

## The Branding of the Museum

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The British Museum shop, 2008. Photo: JS

While museums have long had names, identities and even logos, their explicit branding by specialist companies devoted to such tasks is relatively new.<sup>1</sup> The brand is an attempt to

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<sup>1</sup> This piece has had a long gestation, and has benefitted from the comments of many participants at lectures and symposia. As a talk, it was first given at the CIMAM 2006 Annual Conference, *Contemporary Institutions: Between Public and Private*, held at Tate Modern. In the large literature about museums and their changing roles, there has slowly begun to emerge some consideration of branding. Margot A. Wallace, *Museum Branding: How to Create and Maintain Image, Loyalty and Support*, AltaMira Press, Oxford 2006 is, as its title suggests, a how-to guide. James B. Twitchell, *Branded Nation: The Marketing of Megachurch, College Inc. and Museumworld*, Simon & Schuster, New York 2004 is a jocular lament about the pervasiveness of marketing culture, which sees the museum, too simply, as providing ‘edutainment’ with no meaningful differentiation from consumer culture. More seriously, Andrew Dewdney/ David Bibosa/ Victoria Walsh, *Post-Critical Museology: Theory and Practice in*

stamp all of an organisation's products with the same swiftly recognisable identity which acts as an assurance of reliable quality. Yet what does the branding of the museum mean, how far does branding spread into an institution's general operations, and what does branding do to the way viewers see and think about works of art? Since the vehicle by which the brand is transmitted in museums is largely visual, the form of analysis here is as much visual as verbal, and my inquiry has involved a good deal of photographing in museums.<sup>2</sup> The photographs reproduced here develop an argument parallel to that found in words.

The branding of the museum is associated with neoliberal economies, such as the UK and the US, and is less developed in nations where the state takes a more interventionist role in the direction of culture. The effects of the neoliberal regimen on museums have become very familiar: the 'business-like' conduct of museums, their elevation of managers above curators, their chasing of publicity, their reliance on private and corporate donors and sponsors, and their extensive use of business consultants.<sup>3</sup> Branding, as we shall see, is one response to attracting the transient, insecure and protean populations that the neoliberal attack on the state, welfare and the trades unions has brought about. Indeed, those groups are celebrated as the virtuous, adaptable avatars of the reign of fleet-footed, ever-mutating finance capital.



Tate sugar, 2006. Photo: JS

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*the Art Museum*, Routledge, London 2013 provide a detailed account of Tate's increasingly business-oriented operations, of which branding is a part. Branding is explicitly discussed on pp. 40-5.

<sup>2</sup> All of my photographs in the article are shared under a Creative Commons licence, and can be found in the set 'Museum Commerce' on Flickr:

<http://www.flickr.com/photos/slowkodachrome/sets/72157623724407791/>

<sup>3</sup> As noted above, Dewdney, *Post-Critical Museology* provides an account of such changes at Tate; for the US, see Andrea Fraser, 'A Museum is Not a Business. It is Run in a Business-Like Fashion', in Nina Möntmann, ed., *Art and its Institutions: Current Conflicts, Critiques and Collaborations*, Black Dog Publishing, London 2006, pp. 86-98.

I will take Tate as the main example here, especially Tate Modern, simply because it is the most successful, innovative and professional branded museum. Its fortunes, following rebranding by the consultancy Wolff Olins in 1998, have been remarkable. Tate as a whole has become a highly recognisable global brand.<sup>4</sup> Tate Modern is by far the most popular museum of modern and contemporary art in the world—the viewer figures oscillate depending on the popularity of individual shows but have shown significant annual increases, and have risen from about 4 million a year on opening to 5.3 million in 2012.<sup>5</sup> By comparison, in 2009, when the Tate had 4.7 million visitors, the Pompidou Centre attracted about 3.5m visitors, the Museum of Modern Art about 2.6m, and the Guggenheim New York about 1.2m.<sup>6</sup>

While Tate Modern will be the focus of this piece, no particular criticism of that institution is implied: it is rather that the museum offers a symptomatic vision of a possible future, and a logical response to the neoliberal climate. As museum-goers, we may look to Tate just as Europeans used with a mix of anxiety and pleasure to look to the US to glimpse their future as consumers.<sup>7</sup>

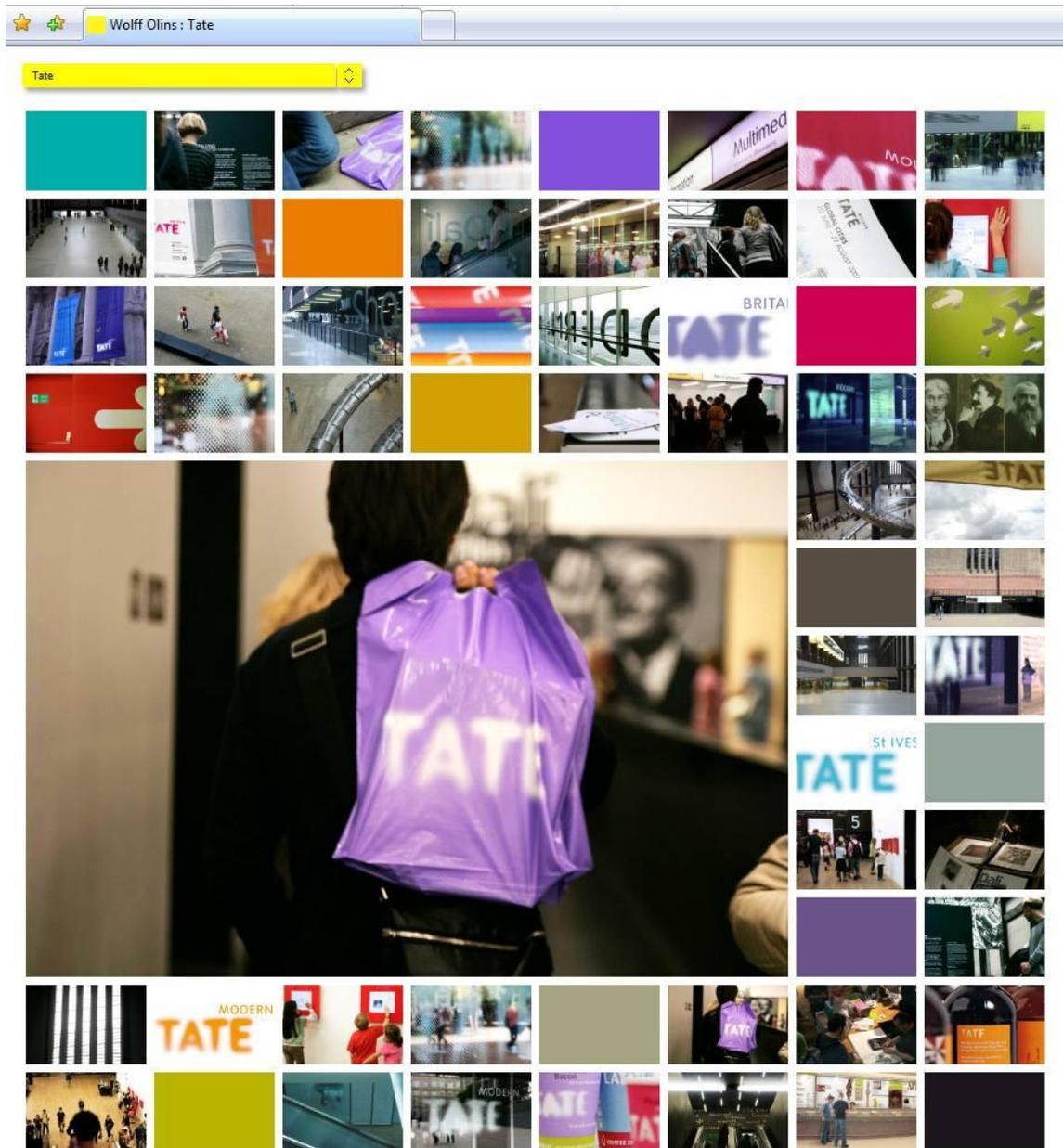
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<sup>4</sup> Brand league tables may be taken with a dose of scepticism, but it is perhaps telling that on some charts, Tate features as a contender among the most celebrated and valuable brands in the world. For instance The Centre for Brand Analysis rates Tate at 60 in its 2012 chart, between Shell and Stella Levi's. See <http://www.rankingthebrands.com/PDF/Consumer%20Superbrands%20Official%20Top%20500%202012.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> The 4m was itself far more than Tate had expected and planned for. See *Tate Modern: The First Five Years*, Tate Publishing, London 2005, p. 42; figures may also be found in the Tate Gallery Reports, grouped here: <http://www.tate.org.uk/about/who-we-are/tate-reports>. For the latest figures, see <http://www.tate.org.uk/about/press-office/press-releases/tate-modern-attracts-record-53-million-visitors-2012>

<sup>6</sup> 'Exhibition and Museum Attendance Figures 2009', *The Art Newspaper*, no. 212, April 2010, p. 24. Of course, these comparisons are distorted by the fact that Tate offers free entry; nevertheless, it has long done so and has seen an impressive rise in its visitor numbers.

<sup>7</sup> For an early and eloquent example, see Georges Duhamel, *Scènes de la vie future*, Mercure de France, Paris, 1930.



Wolff Olins website page on Tate branding, 2008.

Branding is a shorthand assurance of quality in an environment where the old forms of local reputation no longer function.<sup>8</sup> Mobile populations in large cities cannot readily avail themselves of gossip about the reputation of the shops and services around them. So tourists head to Starbucks for a standard and consistent experience. Brands are useful for inculcating trust, since, under the sign of the logo, a particular service and behaviour is supposed to be guaranteed. Would you trust your credit card details to a company in Seattle? If it's called 'Amazon', probably yes. Increasingly, brands sell life styles and experiences (or at least images of them) as well as products.<sup>9</sup> The branded environment of Starbucks is sold as much

<sup>8</sup> Editorial, 'The Case for Brands', *The Economist*, 8<sup>th</sup> September 2001.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

as its coffee; Coca-Cola happens to sell an acidic and sugary drink along with the image of youthful, outgoing affability.



Tate Britain wall brand, 2007. Photo: JS

In the process of rebranding, Wolff Olins put Tate through a thorough rethink of all its operations. Its scale is suggested in the layout of the Wolff Olins' website pages devoted to Tate, a grid of images that magnify individually as the cursor is run over them, and take in shopping, merchandise, logos, colours, banners, explanatory boards, fonts, quotes from the press, and above all images of how viewers act in the museum environment.<sup>10</sup> As Wolff Olins put it in their own account of the rebranding exercise:

With help from Wolff Olins, Tate reinvented the idea of a gallery – from a single, institutional museum, with a single, institutional view, to a branded collection of experiences, sharing an attitude but offering many different ways of seeing.<sup>11</sup>

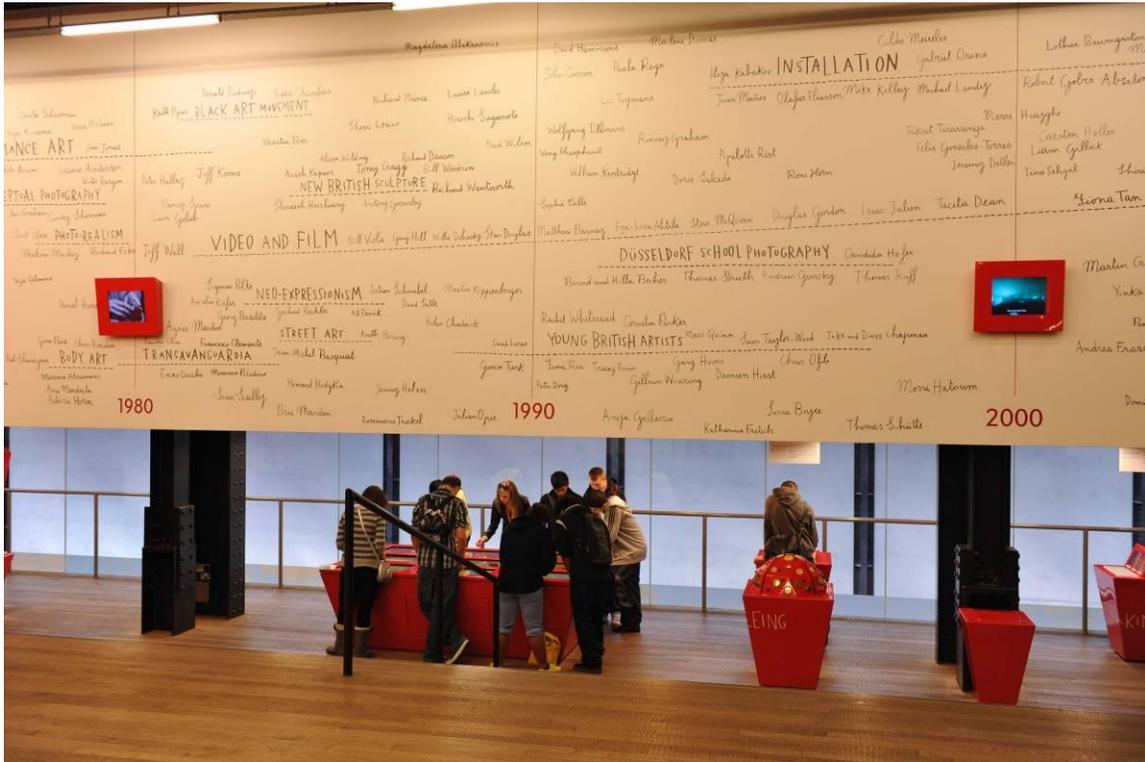
It may be hard to recall the Tate's previously staid status as a solid national institution inhabiting a single building with a well-known collection, much of it on permanent display,

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<sup>10</sup> <http://www.wolffolins.com/tate.php> Accessed 2008 but no longer available in this form. The page has since been redesigned; see <http://www.wolffolins.com/work/tate>

<sup>11</sup> [http://www.wolffolins.com/pdf/Tate\\_case\\_study.pdf](http://www.wolffolins.com/pdf/Tate_case_study.pdf) Accessed 2008 but no longer available: the text on the current webpage cited above is identical, however.

as such memories are effaced by the current slick, opportunistic and publicity-hungry cultural behemoth.



Tate Modern interior, 2009. Photo: JS

Wolff Olins also stated that their aim was to project ‘an open, modern, forward-looking experience which is as much about entertainment and enjoyment as it is about culture and art’.<sup>12</sup> The implied opposition here is telling. Tate sees itself as competing directly with other commercial attractions: in a publication celebrating five years of Tate Modern, one author notes that on the 21<sup>st</sup> March 2004, the last day of Olaf Eliasson’s very popular Turbine Hall piece, *The Weather Project* there were more people crowded into the museum than at Europe’s largest retail complex, Bluewater.<sup>13</sup>

Among the many components of Tate’s brand are:

- The name: what had been known as ‘The Tate Gallery’ became ‘Tate’ (and in London, ‘Tate Britain’ and ‘Tate Modern’). I was working at ‘Tate’ when the change was implemented, and all staff received a memo strictly banning the definite article from proximity with the new names.
- Slogans: at the launch of Tate Modern, it was ‘Look Again, Think Again’, and there have been many others since.

<sup>12</sup> Wolff Olins, press release, ‘Wolff Olins Brands Tate’, 16 June 2000; cited in Christiane Charlotte Hille, *The Art Museum as a Brand*, MA Dissertation, Courtauld Institute of Art 2002, p. 16.

<sup>13</sup> John Holden, ‘The Cultural Value of Tate Modern’, in *Tate Modern: The First Five Years*, Tate Publishing, London 2005, p. 33.

- Logos: immediately recognisable, of course, as logos have to be, but variable in colour, blurriness, and the use of positive or negative lettering.
- Packaging: the architecture of Tate Modern has itself become a logo, and Tate is hardly alone in this, with signature buildings widely recognised as brand identifiers.
- The interior environment, which has a uniformity of design that extends to colours, font, and even the Paul Smith uniforms for the front-of-house staff. The result is that the Tate interior is as recognisable and standard as Starbucks'.<sup>14</sup>
- Tate's own advertising and marketing of a range of branded products from those that are art-related (sketchpads and pencils) to those that would have little connection to the museum's supposed purpose (Christmas mince pies).



Mince pies on sale in the Tate Modern shop, 2006. Photo: JS

Beyond these manifest elements, branding also casts an influence over what may be thought of as the museum's product design. Under Nicholas Serota's directorship, the Tate adopted a sparse curatorial hanging style, quite distinct from the old crowding, and long predating the rebranding. Yet, given that it remains a consistent feature of Tate display, and that it now takes place within a branded environment, the style is experienced as a component of the

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<sup>14</sup> In Dewdney, *Post-Critical Museology*, p. 40 the change in uniform is seen as a shift in the role of such staff from providing security towards interacting with the public on an experience economy model. The notion of the experience economy, in which memorable events are orchestrated for consumers, has become increasingly important to examining both museums and the biennial scene. The model was defined in B. Joseph Pine II and James H. Gilmore in *The Experience Economy*, Harvard Business School Press, Boston, 1999.

brand. Other curatorial features did change with the rebranding: curatorial statements are far from the scholarly and careful notices of the past, being far more publicity-friendly—punchy and positive, and seeking controversy. While it had long been suspected that the curation of the Turner Prize was made with an eye to courting media attention, and the more fervid the better, this is now a regular feature of Tate exhibitions, which often include elements likely to exercise the press, including overt sexual content. Many exhibition titles have become as vacuous and copy-friendly as advertising slogans—‘Cruel and Tender’, ‘From Cinema to a Hard Place’, ‘Pin Up’, ‘Street and Studio’, ‘Pop Life’ and ‘Exposed’.



Cards of the Tate Modern building, 2006. Photo: JS

Still less visible is brand promotion and protection through proxies. Wally Olins, a Wolff Olins partner, has a book about branding, which stresses that the brand is a communications device for promoting the same consistent message about corporate identity to all concerned parties—consumers, suppliers, workers and, of course, the press.<sup>15</sup> Tate runs a very effective publicity machine, which places regular positive stories in the press, and also has the ability to kill hostile stories. British newspapers are full of PR ‘stories’ placed by powerful branded art institutions, particularly Tate, the National Gallery and the British Museum. They are generally the regular victims of PR agencies which pass publicity off as news, since they increasingly lack the time, resources or will to check facts or offer opposing views.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Wally Olins, *The Brand Handbook*, Thames & Hudson, London 2008, p. 25.

<sup>16</sup> For a devastating critique of the industry, see Nick Davies, *Flat Earth News*, Chatto & Windus, London 2008.



Front-of-house staff, Tate Modern, 2009. Photo: JS



Pricing for Orla Kiely goods in the Tate Modern shop, 2006. Photo: JS

The branding of the museum opens up opportunities for cross marketing, in which an alliance of brands (McDonalds and Disney was one signal combination) is supposed to elevate all those involved. At the launch of Tate Modern, six million disposable coffee cups were made for Coffee Republic cafes bearing the doubtful pun, 'Latate'. Others have followed, including cups advertising the 2008 Rothko show at Nero's, while the Tate shop showcases products designed for the museum by Orla Kieley and Ally Capellino. More striking was the Tate initiative in collaboration with the D-I-Y chain, B&Q, to launch its own domestic paint range:

The Tate brand is occasionally licensed to appropriate partners on a royalty basis. In 2001 Tate licensed its brand on a royalty basis to B&Q in order to launch a range of paint. Between 2002 and 2004 the successful B&Q paints licence was extended to include wallpaper and frames, with Tate posters also sold directly to B&Q. This licence has brought income to Tate and helps raise awareness of the gallery among a wider public.<sup>17</sup>

Another form of cross-branding takes the form of 'sponsorship' or 'partnership', where the aim is not directly the marketing of products (unless one counts exhibitions) but rather the mutual elevation of brands. In the partnership with British Telecom over Tate's website, the former attempted to acquire a reputation as being the kind of forward-looking and creative company that would support contemporary art, while Tate borrowed the mantle of BT's tech-savvy character.<sup>18</sup> In the long alliance with BP, to which we will return, it is hard to see what the Tate brand gained (other than, of course, money to fulfil its vision), while it is plain that BP, like any oil company, is anxious to be thought of as culturally concerned—anything to distract attention from the filth, corruption and oppression that inevitably accompanies its core activity.

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<sup>17</sup> Tate Modern; *Five Years*, p. 58.

<sup>18</sup> For the appeal to companies of entering such arrangements with galleries and museums, see Chin-tao Wu, *Privatising Culture: Corporate Art Intervention Since the 1980s*, Verso, London 2001; and Mark W. Rectanus, *Culture Incorporated: Museums, Artists and Corporate Sponsorships*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis 2002.



Badges, Tate Modern shop, 2006. Photo: JS

In these alliances, curation is affected. In a board explicating Carsten Höller's *Test Site* (2006-7), in which multi-storey slides took thrilled and scared visitors on a bumpy ride down the height of the Turbine Hall, curatorial and sponsors' statements appeared side-by-side in the same font and on the same board, without clear separation. A passage from the sponsor read:

Creativity and vitality are important parts of Unilever's corporate mission and lie at the heart of everything we do and everything we produce: from Dove and Flora to Wall's ice cream.

While sponsor's statements used to be separated from those of the museum, here the corporation and the art institution speak with the same affirmative voice.

Within the branded museum environment, a solo show may be seen merely as another cross-branding opportunity. Until the financial crisis of 2008, and in the contemporary art market bubble that preceded it, there was great pressure on artists (often willingly embraced) to produce decorative conversation pieces for the living room walls of billionaires, and to stick to their hard-won 'signature styles', surely a variant on the logo. Artists once renowned for consumer critique played out their styles in other cross-branding exercises—as Barbara Kruger did by repurposing her slogans to decorate the Selfridges' sale. So exhibitions may be

seen as cross-branding exercises, in which artist-brand or movement-brand and museum-brand are brought together for a marketing event. Tate's recent Damien Hirst exhibition, which attracted record-breaking numbers of visitors, merely made the exercise unavoidably transparent.<sup>19</sup>

In a climate in which art is becoming more business-like, and as business becomes more art-like, the artist is the paragon of flexible self-fashioning which serves the 'new spirit of capitalism'.<sup>20</sup> Endless adaptability is expected in rapidly changing economic, social and technological conditions. The essential 'property' is the self, and everyone should be a producer of themselves, responsible for their body, image and destiny.<sup>21</sup> The artist, whose works are (ideally at least) physical and conceptual manifestations of a carefully honed unique subjectivity is in this sense a ready-made brand.



Tate Modern shop, 2006. Photo: JS

Branding is a fundamentally affirmative device. It may be dark or edgy, or 'alternative' or 'cutting edge' but it must be simple, unitary and positive. In her guide to branding museums, Margot A. Wallace offers the conventional business wisdom:

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<sup>19</sup> *Damien Hirst* was shown at Tate Modern in 2012. It attracted 463,000 visitors, a record for a solo exhibition.

<sup>20</sup> Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello, *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, Verso, London 2006. See also Isabelle Graw, *High Price: Art Between the Market and Celebrity Culture*, Sternberg Press, Berlin 2009, which draws on Boltanski and Chiapello's arguments, applying them specifically to the contemporary art world.

<sup>21</sup> Boltanski and Chiapello, *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, p. 154.

Good branding speaks about the mission and vision to all people that a museum touches—its external and internal markets—in a voice that is distinctive and consistent. A consistent look and attitude help people feel familiar with the museum, and comfortable in giving their loyalty.<sup>22</sup>

The brand's maintenance requires professionalism, judged by business standards, at all levels of the organisation, which must radiate the positive. The brand is an assurance to the customer of consistent quality, and must itself be consistent. Olins puts the matter with clarity: branding is a 'co-ordinating resource' that makes an organisation's activities 'coherent', and its strategy 'visible and palpable'.<sup>23</sup> For museums, this covers not merely the design of objects and exhibitions on display, but extends to relations with volunteers, members, donors and corporate partners.<sup>24</sup>

This affirmative and consistent character sits oddly with both one conventional view of the Tate and with much of its contents. T.J. Demos, in a recent analysis of Tate, rightly argues that the institution is not monolithic, and points to competing agendas in which some staff such as 'curators of education and minor programming' have a bit of autonomy.<sup>25</sup> He also asserts:

There are only Tate effects, plural operations, disparate and often at odds, shifting and irreducible to any overriding principle. If Tate Modern is exemplary of the museum in the age of globalization [...] then it is because today's global museum is a space of conflict, diverse functions, and mixed political effects.<sup>26</sup>

This is certainly how Tate would like to be thought of, at least amongst art-world insiders: as an institution as critical, diverse and interestingly contradiction-ridden as much of the art it shows. Yet it is also obvious that the powerful pull of the brand is towards consistency and affirmation.

It may also be remembered that at least some modern and avant-garde art is (or was) negatory, anti-aesthetic, contentious, contradictory, made in critique of other works of art, radical, anti-instrumental and uncomfortable. Its display in the branded museum environment may serve to downplay these qualities, and to misrepresent them historically.

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<sup>22</sup> Margot A. Wallace, *Museum Branding: How to Create and Maintain Image, Loyalty and Support*, AltaMira Press, Oxford 2006, p. 2.

<sup>23</sup> Olins, *The Brand Handbook*, p. 21.

<sup>24</sup> The extensiveness of the brand strategy is emphasised repeatedly in Wallace, *Museum Branding*.

<sup>25</sup> T.J. Demos, 'The Tate Effect', in Hans Belting and Andrea Buddensieg, ed., *Global Art World: Audiences, Markets and Museums*, Hatje Cantz Verlag, Ostfildern-Ruit 2009, p. 84.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 78.

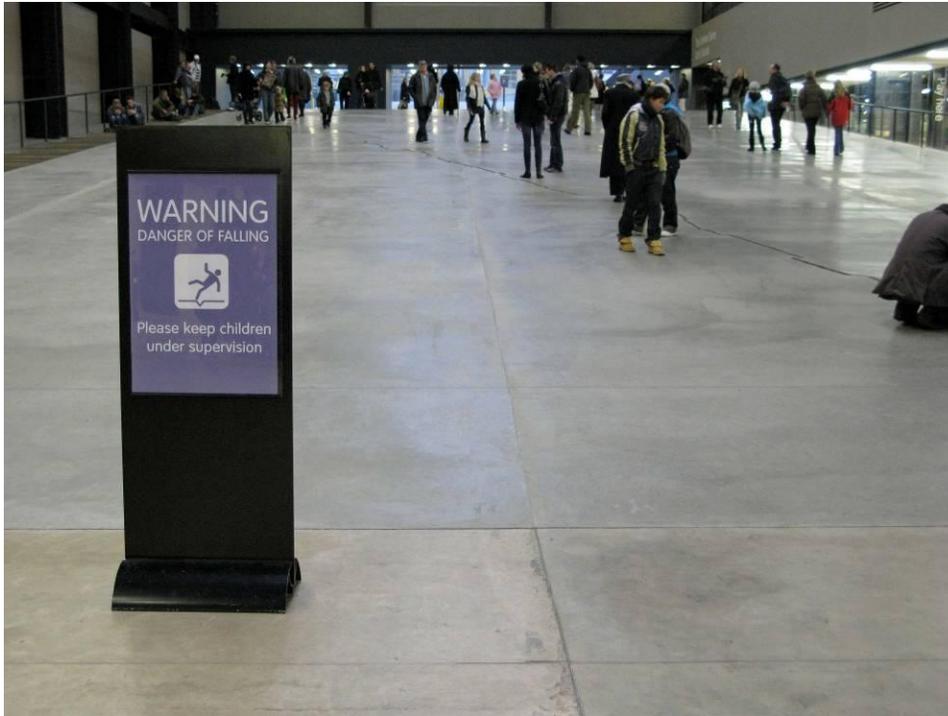


Entrance to the *Futurism* exhibition, Tate Modern, 2009. Photo: JS

The same effect is apparent with the many strands of contemporary art which are not simply complicit with the culture of the mega-rich. Even when an artist is renowned for serious works commemorating the concerted extermination of political opponents and indigenous groups, and for exploring political trauma and the suppression of memory, and even when the title of the work refers to massacre, what is displayed in the fairground of the Turbine Hall still gets treated as entertainment. Doris Salcedo's *Shibboleth* (2007-8) was a crack in the Turbine Hall floor, running the length of the building, which may be read as an assault on the museum and the Western art world, a threatening structural weakness that suggests the instability of the current balance of exchange in culture and barbarism on which the neoliberal museum rests. It was used as a place to stick one's toes, drop small items into, jump over, pretend to trip over, and giggle at. Soon after its opening, it was decorated by Tate health and safety notices. Similarly, what might have been the deep and unsettling darkness of Miroslaw Balka's *How It Is* (2009-10) was continually illuminated by camera flashes and phone screens. In the branded atmosphere of the lightly intellectual mall, darkness, actual or metaphorical, is hard to achieve.



Interacting with Doris Salcedo, *Shibboleth*, 2007. Tate Modern Turbine Hall, Photo: JS



Safety notice for Doris Salcedo, *Shibboleth*, Tate Modern, 2008. Photo: JS

There is in branding an outright conflict with the museum's educative role, which should involve critique of its contents, critique of the museum, discrimination, complication, and the acknowledgement of historical and contemporary contradictions. All of these are anathema to branding.

In business as a whole through the 1990s and beyond, there has been a marked growth in the use of branding. Wally Olins' book identifies two main causes: first, that the shift from advertising to branding is about speaking to not just to the consumer of a product but, as we have seen, to all those involved in its manufacture, distribution and prologandising; second, that in the many markets where there are few differences between products on rational grounds of pricing, quality or service, branding becomes all-important.<sup>27</sup>

In her book *No Logo*, Naomi Klein offers another explanation: the move into branding was the result of the sundering of producers and consumers in a locale due to out-sourcing.<sup>28</sup> Where, under a Fordist regime, the workers in Detroit could afford to buy the cars that they made, and trust in a company was brought about in part by that connection between producers and consumers, it is broken when those jobs are exported to places where wages are very low.<sup>29</sup> Branding has been developed as the fundamental role of business in the attempt to artificially repair the bond.

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<sup>27</sup> Olins, *The Brand Handbook*, pp. 13-15.

<sup>28</sup> Naomi Klein, *No Logo: Taking Aim at the Brand Bullies*, Flamingo, London 2000, pp. 196-8.

<sup>29</sup> Olins does say that branding has become more important because of the complexity of corporate communications due to outsourcing, which is a connected point. Olins, *The Brand Handbook*, pp. 16-17.

It is worth asking whether there is a similar divide between producers and consumers in the contemporary museum. The old model was founded on the powerful ideology of a coherent national culture, and on a class of cultured types, including artists and opinion makers, who shared enough common ground to conduct a rational conversation about that culture—though in principle, if not in practice, that culture could extend to all.<sup>30</sup> In postmodern times, this model was eroded by transnational mass culture and consumerism, the transient micro-identities formed by that consumerism, mass tourism, immigration and emigration, and the ideologies of identity politics and multiculturalism. The museum has had to deal with the consequences of a combination of neoliberal economics and globalisation. The two are linked especially through outsourcing: the flows of people driven into exile by increasing inequality and environmental catastrophe, conflict and failed states at one end of the scale of inequality, and the rootless hyper-rich art-fair hoppers at the other. In the resulting erosion of identifiable and stable national cultures, the art world both exemplifies and proclaims for globalisation.<sup>31</sup>

This is not, of course, to ask like Canute that the tide retreat, or to say that there are not salutary features of the new. Yet the ideal of an integral connection with a like-minded audience, founded on privilege and national identity, has been lost, and this presents the museum with a problem. Despite its popularity, the loyalty of even middle-class audiences for contemporary art is not guaranteed. The widespread media mockery over Tracey Emin's *My Bed* display at the Turner Prize in 1999 was one indication of the fragility of the attachment. Furthermore, when a large number of works by 'young British artists' were destroyed in a warehouse fire, the press and public response was largely one of glee.<sup>32</sup> The appeal to the divided, diverse and mobile audience, the capture of which is demanded by government and corporate 'partners', is left to the status of the brand and its marketed products.

As with all brand marketing, the identification produced among the museum audience is shallow, precarious and ambivalent. It contains little deep trust, is easily damaged, and contains a large dose of hostility, which is due to the justified feeling of being manipulated. The risk is that the cynicism that surrounds all commercial culture is extended to art.

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<sup>30</sup> See Tony Bennett, *The Birth of the Museum: History, Theory, Politics*, Routledge, London 1995.

<sup>31</sup> In the UK, an indication of all this has been the transformation of Turner Prize in 2000 and the British Art Show in 2005, both of which switched from taking as their pool of artists those born in the UK to those living here—a very different matter.

<sup>32</sup> For an account of the response, see James Meek, 'Art Into Ashes', *The Guardian*, 23 September 2004, pp. 6-7.



Tate Modern shop, 2006. Photo: JS



Tate Modern café kiosk with graffiti, 2009. Photo: JS

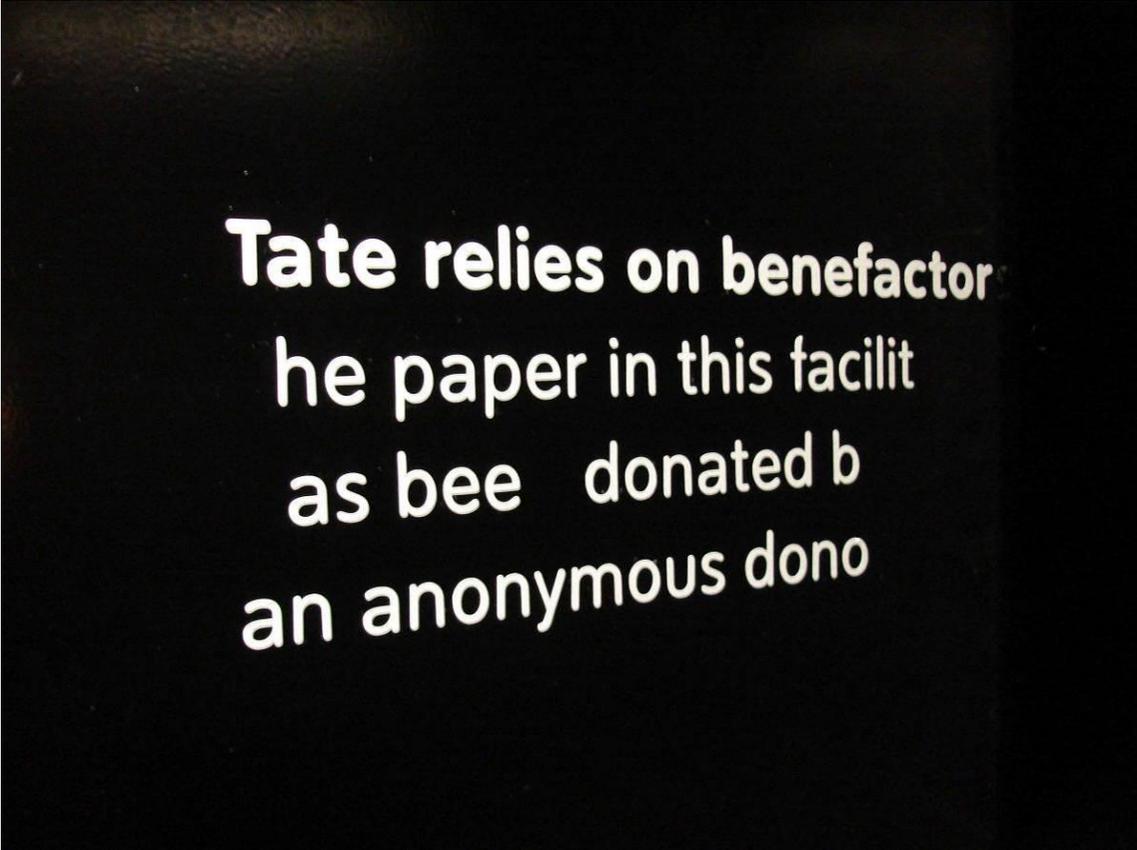
Olins warns that corporate messages can get confused in a competitive environment as suppliers and workers are 'pushed hard' (his euphemism for 'exploited'), since this may conflict with the public ethos of the brand.<sup>33</sup> This is just the nerve that many subverters push on, in 'advertising' Nike sweatshops, for example, and repurposing the 'Just Do It' slogan to illustrate the disciplining of workers. In Tate, there are signs of minor vandalism of the branded environment, an expression perhaps of disaffection with the homogenised environment, and an attempt to introduce some grit into the gears. More seriously, the alliance with BP has presented Tate (and other prominent British cultural institutions) with the problem that its brand was brought into oily proximity with the devastated ecology of the Gulf of Mexico. At Tate Modern's tenth birthday celebrations, a group called 'Liberate Tate' brought into the Turbine Hall black helium balloons attached to oil-smearing bird corpses and rotting fish.

The Deepwater Horizon disaster spurred the campaign to free the arts from oil company funding, and it met with a swift and blunt response: the Royal Opera House, Tate, the British Museum and the National Portrait Gallery would keep taking the money. Serota's justification was: 'you don't abandon your friends because they have what we consider to be a temporary difficulty.'<sup>34</sup> While corporations have acquired the legal status of persons to exploit freedom-of-speech laws for their propaganda, and to freely purchase political influence, the idea that one can be your 'friend' is plainly absurd. Should loyalty always trump other ethical impulses? You may choose to reflect on your choice of 'friends' when they bring about their own and others' difficulties by criminality and greed. The danger of a unified and consistent brand image is that, when something goes awry, the entire enterprise may be sullied.

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<sup>33</sup> Olins, *The Brand Handbook*, p. 64.

<sup>34</sup> See Julia Weiner, 'Interview: Sir Nicholas Serota', in *The Jewish Chronicle Online*, 8 July 2010: available at <http://www.thejc.com/arts/arts-interviews/34470/interview-sir-nicholas-serota>



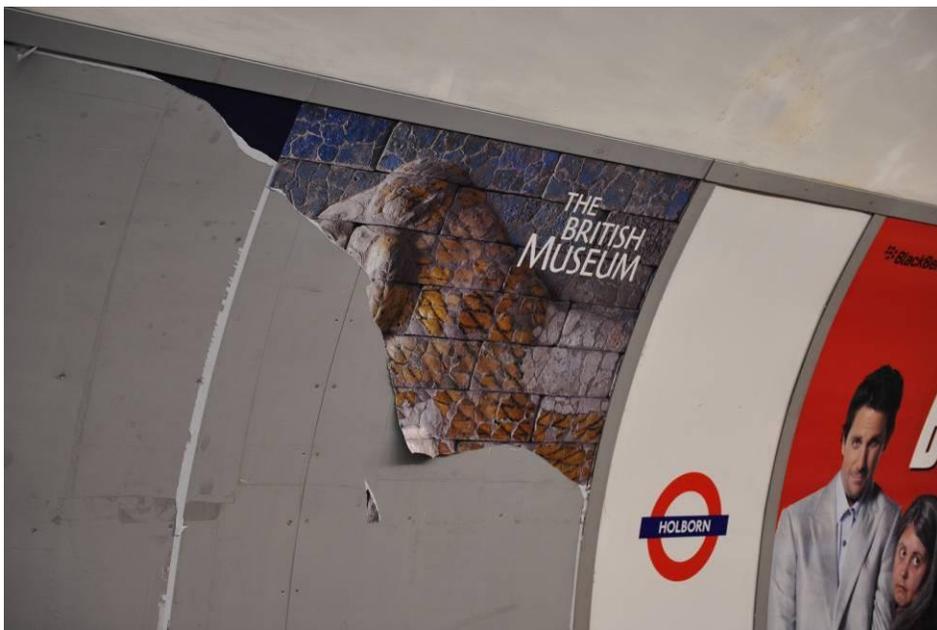
**Tate relies on benefactor**  
**the paper in this facilit**  
**as been donated b**  
**an anonymous dono**

Sponsorship notice in Tate Modern toilets, 2006. Photo: JS

The broader point is that the conditions of the brand are impossible to control, even within the Tate buildings, and certainly not outside them. The neoliberal state, outside of certain ghettos for tourists and the very rich, lacks the will or the money to make the public space which the brand must inhabit coherent, clean and free of vandalism. The 'assured quality' of the brand constantly runs up against the degraded environment that the system in which it inheres produces, to comic and critical effect.



Advertising and graffiti, Ljubljana, 2007. Photo: JS



British Museum advertisement, Holborn Underground station, London, 2008. Photo: JS



LACMA parking sign, Los Angeles, 2008. Photo: JS

There are steps that museums could take, particularly if they acted collectively, to mark out a space for themselves which would be attractive precisely because it would be distinct from the branded environments that increasingly dominate everyday urban experience. One would be to engage in more open criticality and self-critique, and to open dialogue with the public. If there was more of a distance between the institution and its 'product', that would make both seem less like products. The default curatorial stance within the branded museum is one of celebration. There are many more interesting alternatives. This is not merely to argue for 'institutional critique' on the part of artists, for it still takes place within the mutual elevation of museum and artist's brand. It is rather that the museum, unlike the branded enterprise, could be a place for the clamour of competing and contradictory voices of the kind that it ideally recommends.

A comparison may be made with the BBC. Both Tate and the BBC are powerful, public 'brands', and both, under pressure from the neoliberal state, have become thoroughly

penetrated by business values, models and out-sourcing. Thus both fail to see that they have the opportunity to create an alternative to branded culture. The BBC adopts the deeply unpopular apparatus of advertising (mostly itself), in displaying logos over programmes, trailing, interrupting programmes with banners and split screens, an apparatus that is forced on commercial channels by competitors but from which the BBC could be free. The chance to make a better and more popular mode of television viewing is lost. Similarly, in the museum, it may be that to behave professionally is not always about behaving like the most efficient corporation, but may mean carving out a space against business practices.



Tate Modern Turbine Hall, 2009. Photo: JS

Branding is also, of course, fundamentally to do with money, and the political decision taken by the neoliberal state to force museums into the arms of private ‘partners’. There is a contradiction in this strategy, based on the state’s wish to see art salve the social divisions opened up by unrestrained market forces. If the state is serious about the benefits of art as a true counter to business culture, it should provide museums with sufficient funds to free them from having to act like businesses. The assumption that high culture will civilise the disaffected masses, and will wave into existence the grounds for social cohesion amongst divided and alienated populaces may be an illusion.<sup>35</sup> Yet so long as the state believes it, there is leverage to demand a different museum and with it a different art. In this rethinking, and also in the evident bankruptcy of the economic, political and cultural status quo, the hope emerges that various over-familiar features of the neoliberal art world may weaken: the branded celebrity-artist, the vacuous and spectacular work of art, the reflex lauding of the virtues of neoliberalism and globalisation, and lastly the quality-assured casing for such phenomena, the branded art museum itself.

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<sup>35</sup> The idea that the museum can have a civilising influence is old and persistent, dating back to the mid nineteenth century, as Bennett notes in *The Birth of the Museum*, p. 27-8.