

The arts must not be used to cleanse the reputations of dirty businesses

Kevin Smith of Platform says oil companies are sponsoring our most respected cultural institutions as part of a cynical PR campaign

Have you had the chance to check out the recent changes at Tate Britain? It's one of the most major re-orderings to take place in the gallery, with more than 500 artworks sequenced chronologically, from the 16th to the 21st Century. It's also transformed the entire building into a BP billboard, with the number of logos prompting *Evening Standard* art critic Brian Sewell to comment: 'I wonder if BP realises how sick of its initials some of us are? Not only is there now a BP Walk, but there are BP displays of Turner, Blake and Moore, and BP spotlights too. Are we soon to buy BP sandwiches in the BP café, drink BP water from the BP waterspout, and dry our hands on BP paper in the BP loo?'

The sad fact is that many of the UK's most prestigious cultural institutions are being exploited by oil companies like BP and Shell to give themselves a sheen of respectability that is at odds with their appalling environmental and human rights records. Within the industry, this is known as creating a 'social licence to operate,' a licence that enables oil companies to navigate through the inevitable controversies over massive spills, climate change, impacts on fence line communities and so on.

Apologists for oil money argue that it's better that the money gets spent on supporting the arts than on drilling for more oil, but this is to misinterpret the money as an act of philanthropy motivated by the love of art. The money that gets spent on art galleries by these companies is being spent as part of their core business of extracting, transporting and increasing the demand for oil, in

much the same way as money is spent on marketing and PR agencies.

Sadly, sponsorship is an effective means of manipulating public opinion. A survey conducted by YouGov BrandIndex in order to gauge the public's perceptions of Olympics sponsors saw BP brand jump from a negative score to a positive one after the first week of the games. It seems that sophisticated marketing campaigns are a cheaper and more effective means of restoring tarnished corporate reputations than by making actual improvements in safety procedures, reducing carbon emissions or by making compensation payments to communities whose lives and livelihoods have been devastated by spills.

In recent years, there's been a wave of creative activism by groups who would seek to drive a wedge between oil companies and the cultural sector. Liberate Tate is a collective of art activists that was born out of attempts by Tate to censor a workshop on 'disobedience' by saying that activities couldn't address the Tate sponsors. On the first anniversary of the Deepwater Horizon disaster they poured oil over a naked man curled into a foetal position in the middle of the Duveen Gallery in Tate Britain. Last July saw almost 100 people help Liberate Tate smuggle a 16.5 metre wind turbine blade into the Tate Modern Turbine Hall as an embodiment of an alternative energy future for the gallery.

The Reclaim Shakespeare Company got up on stage during the interval at one of the numerous BP-sponsored RSC performances last year, and theatrically denounced BP in iambic pentameter. More recently, the Shell Out Sounds choir has assembled at the Southbank Centre

to sing against Shell's involvement in the Shell International Classics season.

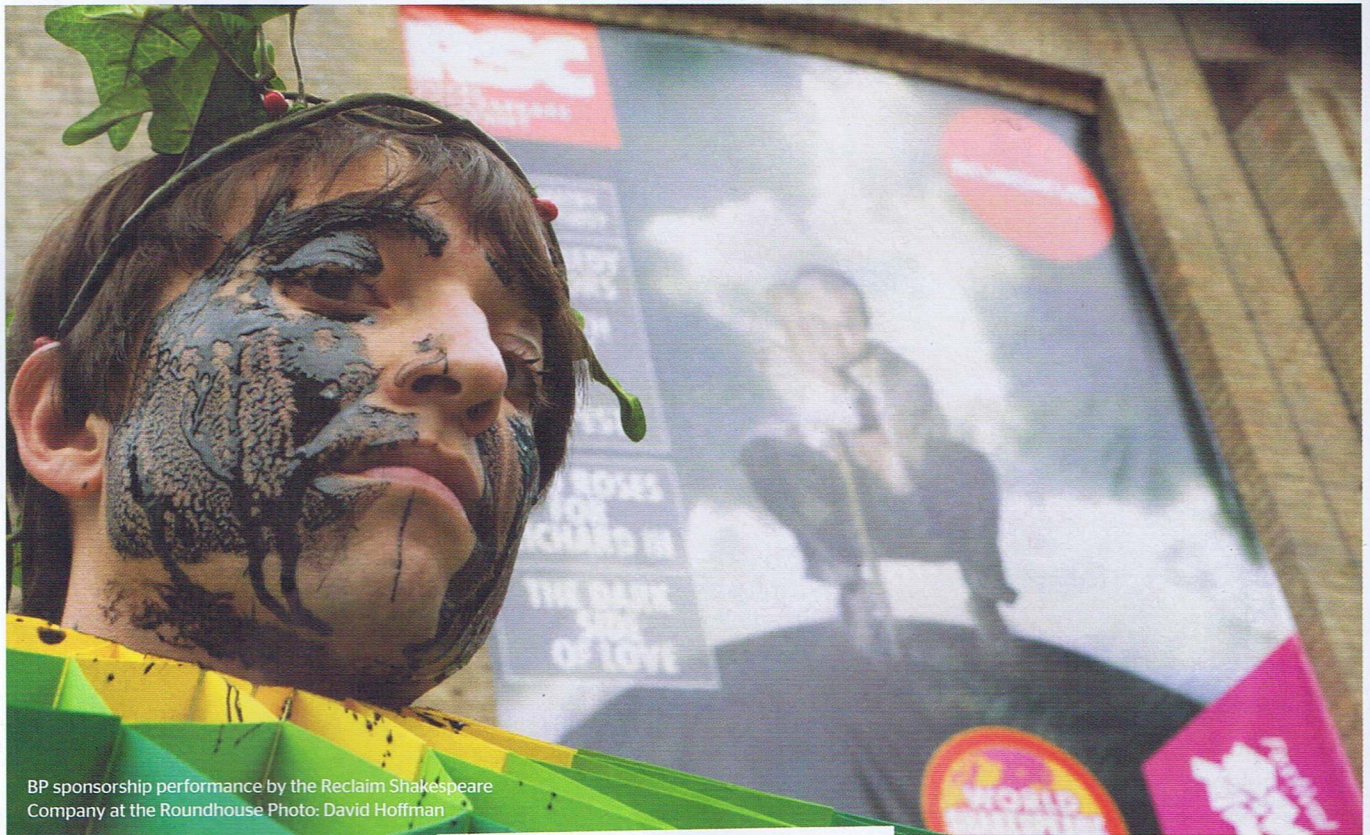
Hundreds of people from the world of art have added their names to letters in the *Guardian*, stating that, among other things: 'As people working in the arts, we believe that corporate sponsorship does not exist in an ethical vacuum. In light of the negative social and ecological impacts of BP around the world, we urge Tate to demonstrate its commitment to a sustainable future by ending its sponsorship relationship with BP.' Some of the artists who have spoken out on the issue have included one who has been short-listed twice for the BP Portrait Award, and one of last year's Turner Prize nominees.

It's especially brave for artists to be speaking out on this at a time when the government is making savage cuts to arts funding as it is with so many other areas of vital public spending. While some might argue that now isn't the time to be choosy about where money comes from, the fact that the sector as a whole is being pushed towards corporate sponsorship means that vigorous debate around the ethics of particular companies is more important than ever. The existence of the arts cut cannot collapse the debate around oil money to the position of There Is No Alternative (TINA). There are other sponsors, other means of income generation and of balancing budgets. What is far less flexible is the irrevocability of climate change 'tipping points.' We're facing a crisis of cuts in public spending, but we're also lurching towards a point of no return for meaningfully addressing the climate crisis. And all of us, including arts institutions need to ask ourselves if



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BP sponsorship performance by the Reclaim Shakespeare Company at the Roundhouse Photo: David Hoffman

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Another argument that often gets trundled out in favour of oil sponsorship is that we shouldn't single out any one particular sector as being beyond the pale as all money is dirty in some way. This argument doesn't reflect the reality of sponsorship, as ethical lines have been drawn in the past about who are acceptable sponsors. A number of institutions have said that they wouldn't take money from tobacco companies and there was a push in the 80s and 90s to drive tobacco sponsorship out of international sporting events. Despite numerous prophecies of doom at the time, these sporting events continued to flourish without the support of tobacco money. As CIWEM executive director, Nick Reeves, wrote in a letter printed in

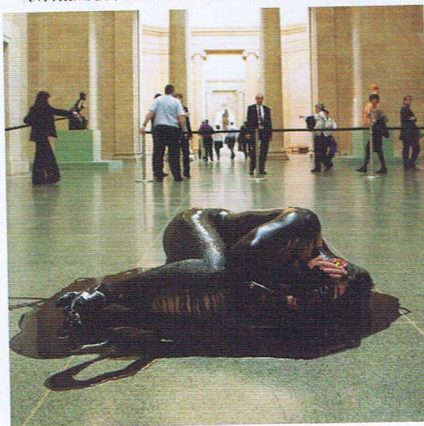


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Not if but when

CULTURE BEYOND OIL

ARTS CUT TO THE HEART OF SOCIETY // BP & SHELL UNDER THE LENS // ETHICAL FUNDING: THE COMING CHANGE // ANYTHING BUT CRUDE - ARTISTS SPEAK OUT //



Platform's publication, *Culture Beyond Oil*, can be found at www.platformlondon.org

the *Independent*: 'The arts have learned to live without money from slavery, tobacco and alcohol; it's now time to remove the oil stain from art.'

Breaking the sponsorship link between Tate and BP will not alone prevent the devastating tar sands projects being inflicted across the northern wildernesses of Canada. But by creating and informing a public debate that questions the legitimacy of these companies in being associated with respectable and cherished cultural institutions, we can strengthen attempts to hold them accountable in other political and financial spheres. This is an essential step in ending the stranglehold that the companies have on the corridors of power – a major obstacle that we face in the transition to a low carbon society.

A shift away from oil will touch many aspects of business and personal life; from the infrastructure of transport, to the shareholdings of pension funds, from where the food we eat is grown, to divorcing fossil fuel industry interests apart from the seats of governmental power. For a fair and just transition to a post-oil era, Platform sees the creativity and collaborative practices of artists as essential to the process, and cultural institutions as a key space to nurture that evolution. ●