

## 'Exhibition of Resistance to Big Oil & the Corporate Hijacking of 'the Arts': street protest & gallery report, June 13th 2005

The Art Not Oil exhibition was mounted onto a sturdy trike and ridden gently through the rush-houred streets of central London. The destination was the National Portrait Gallery, which was hosting the presentation ceremony for the BP Portrait Award.

On arriving, it was clear that after last year's blockade of the main entrance, BP security, NPG security and Metropolitan Petroleum (also known as the police) were taking no chances. There must have been at least 35 police, including a special climbing team, along with serious numbers of crash barriers - all perfect for disrupting the steady rhythm of passing pedestrians and traffic, all asking 'what's going on?', with loads of us lot on hand to explain with a postcard (featuring Saddam Hussein sporting BP-logo'd lapels, in front of burning oilwells), which asked that time-honoured question:

'Climate chaos is set to have a catastrophic effect on all of us, while hitting the poorest hardest. Oil is a curse that also fuels war, poverty and environmental destruction. Yet the companies most responsible are profiting handsomely, and they are still welcome it seems in many of our most prestigious public galleries and museums. Why?'



We weren't going to be able to have the exhibition directly outside the NPG, but the crash barriers on the other side of the road provided a good spot to hang banners and artworks, as did the base of the statue of Edith Cavell ([www.edithcavell.org.uk](http://www.edithcavell.org.uk)). Within a few minutes, the paintings and others images had been hung on specially constructed panels, and a good number of supportive folk were distributing postcards throughout the area, with a buzz of interest building up.

A few of us positioned ourselves at the side entrance, twiggng that since high level BP security were positioned there, their execs might be likely to be heading in that way. Having gone through what it was all about to a purportedly interested copper, given a card to Pet Shop geezer Neil Tennant on his way in and not managed to give cards to two NPG staff, (who were individually sent letters a fortnight ago), we had quite a long talk with art journo Brian Sewell. He was on the judging panel, and was sympathetic but thought that the 'good' of some strong painting being encouraged outweighed the unwarranted positive public relations that might rub off on BP, since no one takes any notice of who sponsors what

anyway. Which we disagreed with absolutely - after all, why would BP make such a big deal of its sponsorship programme if it didn't help them launder their public image for comparative peanuts? But his readiness to even have a discussion about the issues was a big improvement on the absolute refusal of the rest of the art media to allow a discussion, let alone include a listing for the Art Not Oil exhibition.



While this discussion was happening, the slightly stooped, slightly stiff figure of BP boss Lord Browne marched past, accompanied by a couple of security men. Let's hope that one day the crowds outside the NPG for this event calling for oil and art not to mix will be so great that he'll have to be winched in by helicopter. But for now, we had about 25 people, including a small but still racketous samba presence, and a renewably-powered sound system given an early run-out in preparation for the G8 bike ride's departure in a couple of days.

Through the mike, someone gave a bit of a righteous rant about the true face of BP and the oil industry, as well as some practical details about the Art Not Oil exhibition, including its current home at the Institute for Autonomy, 76-78 Gower Street, and its next destination in Edinburgh as part of the student's union space sorted by Dissent there, where it will we hope help to educate passers-through about the true rapacious nature of Big Oil and its G8 buddies, not to mention capitalism itself.

I reckon our event outside the National Petroleum Gallery was a real success. It wasn't particularly confrontational, but it was another nail in the coffin of BP's cultural sponsorship, without which it will find it much harder to extract its 'social licence to operate', that is, it will remove a massive barrier between the public and their anger about what has been done to the climate in the name of profit

The exhibition looked amazing, hosted by the ever-generous presence of Edith Cavell. It was able to show the creativity at the heart of our movements of resistance, and also demonstrate the role art can play in triggering positive change. It's going to be evolving and improving constantly, so send in what you've made, or what you're about to make.

