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Greenwashing social identity

Big polluters make cynical use of culture as a means of greenwashing their public image. The idea is to obtain what is called 'a social license to operate,' a surprisingly overt term adopted with relish by environmental criminals to explain their strategies for winning over local, national, and international communities' acceptance and even welcome (<http://sociallicense.com/definition.html>; Thomson & Boutilier, 2011). *Forbes* magazine suggests that for the extractive sector, 2013 was the year of such licenses (Klein, 2012).

But not everyone accepts this corporate *largesse*. In the words of the British environmental-activist collective Rising Tide: By sponsoring our cultural institutions, Shell tries to protect its reputation, distract our attention from its environmental and human rights crimes around the world and buy our acceptance. (2012)

The return on such investment comes from very little actual support – for instance, private money accounts for well under 20% of income for UK museums and other not-for-profits. But blockbuster shows sponsored by environmental criminals provide alibis to big cultural institutions as well as big environmental polluters, because they counter the populist claims that only elite segments of society visit such places, even as they associate populist sentiment with the oil industry.

Consider BP. It has dedicated much of its corporate social responsibility efforts over the past decade to creating relationships with Britain's principal cultural institutions as measured by size, visits, and media coverage, including the National Gallery, the National Maritime Museum, Tate Britain, the Natural History Museum, the Science Museum, and the National Gallery (Chase, 2010). *BrandRepublic* even takes this as a case study (Chapman, 2012). As BP explained to *Marketing Magazine*, the campaign is a 'return to above-the-line advertising ... showcasing the contribution the company makes to society' (Reynolds, 2012).

The corporation says it 'has proudly supported arts and culture in the UK for over 35 years,' with particular reverence for exhibits that attract large numbers of visitors. At a £10 million cost in 2011 (<http://www.bp.com/en/global/corporate/about-bp/bp-world-wide/bp-united-kingdom/bp-in-the-community/arts-and-culture.html>), this is small fry for a company with revenue that year of \$75,475 million (http://www.bp.com/content/dam/bp/pdf/investors/BP_Annual_Report_and_Form_20F_2012.pdf).

BP paid the Los Angeles County Museum of Art \$25 million in 2007, in return for which the Museum christened a BP Grand Entrance

(<http://www.lacma.org/sites/default/files/bpgef.pdf>). In 2006, the company paid \$1 million to Long Beach's Aquarium of the Pacific. When one of its oilrigs exploded in the Gulf of Mexico four years later, both sides reconsidered the partnership (in the UK, BP quickly withdrew much of its marketing). Today, the company luxuriates in naming rights over the 'BP Sea Otter

Habitat,' which opened a month later – with its sponsors shy of being present, the better to avoid negative externalities and protests, presumably (Boehm & Sahagun, 2010; Reynolds, 2012; http://www.aquariumofpacific.org/exhibits/northern_pacific_gallery/otters). In addition to this patina of legitimacy via a form of citizenship that appears to transcend self-interest, BP also participates in more overtly ideological activities, notably at Britain's Science Museum, where 7–14-year-old school pupils are urged, in the words of the corporation's magazine, 'to explore and understand how energy powers every aspect of their lives and to question how to meet the planet's growing demands in the future.' A 'partnership' between the two virtuous institutions was necessary because of 'a shared concern over the public lack of awareness of energy-related issues.' The exhibit features 'an interactive game where visitors play the energy minister and have to efficiently power [courtesy of a split infinitive, it seems] a make-believe country by balancing economic, environmental and political concerns before the prime minister fires them' (Viney, 2010). This is a clear challenge to environmental science, rather than an invitation to dialog, most particularly as it again positions the firm as a benign intermediary between present and future, science and childhood, truth and innovation, rather than as one of the worst polluters in human history. The game sets up BP and the Science Museum as reasonable people in a world of extremes, capable of a measured and fair-minded engagement with the central issues by contrast with hot-headed, green-gaseous, environmentalists.

Of course, BP is not the only gigantic oil corporation seeking to do well for itself by appearing to do well by others. Chevron in Colombia boasts that its goals include 'promover el desarrollo cultural de Colombia' [promoting the country's cultural development], as evidenced by sponsoring an exhibit at the Museo del Gas de Riohacha (<http://www.fundaciongasnaturalfenosa.org/es-ES/MuseoGas/Paginas/subhome.aspx>) that explores pre-invasion and colonial settlements and the ongoing cultures of indigenous peoples, such as the Wayúu ('Ficha Técnica,' 2013). One issue: the Chevron disrupts the Wayúu's form of life, so they have protested against this despoliation (<http://chevrontoxico.com/take-action/colombia>; <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5RKR2NKdsgQ>). Let's not focus on such uncomfortable things too much. They spoil the story and don't really aid the cause.

Resistance to these absurd practices is alive, however, and gains a great deal of media exposure and hence embarrassment for the oligarchs involved. Rising Tide UK has an Art Not Oil project, which takes as its motto 'For creativity, climate justice & an end to oil industry sponsorship of the arts.' It began in 2004 as a challenge and a stimulus to current and potential artists to forge their practice and exhibitions in sustainable

ways, and to work against the unsustainability of Shell, BP, and their kind – as businesses in general but more particularly as sponsors of the arts. Art Not Oil boasts numerous on-line galleries. Along with direct, material activism, the galleries are designed to criticize and undermine ‘the caring image’ that corporate polluters seek via various nefarious initiatives such as the BP Portrait Award and Shell supporting the ‘Wildlife Photographer of the Year’ exhibit at Britain’s Natural History Museum. The goal is to see ‘Big Oil’ go ‘the way of Big Tobacco in being unwelcome in any gallery, museum, opera house or theatre’ (<http://www.artnotoil.org.uk/about>). (Tobacco killers exited sponsorship of the National Portrait Gallery two decades ago, opening room for fuel killers [Chase, 2010]). One day, non-smokers and governments may feel the same disdain for high-octane drivers, pilots, and passengers as they presently exhibit towards nicotine pushers and users. But this is much more than an issue of consumerism and individual foibles. It is about large institutions and their place within international and national power élites drawing on minimal, cheap sponsorship to gloss their image and win goodwill from the public while maintaining oligarchical ties. For now, though, 8000 signatories opposed the Tate’s renewal of its sponsorship with BP (‘Cuatro museos,’ 2011) but that had little effect given the Museum’s Director, Nicholas Serota, who avowed during the spill of the year before that ‘You don’t abandon your friends because they have what we consider to be a temporary difficulty’ (quoted in Liberate Tate, Platform, and Art Not Oil, 2011, p. 12).

Meanwhile, the Reclaim Shakespeare Company forms a flash mob entitled ‘Out Damn Logo’ to criticize the British Museum’s complicity with big pollution in accepting BP money to help fund ‘Shakespeare: Staging the World’ (http://www.britishmuseum.org/whats_on/past_exhibitions/2012/shakespeare_staging_the_world.aspx) (Kocialkowska, 2012) and alliances such as ‘Good Crude Britannia’ and the ‘Greenwash Guerrillas’ (<http://greenwashguerrillas.wordpress.com>) engage the maddening contradictions of cultural institutions seeking to be conservatories and green while rushing like orgasmic teenagers towards nocturnal pollution (‘Activistas y artistas,’ 2010).

When we ponder such uses of spectacle by the left, it’s easy to fall into either a critical camp or a celebratory one. The critical camp would say that rationality must be appealed to in discussions of climate change and competition for emotion will ultimately fail. Why? The silent majority doesn’t like direct action, corporations outspend activists, such occasions preach to a light-skinned, middle-class eco-choir, media coverage is inevitably partial and hostile, and crucial decisions are made by élites, not in streets.

Conversely, the celebratory camp would argue that a Cartesian distinction between hearts and minds is not sustainable, a sense of humor is crucial in order to avoid the image of environmentalists as finger-wagging scolds, corporate capital must be opposed in public, the media’s need for vibrant textuality can be twinned with serious discussion as a means of involving people who are not conventional activists, and a wave of anti- élite sentiment is cresting.

Absent external evaluation of the social composition of counter-BP/Shell art world participants, the nature of old, middle-aged, and new media coverage, and subsequent shifts in public opinion and reactions from lawmakers, it's difficult to be sure about the impact of such spectacles. We generally incline towards the skeptic's view of populist activism – but not in these instances. Why? Because the lugubrious hyper-rationality associated with environmentalism needs leavening through sophisticated, entertaining, participatory spectacle. A blend of dark irony, sarcasm, and cartoonish stereotypes effectively mocks the pretensions of high art's dalliance with high polluters. And this can and must be twinned with a radical departure from existing museum hierarchies in order to break apart their oligarchical ties to nicotine, oil, and anyone else lining up to exploit the Earth.

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