licence to spill

Apart from catastrophic spills like the Deepwater Horizon, there are a whole host of adverse impacts that are associated with the production of oil. On the local level, it often involves extreme forms of pollution for local communities, while regionally oil is frequently associated with greater militarization and conflict. Globally, carbon emissions, oil companies, and our collective dependence on the product they push, are taking us ever closer to the edge of climate catastrophe.

In order for an oil company to produce oil and transport it to the global market, it needs either the support or the silence of the population in those areas of the world in which this takes place. Where the necessary support — or ‘social licence to operate’ — is not forthcoming, the ability of that company to carry out its business becomes seriously impaired.

The building of this social licence takes place to some extent in the countries of the distant oilfields, but to a far greater degree in the cities of the global North, such as London, one of the companies’ key centres of operation. Here, Shell and BP have between them sponsored almost all of London’s most prestigious museums and cultural institutions over the course of the last decade.

The financial support that the companies provide strengthens their position as a part of Britain’s cultural and social elite, and creates a perception of making a positive contribution to our society. This in turn not only provides them with an important profile with ordinary fuel customers, but far more importantly strengthens connections between the corporations and vital bodies such as government departments. The support of institutions such as the Foreign & Commonwealth Office, or the Department of International Development, are far more important to the global operations of Shell and BP than that of the populations near the oilfields or on the pipeline routes. These relationships are made at the gala openings and concerts, where the audiences made up of civil servants and decision makers rub shoulders with the oil executives.

A decade ago, tobacco companies were seen as respectable partners for public institutions to gain support from — the current BP Portrait Award at the National Portrait Gallery was previously sponsored by Imperial Tobacco. Now it is socially unacceptable for tobacco to play this public role, and it is our hope that oil and gas will soon be seen in the same light, as the public comes to recognise that the sponsorship programmes of BP and Shell are means by which attention is distracted from their impacts on human rights, the environment and the global climate.

Art exists to change the status quo. Sometimes you have to take a moral standpoint to provide that space for questions to be raised, even though others argue that you shouldn’t…”

Nicholas Serota, director of the Tate, speaking in the Guardian, February 2010

South Bank
of the Thames, London. Tate Modern.

Tuesday 20 April

Thousands of visitors pass through the converted power station, taking in an internationally-acclaimed collection of contemporary art. Exhibitions include a retrospective of seminal Abstract Expressionist Arshile Gorky, and the Dutch artist Theo van Doesburg. One of the main sponsors of the Tate is BP. The exact nature of this sponsorship is unknown as the Tate refuses to disclose the figure despite numerous Freedom of Information requests.

10th Anniversary celebrations of Tate Modern South Bank of the Thames, London.

Saturday 15 May

The Deepwater Horizon spill has been gushing its toxic tide for four weeks; it has become one of the worst oil spills in history. Art/activists Liberate Tate, enter the museum’s vast Turbine Hall and release dozens of large black helium balloons with dead fish and oil-slicked model birds tied to them by long black ribbons. The balloons float to the top of the high ceiling, blackened feathers fall through the air, part of the celebrations are shut down. Later, the balloons are shot down by Tate staff armed with air rifles.
“My hope is that austerity will breed discontent and that a generation will be galvanised by the hard times to make art that dares once again to be angry and – dare I say it? – politically engaged.”


Art in an age of austerity

The much-trumpeted age of austerity is here, but let’s never forget that we are paying for a crisis not of our making, a crisis generated by the insane gambles taken by others. Big cuts are being made to state funding of the arts, alongside many other targets. Anxiety abounds, and arts organisations are trying to get ahead of the game to ensure least disruption to their work. For many it is a question of survival. As the belt tightens, it’s easy to lose sight of the wider politics we are operating in, yet it’s precisely at such moments that the true measure of an organisation’s values and ethics will out.

Whereas environmental, health, aid, and social justice organisations tend to have rigorous internal discussions about the ethics of their funding sources, arts organisations very often seem to consider themselves to be immune from such discussions, except where funding sources have clearly been demonised by common agreement, such as tobacco, arms, or pornography. Artist George Baselitz provocatively said that, “the artist is not responsible to anyone. His (sic) social role is asocial...The artist can ask no question, and he makes no statement; he offers no information and his work cannot be used. It is the end product which counts, in my case, the picture.”

We fundamentally disagree with this elitist, Eurocentric, and segregated position of “art for art’s sake,” but this common position arising from European “high” culture does in part explain the head-in-the-sand approach of many arts organisations concerning ethics and their funding. Let’s call it “arts funding for funding’s sake” – take the money and run, and never mind the source.

Yet how can the arts possibly be set apart from ethical financial considerations which other parts of society face daily? The UK has the largest cultural sector in the world, relative to GDP. There’s a huge blind spot here. The arts and artists are often hailed as having a unique ability to make the invisible visible, or – as the poet Shelley put it – “the unacknowledged legislators of the world.” But in regard to ethics and funding, there is almost a complete absence of serious engagement, or at least, transparent public discussion.

The world we’re proposing is one where arts organisations and artists take a position on developing innovative and ethical solutions to finance, and do so in public. There is an increasing consensus that dependency on fossil fuels must end in light of the threat of climate change, as well as the human rights issues, and environmental catastrophes associated with the fossil fuel industry. The tide is undoubtedly turning away from this source of funding. It’s only a matter of time before public opinion considers fossil fuel sponsorship with the same distaste as the tobacco, arms, and pornography funding mentioned above. The question is a moral one. Each organisation has to decide where it stands, which future it wants to be part of. Choosing inaction, choosing silence, is to remain part of the problem, part of the past, part of the dying days of the oil age.

Every arts manager and artist who sees the arts as central to political, economic, and cultural life has the capacity and responsibility to set the agenda, to be part of the future. Or you could avert your eyes until increasing protests from “discontented, galvanised and politically aware” audiences, artists, and affected communities surround your gates or intervene in your space. What do you choose?

Public art and oil sponsorship is a debate that could and should involve everybody. Questions regarding BP’s involvement with the Tate are being raised internally and a decision on the issue could be forthcoming sometime in August.

If you would like to make your views on the matter known, why not email

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Of all the areas of human endeavour, art should be the first place we turn for self-reflection. It is even more absurd therefore that the Tate should be sponsored by a company that is as irresponsible and polluting as BP. Day one of any critical art theory course would dissect the logo of BP and show it to be the most cynical and barefaced piece of modern visual corporate propaganda. Why is the Tate therefore so keen to have it attached to its proud collection of modern art? Work, in part, based on the assumption that art should challenge complacency, disrupt, orthodoxy and authority.

Matthew Herbert is an electronic artist and composer

There is a pleasing aspect to this latest oil spill: it affects rich people. As such it is big news and action is being taken to mitigate its effects. As well as cleaning the Gulf of Mexico, however, ecocidal corporations also need to clean up the Gulf of Guinea, the Gulf Region and their massive everyday destruction of wildlife, peoples and habitats in poorer locations around the world. Thoroughly clean that is, not green-washed. Which would mean the Gulf is cultural thinking that allows “artists” and arts institutions to see no conflict in accepting money from climate criminals also ends – just as nicotine advertising and the Trans-Atlantic traffic in enslaved Afrikans before it. Anglo-Iranian/British Petroleum and their many-tentacled friends must be forced to eat their slick oily worlds and move beyond fossil fuels into spending our collective stolen wealth on global reparations, renewable sustainable energy and not more rebrands, PR, spin and deadly drills.

SaiMuRai (Simon Murray) is a writer and poet who collaborates with African Writers Abroad

The slick tide of oil washing up on Louisiana’s beaches is a symptom of a systemic addiction to oil that we’re all party to. And Tate Britain will celebrate their Summer Party this month and 20 years of BP’s support. We’re just not sure we can raise a toast. We stand watchful of whether BP will commit to investing in the Canadian tar sands, with all its appalling consequences for boreal forests, indigenous communities and the climate. It makes us deeply question how cultural institutions have become so ensnared in oil money and what it takes to shift away from what increasingly appears to be a fatal and flawed dependency. Does this really affect our love of art and partying? Yes.

Ackroyd & Harvey are visual artists that have been collaborating since 1990

Despite the enviable public support for the arts of our European counterparts, we are in a much better position than the United States. What is worrying about the possible future here is it could be what the States have gone through over the last 20 or so years. In the early 1990’s in the States, there were huge agonising debates when arts organisations were offered generous support from Philip Morris during a time when the National Endowment for the Arts (the equivalent of ACE) was under attack.

Why is private finance of the arts a disaster in the States? Aside from the major ethical implications, the financial crisis has blown big holes in the majority of the corporate, private and individual giving sources which has significantly impacted and even closed down arts organisations. Seriously, if you ask any arts professional in the States, they will think we are crazy to adopt their philistine model.

Salette Gressett is an Arts Officer at the Arts Council of England