BP and the tainted temples of culture

Introduction

It may be hard to discern from a distance, but there's a rumble of resistance to BP's programme of blanket arts sponsorship. Here, Sam Chase from direct action group London Rising Tide dissects the anaesthetic effect of corporate sponsorship on the mainstream art world, and the way BP uses that sponsorship to buy a 'social licence to operate'. He is also proud to be able to forward to Red Pepper readers an email from 2012 outlining the way creative direct activists won the battle to kick oil out of art...

Sometimes it's hard to be an oil company. Charming children's drawings on petrol station leaflets about tiger saving and CO2 cutting are not enough. BP, Shell and Exxon Mobil 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 compliant middle-of-the-road NGOs, as well as with highly respectable cultural institutions such as galleries and museums.

Far ahead of the pack in the rebranding stakes, and exerting a virtual stranglehold over Grade A London cultural institutions, is BP...

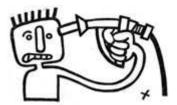


In July 2000, BP had its old shield image and logo towed away, unveiling instead its shiny new flower-like helios logo and 'beyond petroleum' catchphrase. It cost a hefty seven figure sum, and catapulted the company into the lead in the race to present a questioning, responsible, compassionate oil company, 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. (A bit like the way Tony Blair has come a cropper for the yawning abyss between his words and actions on climate change.)

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 2005, it has fingers in the National Portrait Gallery (NPG), Science Museum, Barbican, British Museum, Natural History Museum, Royal Opera House, Tate Britain and National Gallery

The art establishment, artists, BP, politicians and some visitors will 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 to the drastic cuts in public subsidy that have left gaping holes in their budgets. So what's the problem?

Part 1: A few facts BP don't want you to know (or think about):



'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;

BP has an ongoing commitment to expand its fossil fuel production by at least 3.5% per year, (though this figure is likely to top 5% during 2005-6).

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;

* BP has bankrolled Colombian paramilitary death squads in exchange for the 'protection' of its oilfields, (www.colombiasolidarity.org.uk/)

'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 be a human rights disaster & produce over 150m tonnes of CO2 each year for 40 years, causing untold damage to the world's climate. (www.baku.org.uk);

* BP invests less than 1% of its annual budget in solar & other renewable energy sources, much less than it ploughs into advertising and PR;

BP has been investigated by the Health & Safety Executive (HSE) for serious and widespread safety breaches at its UK refineries. In 2002, the HSE fined it £1m for these breaches;

* 'Alaska cites & fines BP over death of worker', FT, 28.5.03;

In 2004 as BP oil-workers saw their personal safety, union rights and wages in tatters (**www.oilc.org**), BP boss Lord Browne's own salary soared to £5.6m...

Yet, in the face of all this damning evidence, BP is still often regarded as a good company. It possesses, in effect, what BP has itself referred to as its 'social licence to operate'.



Part 2: BP's 'social licence to operate'

From 1980 to the beginning of the 1990's, the National Portrait Gallery (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.

The NPG had, in effect, been allowing Imperial to maintain the unlikely illusion of its wholesome corporate character. Then it offered this service to BP for a few thousand pounds, a fraction of the oil giant's overall PR budget, and for this amount BP had its logo intimately linked with an apparently unarguable social good. Priceless – since without such reputational massage, BP could possibly go the way of BNFL, Monsanto or ExxonMobil in terms of public disaffection.



It is of course true that as one of Britain's biggest companies, it's in almost every pension or investment portfolio, often leaving people feeling perplexed or hypocritical if they feel moved to act against it. But 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

Part 3: What's the problem? - cash in, freedom of expression out

The paintings that are chosen as Portrait Award finalists often pack an emotional punch, but are never challenging politically, and winners often go on to paint figures from Britain's ruling class. Whether that's because among the judges is BP's very own culture stooge – sorry, Director of UK Arts and Culture - or because politicised portraiture is in the self-censored doldrums at present, it's hard to tell.

BP supports institutions that are embedded in the British establishment – solid places that are never going to ask challenging questions of the status quo, let alone agitate for a fundamental transformation of it. They are managed by men skilled in the dark art of marketing, and governed by often government-appointed Trustees from business and the aristocracy, as well as a few safe artists who can be counted on not to rock the boat.



There have always been artists prepared to stand their ground and produce work that challenges the status quo, with Goya, Diego Rivera and Picasso's Guernica springing immediately to mind. However, those with the power - from the church, through kings, queens and industrialists to today's sponsorship deals - have kept the vast majority of artists on a gold leash for centuries. Fair enough, perhaps – after all, they had to eat. But what if hidden within that sponsorship was a cancer of censorship?

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.

In 2004, post-oil, post-capitalism direct action group London Rising Tide (LRT) took action against the BP Portrait Award, and also held an alternative 'Art Not Oil 1' exhibition at a very desirable squatted venue up the road from the NPG. The art establishment cold-shouldered the exhibition, but that didn't prevent it from being a real success, thanks to the creativity and hard work of London's grassroots scene. As well as being a real community resource, several amazing art works were lent to the exhibition or made especially for it. One dark satanic portrait of BP boss Lord Browne spent at least one afternoon outside the NPG with its creator. While it wasn't allowed entry, it did garner a mention in the following morning's FT, which ended by saying 'Organisers claimed the artwork "paints a true portrait of an oil company".'

Part 4: A social licence to operate?

LRT and art/activism collective Platform are still chiselling away at BP's 'social licence to operate', sometimes also described as 'the extraction of our consent'. Shell also plays the same sophisticated game with its sponsorship of the National Theatre, but its programme is nothing like as widespread as that of BP. The campaigners are convinced that within seven years, with the right sort of inspired and concerted pressure, BP will become persona non grata in sponsorship terms. (See Timeline 2012-2005) . That would send its public image reeling and make it much harder for it to operate successfully.



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. That 'good name' is undeserved: for example, the British Museum could be accurately described as a posh warehouse full of stolen property. And since that's the case, perhaps it's only fitting that Lord Browne sits on the board and that his neo-colonial company is a regular sponsor, as well as having its own-branded lecture theatre.

The Science Museum, often portrayed as an invaluable educational resource, is in a way a monument to pro-industrial propaganda. Granted, it holds the now uncontroversial view that 'climate change has become the most important challenge that human ingenuity has to solve'. However, its *Energy – fuelling the future* exhibition, aimed at young children and their teachers, pushes a pro-economic growth, pro-corporate line that contains nothing about the social and ecological devastation wrought by the oil industry on the people and places where it operates. Unsurprisingly somehow, it is sponsored by BP, BASF and Vodafone.

Initially I was shocked to hear that 'BP energy experts acted as consultants to the exhibition to help create content that is accurate and relevant'. And that Celeste Bright, Head of Development at the Science Museum, chose to terminate our dialogue by saying 'As I'm sure you will appreciate, our relationship with BP is protected by copyright and as such I am not in a position to answer any more questions on it.' But once I'd worked out that the Museum is built on colonial profit and continues to smuggle capitalism-friendly messages into its exhibitions to this day, I realised that BP is in fact the perfect bedfellow for this and the other mired-in-Empire institutions.

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.

Part 5: Some rays of light

Corporate sponsorship eats into the art world's soul. For that reason I feel justified in painting a thus-far darkened picture. However, scattered here and there are creative glimmers of light and resistance in the struggle against corporate sponsorship and oil madness. Here are six:

1.) The Museum of Contemporary Arts in Chicago receives funding from Phillip Morris. In 2003, art/activist The Vacuum Cleaner ('cleaning up after capitalism') cleaned their floors whilst asking visitors if they had a spare smoke; (www.thevacuumcleaner.co.uk/vacuum.html)



- 2.) Artists sent a flurry of concerned letters to Tate boss Nicholas Serota in 2003 when Tate Liverpool entered into a 'partnership' with arms company Rolls Royce.
- 3.) In Tasmania, writers and artists came together in 2003 to organise an alternative festival to 'Ten Days on the Island', a mainstream arts festival sponsored by old-growth forest logging company Forestry Tasmania; (www.doctorsforforests.com/arts/)
- 4.) Also in 2003, novelist Hari Kunzru turned down the prestigious John Llewellyn Rhys prize for literature, as he was deeply uncomfortable with the attitude of the prize's sponsor, The Mail on Sunday, to refugees and asylum seekers; (www.harikunzru.com/hari/jlr.htm)
- 5.) The war in Iraq and west's intimately linked lust for oil have triggered an outpouring of powerful images, especially in the US. (See **www.bloodforoil.org** for starters.)
- 6.) One audacious plan to trigger greater awareness and action on all this is Crude, a feature-length, cinema-release film following several stories, all with a strong connection to oil, war and climate chaos. Look out for it in cinemas in 2007, or invest in it now if you can; (www.spannerfilms.com/?lid=1578)