp.org

50 Chalk Farm Rd, NW1

Let's mobilise our creativity
to kick the corporations out
of the galleries, museums, operas
and Planet Earth !!!

according to a recent pentagon report, global warming now presents a greater threat to human life than global terrorism. so why are we still going to art galleries sponsored by oil companies?

A

oil & art
DON'T MIX

GREENWASH OR US
THE 1ST ANNUAL EXHIBITION OF
RESISTANCE TO BIG OIL AND THE
CORPORATE HIJACKING
OF 'THE ARTS'

Inside of first Art Not Oil leaflet, (designed by UHC; www.uhc.org.uk)

As well as collaborating with local people to run the thriving Camden space well into the autumn with an exhibition, infopoint, cinema, party

and workshop events, there was also a blockade of the front entrance on the night of the ceremony to announce the winner of the Portrait Award:



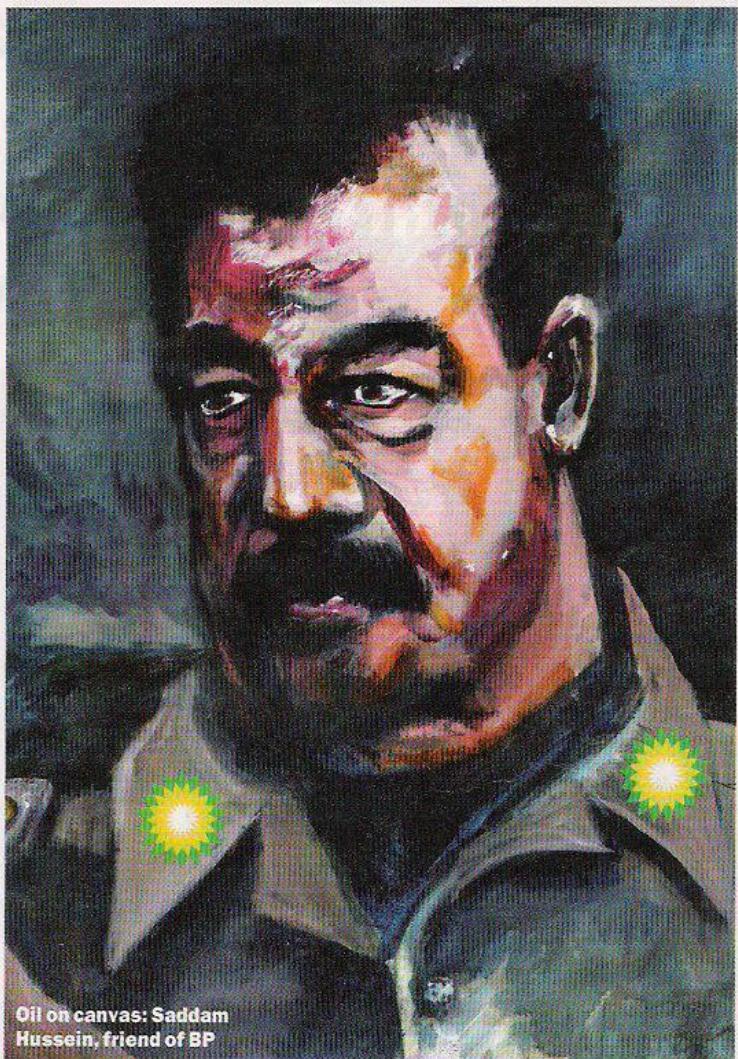
LRT blockades NPG, June 2004

The art establishment cold-shouldered the Chalk Farm exhibition, but that didn't prevent it from being a real success, thanks to the creativity and hard work of London's grassroots scene. Not only was it a real community resource, several amazing art works were lent to the exhibition or made especially for it. Media coverage was (conspiratorially?) sporadic, apart from a very tasty piece in the *Financial Times* which signed off with this paragraph: 'Pride of place goes to a portrait showing [then BP-boss] Lord Browne's "benign mask" slipping to reveal "a satanic look". Organisers claimed the artwork "paints a true portrait of an oil company".'

On September 21st 2004, LRT was present with banner and critical leaflets at an evening reception for teachers at the Science Museum's BP-sponsored 'Energy - Fuelling the Future' exhibition. (The exhibition

contained plenty of propaganda about our supposed 'energy needs', not to mention an online game where 'Energy Ninjas' smash a hippy's guitar and give him a black eye for lighting a camp fire in a forest.) During these years there were also banner-led visits to Tate Britain and the British





Oil on canvas: Saddam Hussein, friend of BP

There is little research into ketamine's long-term effects, but too large a dose can lead to users experiencing a loss of feeling, sight and sound, often referred to as a 'K-hole'. 'It's okay if you take it in small doses, but when people see a white powder they think about doing coke-sized lines, and then they can become seriously confused or comatose,' says

Gary Sutton from drugs

charity Release. He says

ketamine's popularity is also linked with the recent upsurge of the free party and squat scene where the drug is easily and cheaply available.

'A K-hole feels like you've

gone under. You can't move, you can't talk, you don't know if you are upside down or right way up. But it does wear off and I've never heard of anyone dying from it,' says Kate.

The Home Office will complete its consultation on ketamine's legal status this month and it is expected it will be classified as a Class C drug under the Misuse of Drugs Act later this year.

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No-oil painting

'Our event is designed to paint a truer portrait of BP than the caring image manufactured by the BP Portrait Award,' says Sam Harkin of London Rising Tide, organisers of this year's Art not Oil event. The exhibition is being held to coincide with the annual BP Portrait Award run by the National Portrait Gallery and includes paintings, photos, sculpture and other work that aims to highlight the role of oil companies in fuelling environmental destruction. 'Rising Tide? That extreme left-wing organisation?' said a spokesperson for BP when asked about Art not Oil. 'Their claims are without basis and are of no concern to us.'

Make up your own mind at: Art not Oil, Institute for Autonomy, 76-78 Gower St, WC1, June 9-18. See www.artnotoil.org.uk

Museum, where we danced the 'This is private property, you know' tango with a host of security guards and other personnel, usually finding favour with those who stopped to take a leaflet.

Portrait of Lord Browne by Fiona Richmond

Always alongside this protest activity - the visits to galleries, museums and opera houses, the postcards, stickers, press releases and courteous (though almost entirely unacknowledged) emails to bosses and employees of sponsored institutions, the strong connection between conscious art and a rapidly emerging radical movement for climate justice in the UK personified initially by Rising Tide, and also by Climate Camp and Plane Stupid...always alongside this was the patient gathering of artworks on the website. Making art out of climate chaos, wars for oil, the struggle for justice and the search for solutions is tough - quite often it struggles to transcend the desire simply to spell out the trouble we're in on so many levels. (At the height of the Iraq war, we were jokingly tempted to institute a boycott of George Bush in the galleries, as his blank face was appearing so repetitively.)

James Self's portrait 'Saddam' heads this piece from a 2005 *Time Out* (left). The painting was one of two politically charged submissions to the BP

Portrait Award. Needless to say, neither was selected. (The fact that one of the judges is always BP's Director of UK Arts and Culture can hardly increase the likelihood of there being a portrait with an anti-corporate or fossil fuel-related theme selected for exhibition.)



London Rising Tide visits BP-sponsored Tate Britain, c.2004



Another fun day out for LRT, this time as Greenwash Guerrillas, detecting gallons of the stuff at the opening of the BP-sponsored 'Michelangelo Drawings' exhibition at the British Museum, 23.4.09, (1st anniversary of the BP's Texas City refinery disaster, when 15 people lost their lives).

So some of the submissions don't make it, and some of the over 375 pieces gathered on the website's ten galleries are patently more powerful than others. But gradually, over the years, the galleries have become a repository of strong, engaged, passionate work, which attracts artists from all over the world to submit their own, and also sees activists, curators, alternative media outlets and others come to us to find art that suits their need. Always in that situation, we point them back to the artist themselves, who retains absolute copyright over his or her work, which we hope is some consolation when they discover we aren't able to pay them for the privilege of including it!

A group as small as LRT can't expect to have a direct economic impact with the occasional short-term blockade of a refinery or petrol station. But it can zone in on the Achilles heel that BP has exposed with its hyperactive programme of public relations and saturation sponsorship. Ever since the company rebranded, it has been dancing on highly profitable but dangerously thin ice. With every duplicitous claim to be a good corporate citizen and a hypocrite evangelist for renewable energies, it has laid itself open to brand damage. One could even argue that whenever we visit a BP-sponsored institution without comment or action, we are giving BP our tacit approval. So by targeting its corporate sponsorship, and inspiring others to pressurise such institutions, it's possible to blockade BP's extraction of our consent.



Art Not Oil's 2005 exhibition takes shape outside the NPG on Portrait Award ceremony night

LRT's targeted application of pressure was a combination of strategy and the fact that BP and Shell's duplicitous citizenship, not to mention the blithe insouciance of the cultural establishment made us angry. For example, the Tate has 'ethical guidelines' for its 'commercial relationships'. These are a rejection of arms, tobacco or alcohol companies, even though it's plain to see that the oil industry is responsible for more death and destitution than tobacco and alcohol combined. After all, neither sells a product which is threatening the long-term future of the human species! Corporate sponsorship of any kind robs art of any integrity, but removing oil from the picture would mean the oil industry had one less place to hide, and would allow the public gaze to settle more conclusively and damagingly on its true activities. And removed it will be - it's just that the process needs a kick up the arse.



Life imitating..? London Rising Tide at the BP Portrait Award ceremony, June 2006

Art Not Oil 2005-6: the wanderlust years...

Art pumps up pressure on oil giants

OIL company BP sponsors several high profile art events across the capital but there's one in the East End they will be steering clear of.

Art Not Oil in Bethnal Green is a direct challenge to the oil industry's attempt to use art for its own PR purposes.

Sam Harken, who organised the exhibition for the environmental group London Rising Tide, said that the art establishment and oil companies were far too cosy.

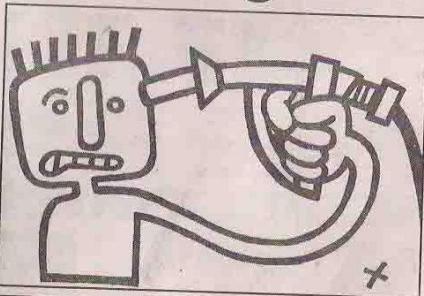
He cited a BP sponsored National Gallery exhibition about Russian art which was visited by President Putin and Tony Blair and coincided with the signing of a lucrative oil deal.

London Rising Tide claim that climate chaos is set to have a catastrophic effect on all of us, while hitting the poorest hardest. It believes that oil is a curse that also fuels war, poverty and environmental destruction.

The exhibition Art Not Oil

encourages artists to create work which explores the damage that companies like BP, Shell and Exxon are doing to the planet.

Art Not Oil 2005 is an exhibition that includes paintings, photos, sculpture and other work that addresses issues like climate chaos, shiny corporate public relations and the concept that 'profit is king'. The show runs until August 28 at Oxford House in Derbyshire Street, Bethnal Green.



Headline from the East London Advertiser, 18.7.05

2005 and 2006 were Art Not Oil's wanderlust years, as the exhibition travelled all over the UK, including a squatted social centre in London's west end, a students' union in Edinburgh (to coincide with the anti-G8 mobilisations of June 2005), a community arts centre in Bethnal Green, the first Climate Camp at Drax in



heartland that is Aberdeen.

The 2006 ceremony was greeted by Greenwash Guerrillas, some in suitably greenwash-spattered business attire, resulting in the memorable Evening Standard headline 'Protest at oil sponsor mars art awards', (right), though still no acknowledgement by Brian Sewell, or any other art critic, of the fact that an arts sponsor was triggering concerted protest. Could it be that the denial about climate change that suffuses western society is also alive and well in the art world, aided by the guilt that many who are part of it perhaps feel about being on the payroll of Big Oil, not to mention users of the black stuff like the rest of us who haven't yet retreated to

Yorkshire (see photo, left), and even a reclaimed fish market in Northampton. The exhibition also tailed the BP Portrait Award, turning up on the NPG's doorstep on the evening of its awards ceremony in 2005, then following it on its own tours, popping up in Newcastle, Edinburgh (again, this time triggering a terrific piece in Glasgow's *Sunday Herald*) and even the oily

Protest at oil sponsor mars art awards

DEMONSTRATORS interrupted a prestigious art awards ceremony with a protest over oil giant BP's sponsorship of the event.

Activists gathered outside the BP Portrait Award 2006 at the National Portrait Gallery, claiming that BP's oil companies are destroying the environment.

A Not Oil campaigner Rebecca Johnson said: "This event is a complete greenwash, it's keeping a system going that allows people to think that their oil companies are doing a good thing. It's sponsoring art events, but it's bad because it's really just putting a spin on the bad things they are doing."

Inside the gallery, the winner of the 2005 portrait award joined at the length of time and reason for him to be successful. Andrew Tift was praised for his triptych portrait of Kitty Garman, Lucian Freud's first wife, whom he befriended in his native Australia. He had exhibited in the awards for the past 14 years and has even been shortlisted twice, but has narrowly missed out on every occasion.

Speaking at the awards, held last night at the National Portrait Gallery, after the competition, 4 years is a long time to wait. I will have to tell Kitty when I see her. Although, to be honest, she's so used to bigger and better artists that this will be water off a duck's back. But I'm sure

GEORGINA LITTLEJOHN

she'll be pleased all the same." The annual BP Portrait Award showcases the best in contemporary portrait painting anywhere in the world. It encourages young artists to focus on using and developing the theme of portraiture in their work.

Now in its 27th year, the National Portrait Award has been sponsored by BP for 17 years. This year, the competition received a record 1,113 entries compared with 1,062 last year. In total, 56 portraits—44 from the UK and 12 from abroad—have been selected for display at the gallery.

First prize went to the painter of the portrait of Bryan Ferry, an art lover and supporter of the National Portrait Gallery. He said: "I hadn't seen a lot of Georgia's work until tonight and I think it's very good. Technically it's very well done and it's a very strong portrait. I think that you get more out of a painting than you do a photograph."

The second prize winner was Rafael Reilly for his portrait of a canvas portrait, Model 1. Cruz, 29, lives and works in Mexico where he studies architecture and fine art. The third prize went to Angela Reilly for her self-portrait. Reilly, 40, from Glasgow, exhibits frequently in Edinburgh and London.



Winner: Andrew Tift with his triptych of Lucian Freud's first wife Kitty Garman

a cave in the outer Hebrides with two crates of baked beans and a Kalashnikov for company? One thing is, perhaps, certain: such guilt is the friend of those who are profiting from the status quo, regardless of whether that same status quo may be destroying our collective tomorrow.

The sojourns of the Art Not Oil exhibition were usually made in a rented Luton van, with the art strapped down laboriously in the back, but not tightly enough to prevent the weary driver occasionally hearing the agonising sound of paintings tumbling sideways at an unanticipated red light or two. The fossil-fuelled nature of this touring, and the stresses on a small team of unpaid Art Not Oil volunteers, meant that it was destined to be short-lived. Also, the group which had initiated the project - London Rising Tide - was becoming increasingly involved in the ever-growing Climate Camp process, and we mustn't forget the emergence of something known - temporarily at least - as the Shell Wildlife Photographer of the Year Award...

Shell's Wild Lie: at last, a cast-iron, unarguable victory

For people attempting to transform the status quo for the better, there is always a balance to be struck between what fires the heart, and what engages the brain. When we heard that the new sponsor of the Natural



'Brian in a Traffic Jam' by Eva Ronnevig,
part of the 2006 exhibition

History Museum's Wildlife Photographer of the Year Award was to be none other than Shell, there was a collision between indignation, ('How the hell can a company hell-bent on species destruction get its logo on the poster for an exhibition of exquisite, often incredibly moving images of wildlife?') and strategic opportunism, ('If other people feel the same way - which they're bound to - then we have an extraordinary opportunity on our hands. If the NHM has a strong sense of the public's disgust at this situation, and persuades it not to renew Shell's two year contract, then oil industry sponsorship across the board could be subject to stronger civil society scrutiny, and be in serious jeopardy in the longer term.')

To those who had argued that we were depriving the Museum of much-needed funds, we responded that if such institutions were to band together and institute a campaign to divert state funding away from wars to secure energy reserves in the Middle East and towards essential services and culture, then they might find the public right behind them - especially if that funding increase meant seeing the back of deeply tainted oil

money. Instituting an energy-saving campaign and inviting innovative projects like Cape Farewell (which sends artists to the Arctic in the hope that they will create art that will perhaps move us to change in a way that cool statistics manifestly don't) are commendable, but we think that in this pivotal moment in human and planetary history, all sectors of society need to be getting their hands on the metaphorical pump to ensure the survival of life on earth, a survival best served with a generous portion of climate justice.



London Rising Wild campaigning against Shell's sponsorship of the Wildlife Photographer of the Year exhibition, 23.9.06

So we got to it:

* we teamed up with Friends of the Earth (FOE) to bring excellent campaigners from Shell-affected communities in Russia, the Philippines, USA and South Africa to the UK for a tour, for press coverage (which failed to materialise) and a hoped-for meeting which NHM boss Michael Dixon refused to agree to. They were also refused entry to the NHM for an event where members meet the photographers, to which they had tickets. (FOE also instituted some invaluable Freedom of Information requests which revealed that the NHM had carried out internal research into the possible negative reputational impacts of accepting Shell sponsorship. While warning that there might be dissent, the report said that such dissent wouldn't reach the same levels as the period in the 1990s when Shell was hit with a double whammy of bad press as a result of its complicity in the execution of Ken Saro-Wiwa and its decision to dispose of the Brent Spar oil platform in the North Sea.)

* we set up www.shelloiledwildlife.org.uk, which is still live though showing its age a little;



* we went into the Museum, donned wildlife costumes, and wandered around asking tricky questions about Shell and wildlife and generally (though not always successfully) attempting not to scare the children. Outside, a huge banner reading 'Warning: Shell Hell in Operation' was unfurled, as a 'Shell executive' tried to unruffled feathers and the animals staged an impromptu die-in, to the bemusement of security and the overwhelming support of visitors.

* later in the year, the Carbon Town Cryer and 10 other singers sang a song called 'Shell Sells Suicide' in front of the dinosaur in the Museum's main hall, or did at least until they were gradually dragged out by security guards, one of whom displayed a level of aggression verging on assault, later offering to throw a supportive cameraman's equipment into the heavy traffic of the Cromwell Road. (The Carbon Town Cryer sang versions of the same song to Shell's directors at its Annual General Meeting in 2008, and in the foyer of the Shell-sponsored National Theatre in January 2009:

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ojb_Tv2TzN4&feature=channel_page;



Polar bear die-in by Bristol Rising Tide and friends, opening of touring Wildlife Photographer exhibition, Bristol Museum, December 2007



* we created a counter-exhibition, which we called 'Shell's Wild Lie' (SWL), of photographs which we hoped served as powerful testimony to the impacts of Shell (particularly in Nigeria), as well as the oil industry more generally, (which you can see here:

<http://www.artnotoil.org.uk/gallery/v/Shell>, and which you are also welcome to borrow, as long as you can cover the postage.)

We took SWL to the Museum on several occasions, and sent it round the country, so that it surfaced for example outside Bristol Gallery on the opening of the touring Shell exhibition there in December 2007, when an activist also entered the private opening ceremony and delivered a speech as a far-from apologetic Shell executive to an audience that took some time to realise it had been lovingly fooled.

Perhaps SWL's finest moment came when in November 9th 2007, Aberystwyth Arts Centre finished hosting the 2007 Shell exhibition, and on November 10th, (the 12th anniversary of the execution of Ken Saro-Wiwa and 8 other activists opposing Shell in Nigeria), the Centre began showing the counter-exhibition. The fact that a brave arts centre curator was willing to offer space to our exhibition could well be one of the moments when the NHM started seriously to think twice about renewing the Shell contract;

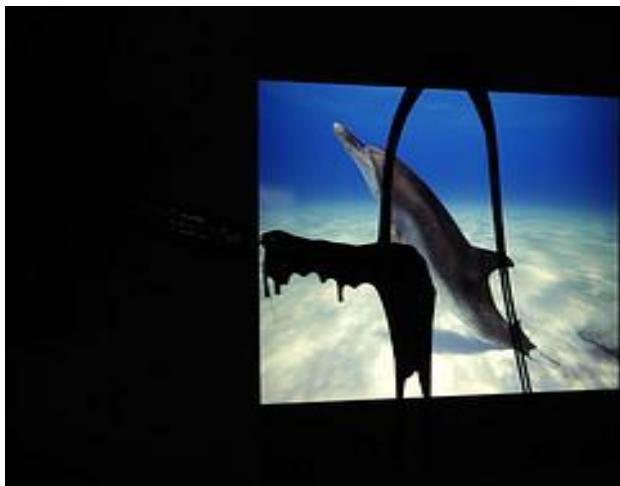
Outside the NHM, 27.10.07

Aberystwyth Arts Centre website, November 2007

- * we produced a series of powerful stickers and postcards (easily slippable into the exhibition catalogue on sale in the Museum's own bookshop);
- * we flooded the internet with press releases, youtube clips and rants with wish fulfilment-drenched titles like 'Oil industry sponsorship to become endangered species in 2007?' and 'Songs of freedom at opening of Shell Wildlife Photographer Abomination'.
- * like Friends of the Earth, we encouraged people to contact Michael Dixon directly, resulting in a steady drip of intelligent, heartfelt emails being sent in his direction;



Art Not Oil beyond London shock! Shell's Wild Lie in Bristol (2007, left) & Plymouth (2008, right)



* also, there was a Climate Camp action (see photo, left) where people smeared that trusty oil impersonator black treacle over the exhibits, resulting in one or two handy headlines...

When the news came through in early 2008 that Shell's contract hadn't been renewed, our cup of euphoria runneth over, for a little while at least, and tasteth damn fine. Even so, we were careful to acknowledge the fact that we hadn't worked alone on the campaign, and that the circumstances around the Shell drop weren't very clear. But it seems hard to discount the fact that the actions of a small but determined group of concerned people had made

a palpable change for the better.

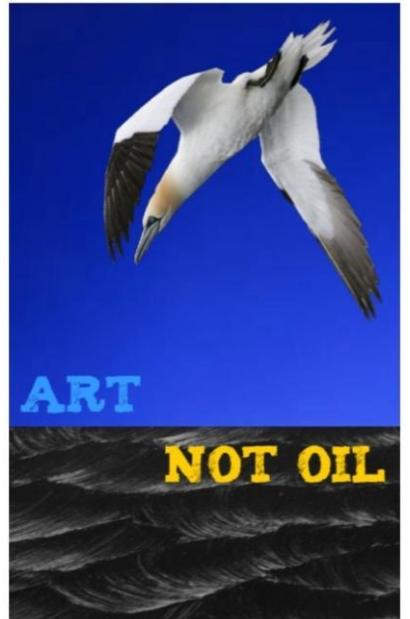
The number of overjoyed messages of congratulation indicated that with the odds still very much stacked against us in the struggle to get off the fossil fuels before it really is too late, we really need victories - even comparatively small ones like this - to keep despair from gaining the upper hand and robbing us of the belief that having a go is worth the effort. Also, it's often so hard to gauge what effect - if any - we are having, especially if we're trying to create change within institutions which are almost impossible to 'read' from the outside. Sometimes, it's just at that moment of exhaustion and disillusion that the edifice crumbles and a positive change is revealed in all its glory. So it's back to the walls of Jericho, then, with trumpets and, er, artworks at the ready...

Shell: an Oedipal relationship with Mother Earth?

So 2008 got Art Not Oil - now something of a veteran campaign, and a stand-alone group now, though with strong support still from London Rising Tide - off to a cracking start. The rest of the year saw the usual combination of promotional postcards (see right) and the careful tending of the various online galleries.

It wasn't until late autumn that we were noticed again by the media, when it launched a spoof leaflet and press release in response to Shell's sponsorship of the National Theatre's production of 'Oedipus'.

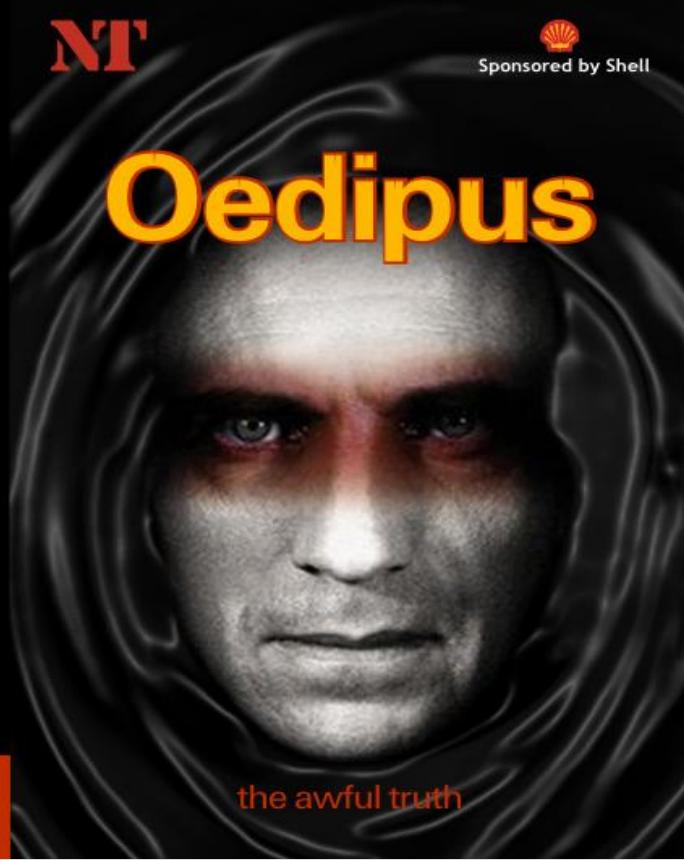
The spoof - being an artfully worded text and an equally artful NT-like design, claimed that the NT wanted to use the opening of the play to kickstart a public debate about oil company sponsorship of the arts. It resulted in a piece in 'The Stage', the theatre world's journal of record (<http://www.thestage.co.uk/features/feature.php/22157/chit-chat-hytner-miss-or-maybe-an-attack->), several bemusedly fooled fellow activists, as well as a letter to ANO from the NT's Chief Executive saying that 'the press release and leaflet you have put out, both purporting to come from the National Theatre, discredit your cause. The tactic is under-hand and dishonest. If these are the "creative interventions" mentioned in your letter to the *Oedipus* company, they are woefully short of honesty and straightforwardness. Please withdraw them forthwith.'



NT

Sponsored by Shell

Oedipus



National
Theatre

ARTS COUNCIL
ENGLAND

the awful truth

Spoof 'Oedipus' leaflet (designed by Inkthief), distributed by ANO in the National Theatre, late 2008

Incidentally, the letter referred to comprised a polite outlining of our concerns about Shell, as well as a more detailed itemisation of its wrongdoings. Over thirty copies were hand-delivered at the Stage Door, but not one received a response of any kind. Did the entire company feel too uncomfortable, insulted, bored or bewildered to reply, or might the NT management have encouraged them not to respond? We have absolutely no idea which, but it's certainly true to say that of hundreds of polite messages sent to creative people working for oil-sponsored institutions, (which have been at pains to point out that we aren't standing in judgement over people making their living in such a way, and which never make demands, instead asking the recipient to let us know what they think of the issues raised, or perhaps to raise them with the institution in question if they feel so moved), the number of replies still stands in single figures. (If you are one of those who has heard from us, but didn't respond, we'd love to hear from you to find out why you didn't - or couldn't - reply.

Our Oedipus campaign was also made up of a call-out for art inspired by the Shell-Oedipus axis, resulting in various strong pieces, including Carrie MacKinnon's painting (*below*). Various London Rising Tiders and Climate Campers (once with faces made up like that of Ralph Fiennes in the poster) leafleted the production, sometimes asking the question 'Is Shell buying our blindness?' in reference to the plight of Oedipus himself in the play. A supportive audience member turned out to be *Guardian* blogger Chris Wilkinson, whose piece headed 'The National Theatre should clean up its act and ditch Shell' appeared online in

January 2009.



'Nothing I could see could bring me joy' - Carrie MacKinnon

And lo, in 2009, the Art Not Oil pendulum swung back to a centenary-celebrating BP...

Preparations for the sumptuous 2010 diary were slowed considerably by the revelation early in 2009 that this was indeed one hundred years since the incorporation of BP, and that the company intended to make something of a big deal of its centenary.

Here's our press release from March 21st 2009:

'OIL GOLIATH BP FELLED BY FOSSIL FOOL'S DAY DAVID

BP has been forced to postpone its centenary party at the British Museum on April 1st, as word had leaked out and triggered a demonstration by Art Not Oil.

BP had either failed to notice - or decided to ignore - the fact that April 1st had been designated 'Fossil Fools Day' by the international Rising Tide network. Also, there are several protest events planned for

that day in reaction to the G20 meeting, including a 'Climate Camp in the City', all of which meant the BP demo was too much of an unknown quantity not to attempt to avoid.

'Whenever and wherever BP attempts to hold a party to celebrate its tarnished centenary, we will be there to say 'Your party's over!' said Art Not Oil's Sam Chase. 'BP's one hundred years have seen a world plundered and a climate torn asunder. We cannot allow that to continue, so we are resisting Big Oil's empire of carnage while building our own post-oil, post-capitalism future right here, right now, with our creativity, our tenacity and our humanity.'

'Any company that can boast that it's replacing "2008 [oil] production by 121% and aims to grow annual output through to 2020" needs to be decommissioned forthwith, if we are to have a chance of avoiding climate catastrophe in the not-so-distant future. Fortunately, Art Not Oil is not alone in working for this to happen, as movements of resistance gather strength all over the world.'

Art Not Oil has pledged to be present at BP's AGM on April 16th to make sure it gets this message, and to wish its employees well in their new low carbon, post-corporate careers.'

This resulted in a short piece in something called *The Times*, headed 'It's BP's party and we'll protest if we want to...', which referred to 'something called Art Not Oil', (not that we're complaining!) When the date of BP's rescheduled party leaked out as being on May 6th, the next ANO press release said 'As before, people wanting to come and say "BP - your party's over!" and wish the behemoth a happy last birthday are more than welcome. The British Museum's main gate on Great Russell Street will find a contingent of the newly-formed Brazen Pranksters playing tunes to usher in a new era of climate justice and ecological sanity.'

In effect, the black-tie-and-tiara'd invite-holders passed a small but righteous gathering of well-wishers, performing a double whammy of 'Celebrate This!' (whose lyrics had already crept into *The Guardian*) and the Jacksons-emulating 'Shake That BP Down to the Ground'. There was also a trio of oil-swilling zombies who kept the police busy with their constant attempt to gatecrash BP's party

...



2 sides of 'A Wake for BP', British Museum, 6.5.09. Photos by Amelia Gregory

The future: everything to play for?

The 2010 desk diary that we launched in September 2009 was a way of celebrating Art Not Oil's longevity, not to mention the extraordinary breadth and sustained quality of the work it has been able to feature over the years. But the diary also exists as a testament to the project's failure to stimulate - amongst the public or the art world more particularly - an open-minded debate about the issue of oil company sponsorship, and the way such companies appear to be able to neutralise potential civil society opposition with a canny programme of sponsorship (ranging from the arts, through tie-ups with liberal newspapers, to support for the Olympics and other sporting events).

ANO is still chiselling away at that 'social licence to operate', sometimes also described as its 'extraction of our consent'. We're convinced that within five years, with the right sort of inspired and concerted pressure, Big Oil will become persona non grata in sponsorship terms. (*For one slightly unhinged version of that journey, have a look at the future timeline that punctuates the pages of the diary, as well as the bottom of this essay.*) That would send its public image reeling and make it much harder for it to operate successfully.



'Extinction' – Kate Evans (from the Art Not Oil 2009 gallery)

Unfortunately, climate chaos is likely to do much of our work for us, forcing the cultural institutions into a position where they feel their 'good name' will be damaged by any association with an increasingly pilloried industry. Kicking oil out of these institutions would still leave them tainted by their pro-status quo agendas as well as cash from other possible equally dodgy corporations. So while such an exclusion would be a blow of some kind for creative freedom, the real gain would be in the blow it would deliver to the oil industry itself.

We keep on keeping on with Art Not Oil because it celebrates the intangible but undoubted potency of human creativity, particularly when it empathises with injustice and transcends a mere reiteration of where we've gone wrong. With the stakes so high, there's always a danger of lapsing into cliché, so we'll just end by saying that we hope somewhere along the line we've been able to open hearts, stimulate minds, and inspire more joyous resistance to a rapacious industry – and the profit-hungry system that it fuels with such frighteningly wasteful power – that we are easily equal to decommissioning, and even of rising out of.

And let's not forget the dormant disquiet that lies just beneath the surface of countless creative individuals. When it all comes down, perhaps it's love that is the catalytic ingredient to counter the despair and gear-grinding anger that the illusion of powerlessness brings. How we keep that bubbling through our discourses and our direct actions is doubtless one to deal with on another day. Here's to more of it!

Thanks for reading...

Sam Chase, Art Not Oil



BP corporate social responsibility reps point to a sparkling greenwashed future

outside the National Portrait Gallery, 13.6.06

Some links you might find interesting and, with any luck, inspiring:

www.artnotoil.org.uk - art and culture playing its part in the very necessary dismantlement of the oil industry!

www.risingtide.org.uk - helping build a movement for climate justice across the UK

www.climatecamp.org.uk - the crew that took its summer holiday in 2007 at Heathrow Airport, went to Kingsnorth coal-fired power station in Kent in 2008 and highlighted the insanity of the failed carbon trading system in 2009, also happens to be a thriving UK-wide network committed to taking direct action to save the climate

www.carbonweb.org - PLATFORM's authoritative fossil fuel resistance resource

www.oilwatch.org - coalition of groups in the global south resisting oil extraction

www.WiwavShell.org - Shell finally on trial in 2009 over its role in the execution of Ken Saro-Wiwa in 1995. See also www.shellguilty.com

www.remembersarowiwa.com - keeping the spirit of Ken Saro-Wiwa alive

www.shellfacts.com - Shell's neighbours tell the truth about the company

www.corribssos.com - Shell to Sea, resisting Shell's plans for a gas refinery and pipeline in County Mayo, Ireland

www.rossportsolidaritycamp.110mb.com - also resisting Shell's plans for County Mayo

www.groundwork.org.za - groundWork, South Africa, campaigning for environmental justice

www.gcmonitor.org - polluted communities fighting back

www.eraction.org - Environmental Rights Action, Nigeria

www.nationalpetroleumgallery.org.uk - admittedly Marie Celeste-like spoof site set up by LRT in 2004

www.escanda.org - community-controlled, post-capitalist renewable energy is already a reality

www.permaculture.org.uk - get your hands in the ground and plant the future!

Further reading:

Privatising Culture - corporate art intervention since the 1980s

By Chin-tao Wu (Verso, 2002; ISBN: 1-85984-472-3)

Art Incorporated - Julian Stallabrass, (OUP, 2004; ISBN: 0-19-280165-1)
2629

Free Exchange - Pierre Bourdieu & Hans Haacke, (Stanford University Press, 1995; ISBN 0-8047-2496-2)