

## Artwash



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Big Oil and the Arts

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**PlutoPress**

[www.plutobooks.com](http://www.plutobooks.com)



First published 2015 by Pluto Press  
345 Archway Road, London N6 5AA

[www.plutobooks.com](http://www.plutobooks.com)

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN	978 0 7453 3589 6	Hardback
ISBN	978 0 7453 3588 9	Paperback
ISBN	978 1 7837 1332 5	PDF eBook
ISBN	978 1 7837 1334 9	Kindle eBook
ISBN	978 1 7837 1333 2	EPUB eBook

This book is printed on paper suitable for recycling and made from fully managed and sustained forest sources. Logging, pulping and manufacturing processes are expected to conform to the environmental standards of the country of origin.

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Typeset by Stanford DTP Services, Northampton, England

Text design by Melanie Patrick

Simultaneously printed by CPI Antony Rowe, Chippenham, UK  
and Edwards Bros in the United States of America



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# 1

## Introduction

In June 2010 the British cultural institution Tate held its annual Summer Party. It was a prestigious affair. Guests were greeted and tickets were inspected at the main entrance. Notables on the guest list included the art historian Wendy Baron, the Duran Duran keyboardist Nick Rhodes, the artist, author and Marquess of Bath Alexander Thynn, and the Conservative party faithfuls Virginia and Peter Bottomley. Smiles and nods from smartly dressed staff directed them up the stairs into Tate Britain's impressive and expansive Duveen Galleries, where silver service staff standing in a perfect 'V' were holding shiny trays and offering each new arrival a flute of champagne.

The party hosted a cast of characters crucial to the story of *Artwash*. Nicholas Serota, Tate Director, and John Browne, ex-CEO of BP and Tate Chair of Trustees, were both holding court. Penelope Curtis was centre stage; as director of Tate Britain she curated the exhibition of Fiona Banner's artwork that formed the party's centrepiece. Nearby: Iwona Blazwick, once Head of Exhibitions and Displays at Tate and now Director of the Whitechapel Gallery in London – the position Serota held before stepping up the cultural professional's ladder – and Anna Cutler, the newly appointed Head of Learning. Around them party goers surveyed Banner's *Harrier and Jaguar*, decommissioned fighter jets suspended through the 100 metre-long gallery, and accepted offers of sausages on sticks.

It was an opportunity to rub shoulders or take 'selfies' with some prominent individuals. Christopher Frayling, a previous director of Arts Council England, and Colin Tweedy, a lobbyist for corporate sponsorship of the arts, each would have made an appearance, as would the artistic directors from other BP- and Shell-sponsored galleries,

such as Jude Kelly of the Southbank Centre and Sandy Nairne of the National Portrait Gallery. There was a light accompaniment of live music heard underneath the buzz of chattering guests.

Tate holds the party annually but on that particular occasion Tate directors elected to use the event to mark 20 years of BP sponsorship of Tate's group of four art galleries spread around the UK. And meanwhile, across the Atlantic Ocean, BP's Gulf of Mexico oil spill that had begun on 20 April 2010 was still splurging from the seabed as party guests gathered at Tate Britain on the River Thames in London. Outside of the party, the world's eyes were fixed on BP's gigantic spill as it spun out of control. It would take 87 days to cork the blowout but on 28 June, the night of Tate's party, no one knew how long the ruinous spill might last.

Unbeknown to the party planners beforehand, a number of unlisted guests were making their way to Tate Britain that evening, and not merely to gatecrash in pursuit of Pimm's and nibbles. Entering the building stage right at 7.15pm: Anna Feigenbaum and me, both part of the freshly formed Liberate Tate. We arrived ready to make a spill performance we created with climate activists Danni Paffard and Beth Whelan – Beth, Anna and I shared intertwined histories experimenting in art and activism, which for Anna was in parallel with a media studies lectureship and authoring the book *Protest Camps*, and for Beth and me this was our chosen path concurrent to our contemporaries' entry on to the Glasgow and London theatre scenes. Anna and I, naming ourselves Toni (Hayward) and Bobbi (Dudley) after the outgoing and incoming BP CEOs – we are also one English and one American performer – entered the party just like the other guests, with heads turning at our large floral vintage bouffant dresses. Invisible to the casual passer-by, we were carrying ten litres of oil-like molasses into the gallery under our skirts, held in easily rippable rubble sacks attached to our hips with remarkably transferable strap-on harnesses. When we reached the entrance to the 'V' of the champagne reception, we spilled our precious cargo across the polished stone floor of the gallery. Across the Atlantic BP was attempting to plug the dire spill, and here at Tate we replicated their messy clean-up mission. We donned the BP ponchos hidden in our handbags and attempted to contain our spill

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Figure 1.1: *Toni & Bobbi, Liberate Tate, June 2010, Tate Britain*. Film stills. Video credit: Gavin Grindon, 2010.

with our nail-polished hands and classy party shoes, as we described the mess to our gathered audience as ‘tiny in comparison to the size of the whole gallery’, echoing Tony Hayward’s widely criticised initial defence of the BP disaster. Gavin Grindon, who lectures in art history at the University of Essex and curated Disobedient Objects at the V&A, joined us inside as videographer of our spill performance.

Then, at 7.25pm a group of twelve performers in black clothing, with black veils reminiscent of Catholic widows in mourning covering their faces, poured more oil-like molasses from BP canisters at the main entrance to Tate Britain, as the guests continued to arrive. The spill seeped down the steps and across the entranceway, silent itself but eliciting gasps from the gathered crowd. In the group were Isa Fremeaux and John Jordan from the ever-inspiring art and activism collective the Laboratory of Insurrectionary Imagination, who were key to the catalysing of Liberate Tate; artists Hannah Davey, Tim Ratcliffe and Darren Sutton who with several more artists and activists went on to form the core of the Liberate Tate art collective and create many more interventions in the space and the discourse; and other performers who founded new groups such as Shell Out Sounds and the Reclaim Shakespeare Company to call out oil sponsorship in different museums and galleries. The twelve figures upon emptying their barrels turned and calmly walked away, a steady procession of graceful objection. These acts, among others by the group, brought the distant spill into greater physical and discursive proximity to the BP logos at Tate.

Remaining at the scene were over fifty people, who were part of a wider movement opposing oil sponsorship of the arts – Art Not Oil. A group of artists and activists held hand-crafted placards declaring ‘Artists are angry’ and interpreted the spill performances for guests: in the bunch was Matthew Todd, the editor of *Attitude* magazine, the performance artist Hayley Newman who later joined the hub of Liberate Tate, and the artist and educator Jane Trowell from Platform, an organisation that is a long-standing critic and creative provocateur of oil and its cultures. Platform’s press officer Kevin Smith ferried himself between soundbites and interviews, and videographer Tom Costello captured every splash. Many of the artists who had gathered had signed



Figure 1.2: *Licence to Spill*, Liberate Tate, June 2010, Tate Britain. Photo credit: Immo Klink, 2010.

a letter in *The Guardian* that day, calling for an end to BP sponsorship of Tate. Signatories to the letter included the playwright Caryl Churchill and the artists Sonia Boyce, Hans Haacke and Suzanne Lacy.

A chorus of voices critical of alliances between art and oil in the city has since risen up, and oil sponsorship of the arts is becoming increasingly controversial in the UK and around the world. Soon after novelist Margaret Atwood expressed concerns about Shell sponsorship of the Southbank Centre in a presentation of her work revolving around art and climate change, the Southbank Centre's five-year-long sponsorship deal with Shell came to a close. *Artwash* will visit art museums around the world where Big Oil – the multinational power glut of petroleum conglomerates – has made an appearance. Of the galleries in London that accept oil sponsorship, it is Tate with which I am most intimately engaged. The changing exhibitions always bring something new to my attention with clarity and depth. Tate's vast collection of surrealist work is a real treasure and the Beuys exhibits remain a favourite. The buildings themselves are part of the delight: Tate Britain on Millbank, London; Tate Modern at Bankside, London; Tate Liverpool on the docks, Liverpool; and Tate St. Ives, on the sea

shore in Cornwall. Each one is distinct, but the four share a certain spacious, sacred – yet somehow not overly pretentious – core. The first time I visited Tate Britain the BP logos remained at the margins of my perception, but once the corporate message registered, my visiting experience changed. I'm glad of this – I want to be clear about how often visits to Tate incur regular, delicate imprints in my mind of a green and yellow 'helios'. This is the reason I set out to examine here the impact of oil branding in the art museum, with reflection on the various galleries around the world that accept oil sponsorship. I do this from a position connected to Liberate Tate, Platform and Art Not Oil, without wishing to speak for all involved in this movement but rather aiming to reflect some questions back at the picture we are collaboratively painting.

From the Thames, via the Atlantic, to the Gulf, the tides connected the two sites of Tate's party and BP's catastrophic spill. The link was both fluid, via the oceans, and solid, in BP share value, because BP's relationship with Tate was fundamental to the company's survival of the disaster. There is a cynical PR strategy central to every oil sponsorship deal, and the companies themselves do not deny this: sponsorship consultant Wendy Stephenson, who delivered many of BP and Shell's arts sponsorship contracts in London, says that 'they milk the sponsorship for what its worth.'<sup>1</sup> Oil companies' desire to associate themselves with prestigious arts institutions is a survival strategy of an industry that itself feels increasingly precarious, both upstream and downstream. In the theatre of the global public relations and brand management industry, arts sponsorship becomes a way for the global, transnational corporation to present and benefit from a nationally specific brand identity; it offers a pretence of corporate responsibility for the callous profiteer; and becomes an illusionary act of cultural relevance for outmoded industries. Many risks accompany the presence of Big Oil in major cultural institutions across the world: the political influence allowed to the oil lobby, stymying efforts to tackle climate change; the uncomfortable disjuncture between the oil sponsor branded on the entrance of the gallery and the artworks, learning programmes and curatorial intentions of specific exhibitions;

and the restraints put on our imaginations through Big Oil's co-optation of these spaces meant for creativity and reflection.

A visit to a gallery opens doors to moments in history when the present is made. It can bring the ideas of artists – who, walking the earth centuries apart, never would have crossed paths – into conversation with each other. The dialogue between visitor and artwork is varied and open-ended. I want to ask, where does Big Oil fit into that conversation? While a visitor to the Turner Prize final selection in 2012 stood seemingly engrossed in Paul Noble's *Homeland*, their mind might also have been filled with Spartacus Chetwynd, and those other things they saw: the map of the gallery, the names, the phrase 'sponsored by BP'. If the sign had no impact whatsoever, it simply wouldn't be worth putting it up: the fact of its very existence warrants critical discussion over the impact of those few words, 'sponsored by BP', 'supported by Shell', 'in association with Chevron'. However discreet, however small, these words have purpose and they have effects. What does the presence of an oil company *do* to the galleries they sponsor? What are the material and aesthetic impacts? How does the curatorial control of the gallery differently extend to staff, artists, visitors, members and corporate sponsors?

In the context of cuts in state funding for the arts, corporate sponsorship looms as an inevitable route – but these debates are riddled with ideological strategies and misleading narratives. This situation should not restrict anyone concerned with ethics and the arts from taking a critical stance on the arguments made by Tate staff and British civil servants under the all-consuming dictum of 'Austerity Britain'. Oil sponsorship is one small, replaceable thread in the multi-coloured cloth of the organisational incomes of large galleries in the UK, North America and Europe. Anyone working in the arts will have had first-hand experience of shifting funding terrains that require constant renegotiation. Power over these decisions is tangled: members and gallery-goers hold a stake in these spaces, but stand at a remove as audiences, while artists and staff share potential influence and precariousness since they are both essential and vulnerable to the institution. Crucially however, galleries can and do change. Shifts take

place when voices within and around coalesce in harmony to shape the institution as they see fit.

The question of oil sponsorship is sometimes submerged into the many considerations that arise with all corporate arts sponsorships. Although associations with certain companies, such as banks or car manufacturers, bring up related ethical questions, the singular impacts of oil make a narrow focus on oil sponsorship both necessary and urgent. The oil industry is responsible for some of the most devastating social and environmental disasters in history. At every stage of the industrial process from extraction to transport and refinery, the sector has created countless catastrophes. Eleven people died in the explosion on the BP Macondo rig in the Deepwater Horizon field, Gulf of Mexico, and sixteen were injured: these terrible risks are more often associated with joining the armed forces, not extracting oil. Drilling rigs like the Macondo have exploded numerous times, killing the workers on board. In 2012, 154 people died on the Chevron KS Endeavour exploration rig in the Funiwa field, Nigeria. Oil tankers at sea are another source of nightmares for the industry and feature in a heavy catalogue of oil's most apocalyptic moments. The counter climbs to over 9,500 tanker spills to date, depositing thousands upon thousands of oil into the oceans to be washed up along the shores. Oil pipelines, the arteries of the industry, are notorious for causing immediate community disruption and frequent accidental disaster. In Nigeria, up to 2,500 people have been killed in oil pipeline explosions between 1998 and 2008. In 2013 an ExxonMobil pipeline bearing tar sands oil from Canada burst in Arkansas and spewed out 1,000 tonnes worth of its contents. The spill basin included twenty-two homes, and forced residents to evacuate. And potential for accident awaits crude oil upon reaching its destination: refinery explosions around the world have wrought devastating losses of life. However shocking they may be in cause and consequence, these incidents are far too frequent to seem surprising.

Further to catastrophic events, oil extraction produces daily social and ecological harm. Despite its illegality since 1984, some oil companies in Nigeria continue to flare, or burn off, unwanted natural gas as a routine practice of oil extraction by crafting ways to



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circumvent the law. Toxic chemicals released during gas flaring have been linked with chronic illnesses including respiratory problems and skin conditions. Shell pledged to phase out the activity by 2008, but has since postponed its commitment year on year, unfazed by condemnation from local and international civil society groups. In 2010 Shell burnt 22 billion cubic metres of gas, which was equivalent to 30 per cent of North Sea gas production in the same period. In Canada, numerous First Nations groups have joined together to oppose tar sands expansion because it denies communities access to indigenous lands and livelihoods; the extractive method has also been linked to increasing cancer rates and decreasing deer populations. Resistance to oil pipelines is global: communities in Azerbaijan, Georgia, Turkey, Egypt, Ireland, Ghana, Nigeria, Chad, Cameroon, Canada and the USA are all engaged in ongoing campaigns against the pipelines built and proposed to be built in their respective regions because of the disruption to land use and risks associated with living in the proximity of a monstrous and foreboding oil pipeline.

From UN report findings to scrawled peace protest placards, the capacity of oil to exacerbate war and conflict has been noted on every continent. The influence of oil companies in the decision of the US and UK governments to attack Iraq in 2003 is summed up in the minutes from a meeting between BP and the British Foreign Office, which state: 'BP is desperate to get in there and anxious that political deals should not deny them the opportunity.'<sup>2</sup> Smaller oil companies Tullow and Heritage raised capital to drill exploration wells on the border between Uganda and the Democratic Republic of Congo, in the same month that 30,000 people fled North Kivu during two weeks of fighting in the region. With reference to British Foreign Office emails and US diplomatic cables Platform and Corporate Watch accused Heritage Oil, founded by former private mercenary Tony Buckingham, of bearing responsibility for the death of six Congolese civilians near an oil exploration site in 2007,<sup>3</sup> and a Platform source found Heritage had equipped the DRC military with boats and jeeps in 2010.<sup>4</sup> In Nigeria, Shell is alleged 'to have transferred over \$159,000 to a group credibly linked to militia violence.'<sup>5</sup>

These examples of the relationship between oil and conflict also demonstrate an uncomfortable pattern of the industry to re-inscribe colonial geographies. BP, Shell, Chevron, ExxonMobil and Total's operations in Iraq, Iran, Nigeria, Uganda, Madagascar, D.R.C. and Angola trace the shape of nineteenth-century British, French and Portuguese colonialism. BP originated as the Anglo-Persian Oil Company (APOC) to drill for oil in Iran in 1909 with the objective of fuelling Royal Navy warships, and in the following decades it formed subsidiaries to drill in Mesopotamia (now Iraq) and Kuwait. When Iranian Prime Minister Mohammad Mosaddegh announced the nationalisation of the Iranian oil industry and said that AIOC should 'return its property to the rightful owners',<sup>6</sup> the British government co-ordinated an international boycott of Iranian oil. British Prime Minister Winston Churchill recruited the US president Dwight Eisenhower to deliver a *coup d'état* and remove Mosaddegh from power. Mosaddegh was overthrown in August 1953; he was held in prison for three years and then kept under house arrest until his death in 1967; the state ordered his burial to be held in his home for fear of a public outcry. BP began life intertwined with British military activity; it survived thanks only to British imperialism, and at the start of the twenty-first century it again sought British government intervention to secure access to oil in the Middle East.

After over a century of quests for oil and disputes over access, Big Oil companies have begun to escalate environmental risk-taking, since the remaining or available sources of oil are more remote and increasingly difficult to seize. Oil rigs that once populated shorelines creep further out to sea into deeper waters that bring an unknowable host of new safety challenges. Drilling methods compete with millennia-old geologies to crack oil and gas shale rock in vast swathes of land and below the seabed, as part of a highly controversial drilling process known as hydraulic fracturing or fracking. Canadian tar sands are potentially unprofitable when the global oil price dips due to the high cost and increased carbon emissions involved in the production of synthetic crude. The continuation of the practice illustrates another facet of the scramble to procure oil: the devastation of precious landscapes. In Canada tar sands strip mining decimates the ancient