

## Art Comes To Life To Tell A Dark And Oily Story Outside BP Portrait Awards Ceremony, by Rising Tide - 13.6.06

London Rising Tide brought to life the image used to publicise its Art Not Oil 2006 exhibition outside the National Portrait Gallery (NPG) on the night of the ceremony for the BP Portrait Award. The Nick Turner image is a petroleum-based version of the iconic Vietnam photograph depicting a brutal assassination, this time with a nozzle replacing the gun, and with the action taking place in front of a BP logo. It took on three dimensions outside the gallery as a simple, powerful way to convey the murderous impact of BP and the entire oil industry, an impact that is brilliantly obscured by cultural sponsorship.



The tableau

Early attempts to take the tableau to the front door of the gallery were blocked by large numbers of Metropolitan Police (working closely with BP security, NPG security and sub-contracted security), who had blocked off the entire pavement to passers-by with crash barriers. (There's nothing quite like seeing an oil-sponsored gallery surrounded by police to undermine the event's civilized veneer.) At this point the road was blocked for fifteen minutes by the police, and two LRTers were arrested and de-arrested by the same officers in a matter of moments.

The street theatricals then set up across the road near our old friend Edith Cavell, or at least her statue, near and sometimes inside the 'protest pen'. For over an hour, passers-by stopped to take a leaflet, hang out with the clowns who had also joined the proceedings, and to find out what the re-creation of the Art Not Oil image was all about.

Around the corner, keeping an eye on the side entrance, were two agents from BP's crack Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) team, decked out for the night in suits that had been splashed with something looking suspiciously like greenwash (but which was possibly only flour, water, sugar and food colouring.) The CsaRse Squad suffered an early setback when they noticed the police Forward Intelligence Team (FIT) photographer picking up their back-up bottles of greenwash and placing them on the NPG office windowsill, alongside an Art Not Oil postcard placed there earlier by an LRTer. The card was a bit smeared with greenwash, some of which had transferred itself onto the window. Having taken a picture of the bottles, card and smeared window, the estimable photographer put the bottles back on the ground, upon which they were seized by another officer. When asked what was going on, we were told that they were being confiscated on grounds of suspected criminal damage to the building. Later we were told that they could be retrieved from Charing Cross nick, where they still remain, festering away nicely in the summer heat.



Forward intelligence?

Still impressively splattered, the CSaRsers thanked NPG staff, artists, petro-police and security for keeping any of the company's reputational issues, such as the death of 15 of its workers in Texas in 2005 or the spilling of 265,000 gallons of oil in Alaska earlier this year, off the menu. They also thanked traffic jammed drivers for keeping the profit rolling in, and showed particular appreciation to those in the back of cabs for sacrificing a nice summer evening stroll for the sake of the carbon.

Another LRTer had raided the dressing up box to make a creditable impersonation of an artist in his smock and homemade beret. Unfortunately he was soon seen canoodling with a BP greenwash guru money (a fiver, to be exact) was seen to change hands, which soon found its way into the artist's mouth, rendering him temporarily incapable of speaking his mind. (LRT takes on board the fact that artists, not to mention most people working at galleries, are just trying to make ends meet, but tonight we wanted to at least gently remind people of the invaluable PR service they are providing cheap to BP.)

Very few guests used this entrance, but one distinguished user was Anji Hunter, once a close confidante of Tony Blair, and now BP Head of Communications. Our Anj was recognised by her CSR compatriots, who gave her an Art Not Oil postcard, warning her that it was a viperous outpouring of hearsay and half-truths. We assume it is now stuck lovingly on her computer monitor, alongside billet-doux from Tony and John (Browne).

One brave woman chanced her luck and walked into the NPG with a bunch of bankers, hoping to slip into the award ceremony and air her views, but was challenged early on and swiftly escorted off the premises.

The gang was also joined by the ever-excellent Backwards Intelligence Team, or at least one representative of same, who became something of a honey-pot to the FIT in the course of his information-gathering pursuits.

'Protest at oil sponsor mars art awards' was the heading of an Evening Standard piece the following day, leading a few to notice that press coverage of Art Not Oil almost always ignores the fact that as well as the campaign and protest stuff, there is also an exhibition travelling the country partly to shed light (and shadow) on the BP Portrait Award. But the piece and its accompanying picture did represent a small fissure in the comfortable illusion of art and oil cosyng up together to universal advantage.



Gutter press

As four-year veterans of this event(!), it seemed as if far fewer of the great and gladragged were in attendance. Award-disher-outer Bryan Ferry and other BP bigwigs may have slipped in through a side entrance, but the low intake through the other two doors led some of us to fantasise that invitees might have been put off by the picket line vibe outside, or that they might even have decided to boycott the event in opposition to BP. That might be a bit wishful at this stage, but with societal attitudes changing seismically even during 2006, that sort of transformation could easily lie around the next corner, especially if we keep the pressure up, which we fully intend to do. With BP announcing it has extended its sponsorship to 2011, Art Not Oil looks set to run and run. Or should it forget about BP and simply concentrate on art that expresses joy about what the world is and could be? Watch this space, (or fill it with your own art)...