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Arts institutions must break their petroleum dependency

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Concerns about art and the environment should not be so divorced. Lucy Orta

After a three-year court battle, the Tate has been forced to disclose how much money it receives in sponsorship from BP. The stubbornness seemed to indicate a massive sum, one the galleries could not do without. So there was widespread surprise when it was discovered that the contribution BP makes to the Tate's overall annual funding budget is only 0.5%. From 1990-2006, the figures ranged between £150,000 and £330,000 each year.

Of major global corporations, BP is the third-largest contributor to climate change through the extraction of fossil fuels. The company has single-handedly caused 2.47% of human-caused emissions over the last 200 years.

So why do the Tate, the Royal Opera House, the National Gallery and the British Museum continue to accept such funding for such little return? In activist jargon this is called "art washing": the attempt by these companies to improve their public image through cultural sponsorship.

A statement issued by the CEO of the Royal Opera House praises the audience outreach and development which has brought opera to tens of thousands of new people. And the Tate proudly publicises the support BP has given to a greater access to the collections through exhibitions and educational programs.

But they fail to engage with the ethical issues of taking such money by claiming that taking moral stances lies beyond their role.

But it is precisely because it is impossible to compare the benefits of culture with the destruction that fossil fuels are wreaking on the environment that arts organisations should steer well clear of such money.

Ethical funding

There is a growing resistance movement and mounting international pressure on public institutions to divest and find an alternative to fossil fuel sponsorship. Some organisations are developing standards to be met. The Live Art Development Agency (LADA) has a clear Ethical Funding Policy, and provides a good blueprint for others to follow. It will not accept funding from companies or organisations which:

Directly block or actively work against social justice; whose activities directly harm the environment; or who directly block or work against community empowerment.



Demonstrators outside the National Portrait Gallery protest against BP sponsorship. Dominic Lipinski/PA Archive

I have read arguments pertaining to BP's high corporate ethical standards, which somehow whitewash all its other controversial activities. But no matter how you paint it, there's no avoiding BP's ravaging of the boreal forests of Alberta, or the human and environmental tragedies of the Gulf of Mexico – the worst accidental oil spill in the history of the petroleum industry, which resulted in the largest criminal resolution in US history. All these episodes constitute a dangerous threat to our society and planet.

Out of the ten immoral areas of activity on LADA's list, BP ticks eight of the sin boxes. It is difficult to understand why and how popular and "ethical" artists like Jeremy Deller, who sat on the Tate Board of Trustees, accept the Tate's declaration that "taking a moral stance on the ethics of the oil and gas industry remains outside of Tate's charitable objectives".

'Apartheid-style boycott'

Desmond Tutu wrote last year: "We need an apartheid-style boycott to save the planet." He went on to say that it's time for "people with conscience" to cut the funding umbilical cords that are poisoning the reputations of publicly funded educational and cultural institutions. We desperately need more key figures to speak out – clearly the voices of these people are the ones we hear.

Thankfully, as Tutu goes on to say, the fossil fuel divestment is the "fastest-growing corporate campaign

of its kind in history". The wave of resistance includes organisations such as the World Council of Churches, the British Medical Association, the Rockefeller Foundation, the Glasgow School of Art, Lego and the Southbank Centre.

Hopefully the Tate's trustees will soon follow suit. In accepting this funding, the sixth most visited art museum in the world is implicitly supporting BP.

The British Museum and National Gallery will also have to make ethical, social and environmental decisions about the money they receive. Alongside all the alternative avenues of ethical funding available, it would take just 50p per visitor to each of the three world-class museums to raise more than £8m in revenue, which is how much these museums will receive from their sponsorship deals with BP between now and 2017.

This is not a campaign to drop free entry to art galleries and museums. But 50p per visitor is not much in the grand scheme of things, particularly considering the emerging resilience of crowdfunding innovation. The growing ethical consciousness amongst some select arts institutions and the increasing grassroots resistance to a world beyond petroleum dependency means that such a world is now well within reach. It's time for the big museums to realise this.

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