

THE CONVERSATION

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Global arts scene awash with big oil and gas sponsorship

AUTHOR



Toby Miller

Professor of Cultural Policy Studies
at Murdoch University



The Brisbane Festival's City of Lights display is one of many global arts events sponsored by a major oil and gas company. Wei Lun Koh/Flickr, CC BY-NC-ND

From Shakespearean flash mobs in London, to zombies and a “dying” koala at one of Australia’s most popular art galleries in Brisbane, there are growing protests over big oil and gas companies' sponsorship of the arts.

Corporate polluters engage in art sponsorship as part of their quest for what they call a “social license” to operate. That means winning local, national, and international communities support.

For instance, global oil and gas company BP has powerful, enduring 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.



A Santos sign during the Brisbane Festival, 2012. Gord McKenna/Flickr, CC BY-NC-ND
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The company 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 cost of £10 million in 2011, that’s small fry for a company with revenue that year of US\$75,475 million.

In 2006, BP gave a million dollars 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 enjoys prominent naming rights over the “BP Sea Otter Habitat”.

The friendly face of pollution

Blockbuster shows sponsored by environmental miscreants give alibis to big cultural institutions, as well as big environmental polluters, by countering populist claims that only elite segments of society visit such places. And they associate populism with big oil.

One of the biggest exhibitions currently on in Australia is Chinese artist Cai Guo-Qiang's dramatic *Falling Back to Earth*, held at the popular Queensland Gallery of Modern Art (GOMA) in Brisbane.

The presenting sponsor is the Santos GLNG Project, a US\$18.5 billion consortium that is converting coal seam natural gas (CSG) to liquefied natural gas (LNG) for export to global markets.

It involves tapping into vast gas fields in the Bowen and Surat Basins in Queensland, constructing a 420 kilometre underground gas transmission pipeline to the coastal city of Gladstone, and a two-train LNG processing facility on Curtis Island in Gladstone.



About 20 protesters dressed as zombie farmers in 2012. AAP Image/Marty Silk
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In a stunt last month, protesters from Generation Alpha went to GOMA after it was revealed Santos had contaminated a water aquifer in north-west New South Wales with arsenic, uranium, lead and nickel. One protester dressed as a koala drank the water and pretended to die. It followed a similar protest two years ago, when activists dressed as zombie farmers gatecrashed an opening night event.

Greenwash

Rising Tide UK's Art Not Oil project takes as its motto "For creativity, climate justice and an end to oil industry sponsorship of the arts".

The project began in 2004 as a challenge and stimulus to current and potential artists to forge their practice and exhibitions in sustainable ways, and to work against the unsustainability of BP, Shell, and others—as businesses in general, but more particularly as sponsors of the arts.

Rising Tide calls such sponsorship for what it is: greenwash.

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.

They are not alone. The Reclaim Shakespeare Company formed a flash mob (“Out Damn Logo”) to criticize the British Museum for accepting BP money to help fund “Shakespeare: Staging the World”.



Look Who's Against Fracking

From Lady Gaga to Yoko Ono and Sean Lennon, we've got more than 200 artists standing up to end fracking.

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Yoko Ono goes a step further, beyond opposing sponsorship and towards protest, via her New York-based alliance Artists Against Fracking.

Beyond petroleum

For some, concerns about the ethics of corporate sponsorship of the arts go beyond the involvement of major energy companies.

For instance, in February this year a group of international artists dropped fake dollar bills from the dramatic spiral at the Guggenheim in Manhattan to draw attention to the labor exploitation of migrant workers in Abu Dhabi, where the museum is building an outpost funded by oil profits.

In Australia around the same time, longstanding sponsors of

the Sydney Biennale withdrew because of a threatened boycott by artists in protest at the firm Transfield's involvement with Australia's overseas detention of refugees.

Several critics, including the Australian government, complained about artists taking such political action, and threaten retribution.

In an open letter to the Biennale's Board, the artists explained that they rejected "adding value to the Transfield brand" because "participation is an active endorsement, providing cultural capital".

This raises questions about the responsibility of artists to provide social commentary and the responsibility of the arts bourgeoisie to secure ethical funding.

Yelling fire, when it's needed

The artistic right to free speech is not, of course, absolute (it's illegal in the US to shout "Fire!" in a theatre audience when there isn't one).

Speech is protected when it renews society through the force of critique. But instead of attacking artists for promoting justice, we should turn our gaze to cultural institutions' complicity with malfeasance.

Critics might say that artistic appeals to people's emotions, like those I've described, will fail for many reasons. That's because the silent majority doesn't like direct action; corporations can easily outspend activists; media coverage is partial and hostile; and crucial decisions are made by élites, not in streets. All those points are true.

I generally incline towards that kind of critical view of populist activism. But not in this case.

Good humour is crucial to sidestepping the common image of environmentalists as scolds. Equally, corporate excess must be opposed in public. And the media's need for image and excitement can be twinned with serious discussion and involve people who are not conventional activists,

Environmentalism does need to lighten up sometimes – and one way to do that is through sophisticated, entertaining, participatory spectacles, like flash mobs.

The right blend of irony, sarcasm, and showmanship is a good way to mock high art's dalliance with high polluters. Bravo.



Protesting “against the slimy spread of oil money through our theatres”.
Reclaim Shakespeare Company, CC BY-NC-ND
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