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Impactful or Theatrical? Performance Protests, Oil Sponsorships and the British Museum

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Impactful or Theatrical?

Performance Protests, Oil Sponsorship and the British Museum



Fig. 9.

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Introduction

0.1: Introducing the Research

In the United Kingdom, numerous museums and cultural institutions continue to be sponsored by big oil companies such as BP (British Petroleum) and Shell. Against the global and UK-based trends of increased climate activism rise (see Greta Thunberg, Extinction Rebellion etc.), oil sponsorship of cultural institutions is garnering more and more negative attention. As a result, protests over the oil sponsorship of cultural institutions have arisen.¹ The British Museum, which has one of the largest collections of objects and artefacts in the UK, has been sponsored by BP since 1996. Consequently, the rise in protests over ethical sponsorship, largely conducted by the group *BP or not BP?*, is one of the major challenges surrounding the museum today. The group specifically undertake performance protests at the museum, which stand out due to their ongoing, persistent resistance which are highly visual, theatrical and participatory.

This research will therefore focus on the controversies surrounding BP's ongoing sponsorship of the British Museum, with a focus on the performance protests undertaken by the group *BP or not BP?*. In focusing on performance protests that are resisting the sponsorship of BP of the British Museum, this research will aim to unearth the following research question; to what extent do these artistic and performance protests affect and impact the British Museum today? The research will be analysed through the following sub questions: what are performance protests, and what are the aims of the performance protest that have taken place at and against the British Museum; how has the British Museum responded to these protests; what changes have occurred in the structure of the British Museum as a result of performance protests; how has the media and popular press responded to and framed the performance protests that have taken place against the British Museum; in what ways do and have performance protests contributed to, impacted and effected the broader identity and understanding of the museum today?

In the past decades, museums have faced issues over a lack of funding and declining popularity. In Europe, Evans argues that as governments have increasingly cut fundings to the arts, corporate "sponsorships have been framed as a perfect plug to fill

¹ Robertson, *Tear Gas Epiphanies*, 16.

the gap”.² In the UK during the late 20th century, governmental funding for the arts decreased and museums were forced to turn to private funding to make up for the loss.³ Colin Tweedy predicted this outcome back in 1991, when he recognised that static government funding would force museums to search elsewhere for capital.⁴ To stay operational, museums have had to modernise and compete for visitors while at the same time secure enough funding to do so.⁵

The British Museum’s report and accounts for the year that ended 31 March 2020 shows that less than 50% of their income comes from the British Government’s Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS).⁶ This implies that they need to secure the rest through “commercial, fundraising, sponsored and charging activities”.⁷ A large majority of their funding comes from donations of visitors to the museum. However, as a result of the Covid pandemic, the museum was forced to close its doors for extensive periods of time. This substantial drop in annual visitor numbers, resulted in a massive loss of funding and income for the British Museum. Consequently, museum fundraisers have sought after corporate sponsorships and private fundings to replace the lack of state and visitor funding. The museum has subsequently claimed that the sponsorship from BP is even more crucial during this time.

Matoula Scaltsa defines the sponsorship of the arts as “the payment of money (or the provision of goods or services) by a business to an arts organisation for the purpose of promoting the business’s name, product or service”.⁸ The museum enters into the marketplace where a sponsorship becomes a mutual exchange, in which the museum must give up some of its intellectual independence. This brings to light issues when it comes to oil sponsorship of the museum. As oil drilling and fossil fuels have played a damaging role in the climate crisis, their association with the museum has put the museum in an unethical light. Judy Motion describes this well when she argues that oil sponsorships impact the possibility to speed up responses to climate change.⁹ This is

² Evans, *Artwash*, 11.

³ Jelinek, *This Is Not Art*, 18.

⁴ Tweedy, “Sponsorship of the Arts”, 161

⁵ Proteau, “Reducing Risky Relationships”, 388.

⁶ The British Museum, “Report and Accounts for the Year Ended 31 March 2020”, 4.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Scaltsa, “Defending Sponsorship”, 88.

⁹ Motion, “Undoing Art and Oil”, 728.

because they limit the independence of cultural institutions who could otherwise speak up more powerfully against the impact of climate change.

Accepting sponsorship deals from big oil companies has therefore increasingly been seen as controversial largely due to the alarming climate issues that the world is facing today. The responsibility of specific oil and gas companies in expounding these crises is becoming increasingly visible – for example, in 2010, BP came under fire for their role in the deep-water horizon oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico. Phillips and Whannel argue that in 2011, despite the controversy surrounding BP at the time of the oil spill in Mexico, cultural institutions such as the British Museum were not in a “financial position to refuse BP’s money”, and therefore continued their sponsorship deals.¹⁰ However, museums are no longer just about the safe keeping of objects collected during colonial times, or “the bearers of national heritage: they are now wholly considered as agents of social inclusion and social change”.¹¹ Therefore, museums need to be seen as institutions that are at the forefront of ethical issues, a position that is seen by the public as compromised by accepting sponsorship from big oil companies. In reaction, the number of public performance protests contesting the oil sponsorship of cultural institutions has been consistent and growing since around 2011.

As a result of the controversies and protests surrounding the oil sponsorship of museums, some predominant museums have dropped oil companies as sponsors. The Tate decided to drop BP as a sponsor in 2016 as a result of the growing reputational risk.¹² The Royal Shakespeare company dropped BP as a sponsor in 2019. Most recently, the National Portrait Gallery announced in February 2022 that they would not renew their sponsorship deal with BP once their current deal expires at the end of 2022.¹³ The Science Museum and the British Museum remain some of the few major museums to be sponsored by oil companies. The Science Museum has received a lot of backlashes for its association with Shell and recent deal with Adani, which “has major holdings in coal”.¹⁴ The position of the museum’s critique is that if other museums can drop oil companies as

¹⁰ Philips and Whannel, *The Trojan Horse*, 117.

¹¹ Paquette, “Mentoring and Change in Cultural Organizations”, 206.

¹² Motion, “Undoing Art and Oil”, 739.

¹³ “National Portrait Gallery’s BP sponsorship to end”, *BBC News*, 22 February 2022, Accessed on 26 April 2022, <https://www.bbc.com/news/entertainment-arts-60476760>.

¹⁴ Matthew Taylor, “Science Museum ‘must lay down conditions’ to fossil fuel sponsors”, *The Guardian*, 16 December 2021, Accessed 24 April 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2021/dec/16/science-museum-fossil-fuel-sponsors-sir-david-king>.

sponsors and replace the loss of sponsorship and funding through new means, than they believe that the British Museum has the influence and ability to do the same.

0.2: Status Quaestionis

There is little evidence of the museum archiving or documenting the volume of these performance protests, perhaps due to attempts to reduce reputational damage. As a result of this lack of documentation of protest at and against museums, scholars have devoted little attention to this area of study. It is only recently that protests against museums have gained more attention within mainstream media, especially as those related to climate change have slowly been expanding their reach as their cause has become increasingly relevant and topical. Consequently, the majority of literature covering museum protests has only been published within the past few years.

The scholar, Paula Serafini has undertaken the most significant in-depth research on *BP or not BP?*¹⁵ She is one of the only academics to have undertaken such extensive research on performance protests against museums in the United Kingdom. Serafini takes an interdisciplinary approach to her work, focusing on theories of aesthetics and politics. Her research is therefore essential to this thesis. With the knowledge that *BP or not BP?* is consistently and repeatedly protesting against the British Museum's refusal to drop BP as a sponsor, this research brings Serafini's work up to date in analysing the movement's most current actions. Moreover, by analysing the protests over a longer time period, this research seeks to understand the long-term impact of performance protests on the identity of the museum. Rather than focusing only on the aesthetics and politics of these performance protests, this research focuses on the museum structure and the impact that the aesthetics of the protests have had on the museum.

Mel Evans and Judy Motion are both academics that have written more widely against the oil sponsorship of the arts in the United Kingdom, focusing on a range of different activists and protests that have taken place.¹⁶ Motion focuses on the success of the *Liberate Tate* movement in contributing to the end of BP's sponsorship of the Tate. She concludes in her research that the protests play a key role in ending unethical

¹⁵ Serafini, *Performance Action*; Serafini, "Prefiguring Performance"; Serafini, "Subversion through Performance".

¹⁶ Evans, *Artwash*; Motion, *Undoing Art and Oil*.

sponsorships. Her work is essential in developing this thesis' approach to understanding why the British Museum have yet to drop BP as a sponsor, in comparing how other protest groups have managed to push cultural institutions to drop oil companies.

Some of these key academics have used their work to individually protest against oil sponsorship, while also actively taking part in the live protests themselves. This is the case for Serafini and Evans. Serafini has taken part in some of *BP or not BP?*'s protests against the British Museum. Evans is an artist and is part of the protest group Liberate Tate.¹⁷ Through her close involvement, she has undertaken extensive research on museums and oil sponsorship, and uses her work to protest against oil corporations. This has given these academics front row seats into the workings of the protests groups, making their findings essential to this research. This research will provide a different perspective, analysing the protests from a position outside the studied organisation. This will arguably give further insight into how the protests impact and reach those not personally involved as well as those not present at the protests. Moreover, these academics have used their research to explain and demonstrate why oil sponsorships are unethical and damaging, and while this research touches on these aspects, the focus is directed towards assessing how performance protests have impacted the museum.

Laura Raicovich is an important academic that has discussed the contestation of museums more generally. In Raicovich's work, 'Culture Strike', which was published recently in 2021, she takes an interdisciplinary approach on activism through arts and politics.¹⁸ Her work is very topical as it addresses the recent global Black Lives Matter protests and the response of museums. Her focus has been on the United States, and she largely contests against the elite control of museums. Due to the current and topical nature of her work, her research is extremely insightful, however with the focus of this research on the United Kingdom, her analysis and protest examples cannot always be applied in the same way.

Claire Bishop's work, 'Artificial Hells', published in 2012, is a key reference point, covering participatory art and activism.¹⁹ It is a valuable contribution to the research on participatory art that can be applied more specifically to performance protests. Academics such as Serafini have frequently referred to Bishop in their work. Her research

¹⁷ Ibid., 6.

¹⁸ Raicovich, *Culture Strike*.

¹⁹ Bishop, *Artificial Hells*.

has formed the theoretical framework in which to view and analyse the performance protests of *BP or not BP?*.

Despite these highlighted contributions, it's clear that the body of research on protests against museums is not extensive. This is partly as a result of a lack of documentation, due to the fact that these protests take place outside the framework of the regulated art world. Museum protests have only recently become topical as scholars are increasingly discussing the non-neutral, elite nature of museums and their relationship to history, cultural legacies and social issues. Research on this most current bout of protests may be forthcoming, but this dissertation forms an exploratory, topical, and relevant look into the protests that are currently taking place.

0.2: Method

A range of different methods have been applied throughout this research in order to assess the impacts and effects of the performance protests. This includes critical and visual analysis of websites, online archives, press statements, newspaper reports, photographs and secondary literature. The large majority of research has been undertaken within the media and newspaper reports, as they are the predominant sources documenting the protests as they took place.

Articles and reports from *The Guardian*, *The Times* and *The Daily Mail*, that have discussed or mentioned the performance protests, have been critically analysed. These are some of the most widely read newspapers within the United Kingdom. The *Daily Mail* can be seen as a centre-right leaning newspaper.²⁰ Its articles are free to read online, which is why it remains one of the most widely read newspaper sources. Similarly, *The Guardian* is free to read online. It has one of the highest reaches among young people, as it is generally more left leaning.²¹ As the articles analysed are from within the past few years, they are largely accessible through an online web browse by searching for key words such as, 'BP or not BP?', 'British Museum' and 'museum protests'. Moreover, less freely accessible articles have been discovered through a search on the Leiden University Catalogue, which has access to newspaper archives such as Factiva.

²⁰ Joe Pompeo, "The British Tabloid: Invasion".

²¹ Thurman & Fletcher, "Has Digital Distribution Rejuvenated Readership?", 548.

Articles discussing the protests are more readily available on art and museum specific websites such as *The Art Newspaper*, *Artnews* and *Museum Association*.²² Critically analysing the range of media sources that discuss the performance protests allows us to gain insight into how the protests and the British Museum have been framed as well as how much attention they are drawing to their cause. Since it is evident that mainstream media has a much wider audience than subject-specific newspapers, it is essential to acknowledge the variety of audiences when analysing the impact of the protests.

A literary analysis of secondary sources over debates regarding the British Museum and sponsorship will be undertaken in order to theorise the protests. Critical analysis of secondary literature is undertaken throughout from a variety of secondary sources, such as the edited work by Robert Janes and Richard Sandell, titled 'Museum Activism'.²³ The aim will be to place museum protests and activism within the broader understanding of the museum identity.

BP or not BP?'s website will be critically analysed, in which they have archived all their past protests.²⁴ The analysis is complemented by newspaper articles, statements released from the British Museum, as well as secondary literature, in order to gain a more balanced perspective. Ultimately, as *BP or not BP?* hold the most in-depth archives on their protests (whereas the British Museum have not documented or archived a single protest), the protests will undoubtedly be viewed and analysed from the perspective and bias of *BP or not BP?*.

Visual analyses of photographs taken of the protestors, which have been found on *BP or not BP?*'s website and in newspaper articles, will be undertaken in order to assess the aesthetic impact of the protests. Again, the majority of photos of the protests have been taken by the protesters themselves. Therefore, the thesis recognises the limits of positionality – participants have selected what they want the audience to see and remember from their protests. Despite this, these photographs remain important to analyse in order to see what the protesters wore, and visualise how they used the museum space. Moreover, since the museum itself does not and has not ever released photographs of the protests, a bias in the analysis of the photographs cannot be avoided.

²² The Art Newspaper, Accessed on 29 April 2022, <https://www.theartnewspaper.com/>; ARTnews, Accessed on 29 April 2022, <https://www.artnews.com/>; Museums Association, Accessed on 29 April 2022, <https://www.museumsassociation.org/>.

²³ Janes & Sandell (eds.), *Museum Activism*.

²⁴ "Home Page", *BP or not BP?*, Accessed on 25 April 2022, <https://bp-or-not-bp.org/>.

This ultimately will work against the museum, as a narrative is increasingly formed against them.

In order to analyse the response and changes within the British Museum and BP, the primary method of research undertaken will be to critically analyse press statements, the British Museum and BP website, as well contractual documents available on the sponsorship deal. Due to the open data policy, the British Museum website has open access to legal documents covering its structure. For example, on the website, access is available to the 'British Museum Acceptance of Donations and Sponsorship Policy'.²⁵ Press statements released in newspaper articles by the museum give insight into how the museum has responded or not responded to the protests undertaken.

The first chapter will discuss the theoretical lens through which *BP or not BP?* has been viewed. The second chapter will analyse the structure of the British Museum and its current relationship with BP. The third chapter will provide an in-depth analysis of various performance protests conducted by *BP or not BP?*, up until their most recent protest in April 2022. The final chapter will place the impact of the protests in conversation with the broader identity of the museum.

While it is evident that the British Museum has not yet dropped BP as a sponsor, despite the continuous efforts from *BP or not BP?*, this research demonstrates throughout that the narrative of and towards the British Museum has changed. There has been increasing and escalating outcry from the public and museum professionals over the sponsorship deal, especially as the climate crisis has become more visible in the public consciousness. The aesthetic and performative nature of the protests, have moreover become part of the museum identity, in which their artistic protests are an expected part of being the British Museum. Whilst this has allowed the museum to largely ignore and avoid engagement with the performance protests, it is evident that the protestors will not stop until the sponsorship deal comes to an end. Thus, as the protesters reach more people, and gain more coverage in the media, the British Museum will eventually have no choice but to drop BP as a sponsor, or it faces damaging impacts to its reputation. This research also indicates that as the role of fossil fuels in society becomes more and more salient – such as during the present energy crisis caused by Russia's war on Ukraine, the

²⁵ The British Museum, "British Museum Acceptance of Donations and Sponsorship Policy".

pressure on cultural institutions is likely to grow. To protesters, the partnership with BP demonstrates how out of touch museums are, especially the British Museum, which they perceive to be an elite run institution for the elite. If the British Museum wishes to stay relevant and on the right side of history, they need to start listening to what *BP or not BP?* are saying.

Chapter 1: Theoretical Framework

1.1: Context: BP or not BP?

BP or not BP? are a sub-section of the larger group *Art Not Oil* which focuses on protesting big oil sponsorship of the cultural industry.²⁶ *BP or not BP?* have been consistently undertaking performance protests against and at the British Museum since 2012.²⁷

The creative and unique performance protests are the fundamental aspect of *BP or not BP?* in their mission to get the British Museum to drop BP as a sponsor. Since they began protesting in 2012, the group have so far undertaken a total of 67 different protests against a variety of UK cultural institutions that have been sponsored by BP.²⁸ Their protests against the British Museum generally take place in the big, clear space in the Great Court of the British Museum, which inspires the production of their performances.²⁹ The Great Court was redesigned by Norman Foster and reopened in 2000.³⁰ The new glass ceiling connects the reading room in the middle to the museum's galleries, creating this new 'courtyard space' in-between. The courtyard was previously a hidden space that was lost to the public. The redesign has increased the size of the museum by 40% and allowed for a smoother and easier navigation of the galleries.³¹ The Great Court has become a statement part of the British Museum. For *BP or not BP?* the clear and bright court has provided the ideal location and space for their performances, setting the stage for their colourful and creative protests to stand out in the open and bright space. As a result, this has become the signature setting for their protests.

Bp or not BP? began with the aim of protesting BP's sponsorship of the Royal Shakespeare Company in 2012, with their theatrical protests taking inspiration and references from Shakespeare. Thereafter they expanded their protests to the Tate and The British Museum.³² Since both the Tate Britain and the Royal Shakespeare company have dropped BP as a sponsor within the past few years, *BP or not BP?* have focused their

²⁶ "Home Page", *Art Not Oil*, Accessed on 20 April 2022, <https://www.artnotoil.org.uk/>.

²⁷ "Our Manifesto", *BP or not BP?*, Accessed on 10 April 2022, <https://bp-or-not-bp.org/our-manifesto/>.

²⁸ "Performances and films", *BP or not BP?*, Accessed on 24 April 2022, <https://bp-or-not-bp.org/performances-and-films/>.

²⁹ Serafini, *Performance Action*, 145-6.

³⁰ "The Great Court", *The British Museum*, Accessed 20 April 2022. <https://www.britishmuseum.org/about-us/british-museum-story/architecture/great-court>.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Serafini, "Prefiguring Performance", 96.

protests solely against the British Museum. Despite no longer needing to protest at the Royal Shakespeare Company, the group has continued its 'Shakespearean' influence, and have used this to inspire the performance protest they undertake as well as the theme of their website and pamphlets. In this way, the group have "reclaimed and subverted Shakespeare in order to stage anti-BP plays that denounced the oil company".³³

Their Shakespearean influence allows the group and protests to have a creative base and encourage highly visual performances. *BP or not BP?* describe specifically on their website that they are a theatre group as well as an action group, and "ensure creativity and performance is at the heart of all we do".³⁴ Their actions can be described as 'performance protests', as they use theatrical means to get across a message of protest and change. Their aesthetic theatrical performance combined with a deeper message of change is what makes their protests a form of engaging art as well as a form of activism.

BP or not BP? has its own detailed website, which clearly outlays their aims as an activist group, and holds archives on all their past protests (<https://bp-or-not-bp.org/>). Their central aim is to get the British Museum to end its sponsorship deal with BP. They argue that BP is using the sponsorship of the arts to 'artwash' their company, meaning to invest money in the cultural sector in order to cover up their destructive oil drilling activities, which they describe as a 'social license to operate'.³⁵ They further claim that BP has made the third largest contribution of any organisation in history to worsening the climate crisis.³⁶ The museum's association with the oil giant therefore promotes BP's environmentally damaging activities at a time in which museums need to be at the forefront of these issues, taking a clear stance towards educating the public on the damaging consequences of climate change.

While their primary focus is on ending the oil sponsorship of the arts, they describe and demonstrate the link of fossil fuels with other controversies surrounding museums today, such as topics of colonisation, racism, gender issues and more.³⁷ For example, the groups protest against the museum's exhibition in 2015, 'Indigenous

³³ Serafini, *Performance Action*, 184.

³⁴ "Our values and safer spaces", *Bp or not BP?*, Accessed on 18 April 2022, <https://bp-or-not-bp.org/about/our-values-and-safer-spaces/>.

³⁵ "Do the arts need oil sponsorship?", *Bp or not BP?*, Accessed on 5 April 2022, <https://bp-or-not-bp.org/does-the-arts-need-oil-sponsorship/>.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ "Our values and safer spaces", *Bp or not BP?*, Accessed on 18 April 2022, <https://bp-or-not-bp.org/about/our-values-and-safer-spaces/>.

Australia: Enduring Civilisation’, not only protested the hypocritical sponsorship of BP in relation to climate change, but also the link of this sponsorship to repatriation issues and the underrepresentation of indigenous populations in Australia.

It demonstrates their inclusivity as a movement, in speaking for the minorities and underrepresented. As the museum remains an elite run institution, it can be seen as a place of colonial capitalism in which voices are suppressed. Oil sponsors are in some ways neo-colonists and continue this suppression of voice. As their protests against oil sponsorship link to a much broader range of societal issues, the group can also appeal to a wider range of people. They are a form of grassroots activism which has brought together a community of outsiders to creatively protest.

1.2: Participatory Art

The performance protests of *BP or not BP?* will be approached and further understood through the lens of Claire Bishop’s understanding on participatory art and spectatorship. This is outlined in her work, ‘Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship’, published in 2012.³⁸ This research into participatory art began with a controversial article published by Bishop in 2006 titled, ‘The Social Turn: Collaboration and Discontents’, in which she looked at the emergence of socially engaged art in the 21st century.³⁹ It proved controversial as she challenged art historians such as Grant Kester, who had previously accepted the status quo that participatory art was the definitive form of political art.⁴⁰ She attempts to move away from an art historical approach through applying theories from theatre history, performance studies and cultural policy.

Her most recent work analyses how participatory and collaborative art has surged since the early 1990s.⁴¹ She emphasises three periods of ‘turns’ in participatory art. The first one being 1917, as a result of the European avant-garde wave, the second in 1968, which was a period of ‘neo’ avant-garde movements, and the final turn in 1989 as a result of the fall of communism.⁴² She is the first scholar to have provided a historical summary on participatory art, in which she has rethought collective art, and looked specifically into

³⁸ Bishop, *Artificial Hells*;

³⁹ Bishop, “The Social Turn”.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ Bishop, *Artificial Hells*, 1.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 3.

participatory art as a socially engaged art form. Her aim was to “generate a more nuanced (and honest) critical vocabulary with which to address the vicissitudes of collaborative authorship and spectatorship”.⁴³

Ten years on, her work is still extremely applicable to participatory and collective art practices today, and has arguably become increasingly relevant as performance protests against cultural institutions have emerged within the past ten years. Her work provides an important theorisation of performance actions such as those of *BP or not BP?*. Her work places importance on participatory art that takes place outside the framework of an art institution, in contrast to which, most theories and still to this day, have focused on participatory art within the framework of the art institution.⁴⁴ While the actions of *BP or not BP?* take place inside the institution, they are formed outside the institutional framework. The protesters are outsiders in the museum framework, which allows them to speak on behalf of those that are being suppressed by the museum.

Bishop defines participatory art as “that in which the people participating constitute the artistic medium and material of a piece”.⁴⁵ She therefore emphasises, the use and role of the human body in the art form. And in doing so claims that this art aims to activate the audience, with the hope of emancipating them, “from a state of alienation induced by the dominant ideological order”.⁴⁶ Chou, Gagnon and Pruitt agree with Bishop in describing how through participation, the human body is used to “embody historical, societal and political abstractions”, which further engages spectators and participants.⁴⁷

Bishop brings together the spectators and the participants in 21st century participatory art, in arguing that the spectators are also participants. This is evident within the performance protests of *BP or no BP?*, who state that they want their protests to be highly participatory and engaging.⁴⁸ They try to ensure that new people are involved in each protest. Moreover, they are participatory because those wanting to become involved both before and during the protests do not need any skills of acting singing or learning lines.⁴⁹ There are no pre-requirements for getting involved, evidencing that spectators can also become participants.

⁴³ Ibid., 8.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 46.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 275.

⁴⁷ Chou, Gagnon and Pruitt, “Putting Participation on Stage”, 247.

⁴⁸ Serafini, “Prefiguring Performance”, 198.

⁴⁹ Serafini, *Performance Action*, 55.

As a result, participatory art is more engaging, which is why Bishop refers to this as socially engaged art. A more socially engaging protest encourages outsiders who get involved to more quickly feel part of the cause and thereafter want to take further action. *Bp or not BP?* sum this up on their website, in which they describe that “creating interventions based on performance, creativity, music, humour, and honesty can help to refresh and recharge us, and reconnect ourselves and our audiences with the issues that matter on a deeper, more emotional level”.⁵⁰ Juris describes that “image is linked to emotion through embodied performance”.⁵¹ Moreover, Serafini makes the argument that “creative participation acts as a path towards political participation”.⁵² Serafini refers to Bishop’s work throughout her research to analyse the earlier actions of *BP or not BP?*. As their actions have continued repeatedly since Serafini’s writing, it demonstrates that Bishop’s work continues to be applicable to the analysis of *BP or not BP?*. Therefore, in focusing on creativity as the essence of their protests, the group is working towards becoming increasingly impactful, affective and socially engaged.

Bishop highlights that in participatory art of the 21st century, collectiveness is key, and that in contrast individualism is regarded as more suspicious, partly because the art world endorses such individuals with outrageous payments.⁵³ Participatory art therefore becomes impactful when there is no longer one key dominant figure. Serafini further demonstrates that in the case of *BP or not BP?* there are around six people who remain a consistent part of the group and are described as ‘choreographers’, rather than leaders.⁵⁴ Their performance protests are not a community driven art in the way that there is no one ‘artist’ directing the project. Rather there are a collection of different actors involved in the creation of the protest, with the aim of evenly distributing the roles and decision-making. This ensures that they remain socially engaged and participatory as a protest group. The museum evidently won’t and can’t change from within. Therefore, it is the role of the group to bring together these variety of voices from the outside through participatory means in order to change the museum from within.

This is further evident within the structure and organisation of *BP or not BP?*. They specify themselves that they aim to “avoid hierarchy as much as possible, and distribute

⁵⁰ “Our values and safer spaces”, *Bp or not BP?*, Accessed on 18 April 2022, <https://bp-or-not-bp.org/about/our-values-and-safer-spaces/>.

⁵¹ Juris, “Performing Politics”, 65.

⁵² Serafini, *Performance Action*, 169.

⁵³ Bishop, *Artificial Hells*, 12.

⁵⁴ Serafini, “Prefiguring Performance”, 200.

power and decision-making as horizontally as we can within the group”.⁵⁵ They are seeking to structure themselves in contrary to the British Museum and its hierarchical organisation. In this way, they aim to include a variety of voices through a more democratic and even distribution of power.

Bishop argues that the effectiveness of participatory art is much greater in live.⁵⁶ This is important to take into consideration when analysing the protests of *BP or not BP?*. Their protests are evidently most impactful for those watching and participating in live. This is however only applicable to those involved in the protests and visitors who happen to be at the museum at the same time. The documentation of the protests that appear in newspaper articles, can only demonstrate a part of what has occurred at the protest. As a result, the impact of the visual, theatrical, embodied and participatory approach of the performance is largely lost. Readers cannot as easily get actively involved, and the protests documented in photographs is less likely to appeal to the viewers emotion than a protest witnessed live. This therefore limits the effectiveness and wider impact of their protests, which may indicate why it has taken the group time to grow over the past 10 years.

Bishop’s participatory art is about “constructive social change”, rather than about “supplying the market with commodities”.⁵⁷ Her work focuses on discovering the variety of meaning that participatory art produces. *BP or not BP?* in their participatory actions are seeking change as their primary goal. Hence, this research will similarly focus on the affects and impacts that *BP or not BP?* produce as a result of their actions.

⁵⁵ “Our values and safer spaces”, *Bp or not BP?*, Accessed on 18 April 2022, <https://bp-or-not-bp.org/about/our-values-and-safer-spaces/>.

⁵⁶ Bishop, *Artificial Hells*, 3.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 13.

Chapter 2: Case: The British Museum & BP

Before analysing in depth the protests of *BP or not BP?*, it is essential to dive into the current structure of the British Museum and BP, to gain a deeper understanding of the sponsorship deal.

The British Museum was founded in 1753, in the midst of the expanding British Empire.⁵⁸ Joseph Crook argues that the possessions of Sir Robert Cotton, Robert Harley and Sir Hans Sloane were key to establishing the British Museum.⁵⁹ They collected artefacts from across the world which they later donated to the founding of the British Museum, beginning its large international collection. Sir Hans Sloane specifically collected a huge range of objects from a vast diversity of continents including Asia and America.⁶⁰ While the museum took time to really take off, it is argued that it was the purchase of the Parthenon friezes in 1815 that led to the expansion of the museum to its current location.⁶¹

The British Museum, which has one of the largest collections of objects and artefacts in the UK, is the subject of multiple controversies today. They have faced backlash and protests relating to colonisation, restitution and ethical sponsorship. As an institution that came together at the end of the 18th century as a result of Britain's colonial activities and to this day houses objects from all around the world that have historical significance, the museum has faced the largest amount of repatriation requests in the United Kingdom.⁶² Stuart Frost, an employee at the British Museum recognises that the Museum's history is "intimately linked to that of the British Empire".⁶³ Some of its most prominent restitution cases include the Parthenon friezes and Benin Bronzes. Dan Hicks argues that until the museum starts acts of restitution and repatriation and "as long as they continue to display sacred and royal objects looted during colonial massacres, they will remain the very inverse of all this".⁶⁴ Many objects housed in the museum continue to represent a dark history. As a result, many academics and non-academics see the museum as an "imperial institution in a post-imperial world".⁶⁵ While restitution cases

⁵⁸ Frost, "A Bastion of Colonisation", 3.

⁵⁹ Crook, *The British Museum*, 39.

⁶⁰ Delbourgo, *Collecting the World*, xxviii.

⁶¹ Crook, *The British Museum*, 108.

⁶² Duthie, "The British Museum", 16.

⁶³ Frost, "A Bastion of Colonisation", 1.

⁶⁴ Hicks, *The British Museum*, 3.

⁶⁵ Duthie, "The British Museum", 16.

make up a large amount of the protests at the British Museum, protests over ethical sponsorship are at the forefront of controversies faced by museums.

In 2015, Neil MacGregor stepped down as director of the museum and was thereafter succeeded by Hartwig Fischer, the current director. MacGregor had long ignored and defied calls from Greece to return the Parthenon marbles to Athens.⁶⁶ He maintained an argument that the British Museum was a world museum and a representation of the world in one building, rather than a specifically British or Eurocentric Museum.⁶⁷ Fischer has continued along similar lines, further ignoring calls to return the Parthenon marbles as well as drop BP as a sponsor. Despite controversies surrounding the museum, it remains one of the most visited museums in the UK. Between 2018 and 2019, the museum received a total of 6.02 million visitors.⁶⁸

The Museum has maintained in its 'British Museum Management Agreement 2016-2020', its wish to keep entry to the museum free for permanent collections.⁶⁹ In order to do so, they need to continue to receive enough funding to maintain their collections and space. They have further described that they would like "to continue to pursue commercial and philanthropic approaches to generating revenue which will complement grant-in-aid funding".⁷⁰ Therefore, for the museum, sponsorship and private funding is essential to the maintaining of their collection and museum space.

In order to ensure that a sponsorship is in line with the vision of the museum, the museum needs to assess carefully the advantages of the sponsorship deal as well as be aware of where exactly the money is coming from. This is laid out in their 'British Museum Acceptance of Donations and Sponsorship Policy', which is available to view on their website.⁷¹ In this policy, they have a list of points that a sponsorship or donation needs to be in compliance with. For example; "Intangibles must be measured carefully, with the economic benefits of accepting the money being weighed against the potential cost of reputational risk".⁷²

⁶⁶ "British Museum director Neil MacGregor stepping down", *Daily Mail*, 8 April 2015, Accessed on 25 March 2022, <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/wires/ap/article-3030125/British-Museum-director-Neil-MacGregor-stepping-down.html>.

⁶⁷ Duthie, "The British Museum", 14.

⁶⁸ The British Museum, "Annual Review Press Statement 2018-2019", 1.

⁶⁹ The British Museum, "British Museum Management Agreement 2016-2020".

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 1.

⁷¹ The British Museum, "British Museum Acceptance of Donations and Sponsorship Policy".

⁷² *Ibid.*, 2.

Multiple arguments have been made that private fundings have interfered with a museum's intellectual independence.⁷³ Museums have a role in shaping culture and education, but the wrong funding can have severe impacts on the principles set across by the museum and their standing on vital issues such as climate change.⁷⁴ This demonstrates clearly that when it comes to the sponsorship deal with BP, the museum needs to assess the economic benefits against the harmful impact that the sponsorship brings. For example, the impact of negative press and long-term reputational damages as a result of being associated with a fossil fuel company. The policy further highlights that the museum should not accept sponsorships or donations if, "there is a significant risk that acceptance may cause harm to the Museum, and any such harm is likely to be disproportionate to the benefit the Museum will derive from acceptance of the gift or sponsorship".⁷⁵

The sponsorship of museums as institutions has long seen controversy and debate, which is why policies such as these are essential. The uncovering of the Sackler family's concerning links with controversial pharmaceutical productions saw a huge number of protests, in which a large amount was aimed at museums, calling for them to end their association with the family.⁷⁶ Museums as a result did refuse donations and sponsorships from the family. For example, in March 2019, the National Portrait Gallery declined \$1.3 million from the Sackler Trust.⁷⁷ It is concerning that it takes a huge controversy such as that for museums to cut ties with unethical and damaging partnerships. These institutions continue to be sponsored by the elite and the wealthy, which suggests that a small percentage of the population have a large amount of influence over the direction of a museum. Without the uncovering of these scandals, it implies that unethical wealthy business owners hold extensive influence over a nation's culture and heritage.

Proteau argues that there are three main reasons why businesses seek to sponsor the cultural sector. These include; improving the public image of the company, creating staff enjoyment, and contributing to regional culture.⁷⁸ BP (British Petroleum) has sponsored the British Museum since 1996. They describe on their website, that in

⁷³ Editorial, "He Who Pays the Piper Calls the Tune", 350.

⁷⁴ Motion, "Undoing Art and Oil", 733.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Raicovich, *Culture Strike*, 14.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 19.

⁷⁸ Proteau, "Reducing Risky Relationships", 237.

supporting and sponsoring cultural institutions they are expanding the reach and diversity of these institutions.⁷⁹

In 2016 it was announced that BP signed new sponsorship deals with the British Museum, The National Gallery, and other cultural institutions, totalling a sponsorship of £7.5 million over a span of 5 years from 2016 to 2021.⁸⁰ Due to the pandemic, the sponsorship was extended until the end of 2022. For the British Museum, it has meant that BP has sponsored a range of special exhibitions at the museum including; Scythians: Warriors of Ancient Siberia, Sunken Cities: Egypt's lost worlds, Indigenous Australia: Enduring Civilisation, Ming: 50 Years that Changed China, Troy: Myth and Reality, and most recently and currently 'The World of Stonehenge'. These special exhibitions have been extremely popular and successful. A writer from the observer commented that the current exhibition on Stonehenge is a 'triumph'.⁸¹ On the brochure for the *Troy: Myth and Reality* exhibition from 2019-2020, in small print was written;

"BP's support for UK Arts and Culture spans a period of over 50 years. The company's partnership with the British Museum began in 1996, enabling a diverse range of initiatives including the development of the BP Lecture Theatre. Today support for the Museum is focused on its special exhibition programme".⁸²

The British Museum has placed importance on the sponsoring of special exhibitions, which they believe bring value to the museum's mission. The 'Troy: Myth and Reality' attracted over 200,000 visitors.⁸³ Therefore, it could be argued by some that a renewal of the sponsorship deal would be beneficial for the museum in shedding light on a variety of objects, and bringing increasing visitors to maintain the popularity of the museum. In released press statements, the museum focuses on highlighting the beneficial

⁷⁹ "BP and the British Museum", *BP*, Accessed on 24 April 2022, https://www.bp.com/en_gb/united-kingdom/home/community/connecting-through-arts-and-culture/bp-and-the-british-museum.html.

⁸⁰ "Do the arts need oil sponsorship?", *Bp or not BP?*, Accessed on 29 April 2022, <https://bp-or-not-bp.org/does-the-arts-need-oil-sponsorship/>.

⁸¹ Natasha Reynolds and David Wengrow, "Stonehenge glories are tarnished by British Museum's oil giant backer", *The Guardian*, 20 February 2022, Accessed on 5 April 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2022/feb/20/stonehenge-glories-tarnished-british-museum-oil-giant-backer>.

⁸² "The BP exhibition, Troy: Myth and Reality", *The British Museum*, 21 November 2019 – 8 March 2020, Accessed on 29 April 2022, <https://www.britishmuseum.org/exhibitions/troy-myth-and-reality>.

⁸³ "BP and the British Museum", *BP*, Accessed on 24 April 2022, https://www.bp.com/en_gb/united-kingdom/home/community/connecting-through-arts-and-culture/bp-and-the-british-museum.html.

aspect of the sponsorship deal. In relating to their sponsorship policy, they are clearly aiming to prove that there is an equal and valuable relationship.

There are a further range of factors that may explain the reasoning behind the British Museum's continued acceptance of BP's sponsorship. It is firstly important to take into account the effect of the pandemic on museums. Museums across the world have been hit hard, with many never reopening their doors after the consistent closure as a result of the pandemic. The lack of visitors saw the British Museums income that is generated from visitors drop by 90%.⁸⁴ As previously mentioned the British Museum is part of a national portfolio in which it receives funding directly from the department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport.⁸⁵ Rishi Sunak also promised an extra £90 million to these national sponsored museums.⁸⁶ However, this was not enough to cover the losses from the pandemic.

Moreover, arguments have been made that the British Museum is in need of refurbishment. For example, there are suggestions that the galleries are not suitably heated, and the roof of the museum is in bad shape.⁸⁷ As a result, a £1 billion modernisation plan to be undertaken over the next few years has been put forward for the museum.⁸⁸ Kate Maltby, a theatre critic and historian, has suggested that in a climate of government funding cuts, "if protest pushes BP away from its philanthropic commitments, we will all be losers".⁸⁹

However, *BP or not BP?* have evidenced that BP's sponsorship of the museum makes up for about 1% of their annual income.⁹⁰ This is further backed up by Lucas Jones who describes that in 2016 the sponsorship only accounted for 0.3% of their annual income.⁹¹ Therefore, they argue that the harmful association with BP is not worth the minor sponsorship deal, and the financial impact of dropping BP as a sponsor will be extremely minimal. Philips and Whannel argue that corporations that sponsor cultural

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Sam Merriman, "George Osborne's biggest job yet: the British Museum's new chairman has to raise £1billion for radical modernisation project", *Daily Mail*, 6 February 2022, Accessed on 10 April 2022, <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-10481381/George-Osborne-seeks-1billion-British-Museums-radical-modernisation-project.html>.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Robertson, *Tear Gas Epiphanies*, 21.

⁹⁰ "Do the arts need oil sponsorship?", *Bp or not BP?*, Accessed on 5 April 2022, <https://bp-or-not-bp.org/does-the-arts-need-oil-sponsorship/>.

⁹¹ Lucas Jones, "BP or not BP? Art Washing and the British Museum", *Cherwell*, 11 June 2020, Accessed 23 March 2022, <https://cherwell.org/2020/06/11/bp-or-not-bp-art-washing-and-the-british-museum/>.

institutions are tactical, as they offer small sponsorships in return for lots of good publicity.⁹² BP pays a small amount of money for their name to be plastered all over the British Museum. Arguably BP gains more from this sponsorship deal, through using it to clean up its company image. As demonstrated by *BP or not BP?*, there is clearly an imbalance within the sponsorship deal.

A further important aspect that potentially has influence on determining the British Museum's decision to continue its sponsorship partnership with BP, is the recent addition of George Osborn (the ex-chancellor of the UK) to the board of trustees. There is an evident conflict of interest in determining the deal with BP, considering that "BP is a client of the boutique investment firm Robey Warshaw where (Osborn) is a partner".⁹³ Moreover, questions can be raised as to what intentions Osborne will have in this position, seeing that back in 2010, he "delivered a 30% cut to England's arts budget and a 15% cut to national museums".⁹⁴ Osborn should have no involvement in the decision-making process of the sponsorship deal with BP. Nonetheless, whether he is involved or not, we will likely not know, but his mere presence at the museum strongly suggests he will be.

Within the structure of the British Museum, there is also a special advisory board to the Chairman, titled CAG (Chairman's Advisory Group). There is no mention of CAG on the British Museum website, thus its role within the museum structure is unknown. A spokesperson for the museum has claimed that CAG is informally run, implying that it has no direct influence over the museum.⁹⁵ However, claims by the research group *Culture Unstained* have argued that CAG has a greater influence within the British Museum than simply giving advice, and its high level of secrecy evidences this.⁹⁶ They have argued that CAG's influence is a lot more than just sometimes giving advice for funding, which is highly unusual for cultural institutions, and suggests improper practices of the British

⁹² Philips and Whannel, *The Trojan Horse*, 20.

⁹³ "7 reasons George Osborn should have no say on BP at the British Museum", *Culture Unstained*, 25 June 2021, Accessed on 18 April 2022, <https://cultureunstained.org/2021/06/25/7-reasons-george-osborne-should-have-no-say/>.

⁹⁴ Mark Brown, "George Osborne appointed chair of the British Museum", *The Guardian*, 24 June 2021, Accessed on 8 April 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2021/jun/24/ex-chancellor-george-osborne-appointed-chair-british-museum>.

⁹⁵ Alex Thomson, "Revealed: Secretive corporate group guiding British Museum", *Channel 4 News*, 17 February 2022, Accessed on 21 April 2022, <https://www.channel4.com/news/revealed-secretive-corporate-group-guiding-british-museum>.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

Museum.⁹⁷ This evidence uncovered by *Cultural Unstained* was published by Channel 4, who described that CAG has direct influence onto the decisions made by the director for the future of the museum. Moreover, claims by *The Ecologist* have suggested that the membership of CAG includes individuals from extremely contentious corporations such as BP, the fossil fuel banks Citi and Bank of America and additionally the mining company Glencore.⁹⁸ These memberships are highly problematic and only emphasise further the deep unethical nature of the British Museum.

Alice Procter, a journalist for the online newspaper *Hyperallergic*, draws a parallel between the members of CAG and the wealthy elites who ran the museum in the 19th century, suggesting that the museum structure has changed little since it was first formed.⁹⁹ While there is a lack of clear evidence over CAG's membership and influence over the director and direction of the museum, the fact of its existence and problematic membership, suggests that there are opportunities in which secret discussions are being held that potentially have a lot of influence over the direction of the museum. It also highlights that the museum lacks transparency, demonstrating and emphasising that the British Museum is far from neutral and remains an exclusive institution. Its structure clearly suggests that a high level of secrecy in important decision-makings for the museum remains, and that this is a museum run by the elite.

Museums and cultural institutions evidently need to do more in knowing and understanding who is sponsoring them. Sponsorship is about the museum getting involved in a market place where commerce and industry are the dominant goals, rather than truth.¹⁰⁰ Thus, in getting involved, they need to take into account a loss of their intellectual independence and freedom. Hence, it is essential that this is given to the right hands. 2022 is a crucial year for the British Museum, as the current sponsorship deal is about to come to an end. It means that it will become evident this year whether a new sponsorship deal will be or even has already been signed, or if the museum will give into the calls from the protesters and drop BP as a sponsor. This highlights the extremely current and topical nature of this research.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ Brendan Montague, "British Museum will not shelve BP", *The Ecologist*, 21 February 2022, Accessed on 22 April 2022, <https://theecologist.org/2022/feb/21/british-museum-will-not-shelve-bp>.

⁹⁹ Alice Procter, "The Backlash Against Oil Sponsorship Can Push for Broader Change in Museums", *Hyperallergic*, 20 March 2022, Accessed on 17 April 2022, <https://hyperallergic.com/717649/backlash-against-oil-sponsorship-can-push-for-broader-change-in-museums/>.

¹⁰⁰ Editorial, "He Who Pays the Piper Calls the Tune", 350.

Research unearthed by the group *Culture Unstained* in February of this year (2022), has arguably proven that the museum is pursuing a new contract with BP.¹⁰¹ *Culture Unstained* requested to view documents and emails via Freedom of Information, which they argue evidence that not only is Fischer looking to renew the deal with BP, but that he has been holding meetings with the oil giant to discuss potential options in the museum's relation with BP after spring 2023.¹⁰² Not all the emails were visible, as most of the contents were blacked out, which only further indicates the lack of transparency and that the museum is trying to hide something. One email from Fischer to BP wrote, "it was wonderful to see you at the BM yesterday and to have the opportunity to discuss the future – particularly as our two organisations move towards a greater focus on sustainability. I look forward to continuing the discussion".¹⁰³ This clearly suggests that the museum is undertaking private conversations to discuss a potential renewal. This element of privacy yet again highlights how important and impactful decisions are being undertaken in secret with only those at the top of the museum are involved, rather than being an open conversation and debate among museum practitioners.

It becomes evident throughout this analysis that the British Museum has not assessed all the necessary elements within its sponsorship deal with BP. *BP or not BP?* have made it easy for the museum to do so, in having undertaken in-depth research into the unethical nature of BP. All the museum needs to do is read it and realise that BP does not fit within the regulations of their sponsorship policy. Moreover, analysing the structure of the British Museum demonstrates that an unethical and secretive nature runs deep within the museum structure, and that if they are to move forward as a museum, a lot of changes need to be made. The following chapter will analyse in depth how *BP or not BP?* have responded with performance protests to the continual unearthing of controversies surrounding the British Museum and its sponsorship with BP.

¹⁰¹ Alex Thomson, "Revealed: Secretive corporate group guiding British Museum", *Channel 4 News*, 17 February 2022, Accessed on 21 April 2022, <https://www.channel4.com/news/revealed-secretive-corporate-group-guiding-british-museum>.

¹⁰² Ibid.

¹⁰³ "The British Museum is seeking new BP deal", *Culture Unstained*, 19 February 2022, Accessed on 2 March 2022, <https://cultureunstained.org/bm-seekingnewbpdeal/>.

Chapter 3: Case: BP or Not BP?

This chapter will analyse the case study of *BP or not BP?* and a selection of performance protests that they have undertaken within the British Museum over the past few years. Their protests are frequent and persistent, and often come about in response to special exhibitions that have been sponsored by BP, for example their most recent exhibition titled 'The World of Stonehenge', and past exhibitions such as 'Indigenous Australia'. The protesters are pushing for the museum to be on the right side of history.

3.1: Stolen Land, Stolen Culture, Stolen Climate

Three performance protests were undertaken by *BP or not BP?* in response to BP's sponsorship of a special exhibition in 2015, titled 'Indigenous Australia: Enduring Civilisation'. Throughout these protests, the message remained the same while the creativity and aesthetics of the performances changed.

The first protest took place on the 21st April 2015. The performers were dressed as a group of robbers, wearing stripped shirts and eye masks, holding signs with the text 'Stolen Land, Stolen Culture, Stolen Climate' (Fig. 1.). The message was clear as they protested the oil sponsorship as well as aimed to symbolise "the colonial legacy of theft in Aboriginal peoples' objects, lands and resources".¹⁰⁴ The British Museum has over 6,000 indigenous Australian items in their collection, yet only a very small proportion of these are displayed.¹⁰⁵ Their considerable collection of objects represents the extent of their destructive colonial activities against the aboriginal people in Australia.

The second performance was larger, and involved a more organised theatrical element to the performance. On the 2nd May 2015, *BP or not BP?* teamed up with Reverend Billy and the Stop Shopping Choir, in which they enacted an oil disaster using umbrellas (Fig. 2.).¹⁰⁶ The performance took a highly embodied approach along with the use of an everyday item (the umbrellas) to oppose and change the expected visual norms within the institution as well as express the fragility of climate change. They used the white clear

¹⁰⁴ Serafini & Garrard, "Fossil Fuel Sponsorship and the Contested Museum", 70.

¹⁰⁵ "Stolen Land, Stolen Culture, Stolen Climate", *BP or not BP?*, 24 April 2015, Accessed on 10 April 2022, <https://bp-or-not-bp.org/2015/04/24/stolen-land-stolen-culture-stolen-climate/>.

¹⁰⁶ "We create an oil spill inside the British Museum, with Reverend Billy and the Stop Shopping Choir!", *BP or not BP?*, 2 May 2015, Accessed on 25 April 2022, <https://bp-or-not-bp.org/2015/05/02/we-create-an-oil-spill-inside-the-british-museum-with-reverend-billy-and-the-stop-shopping-choir/>.

hall and steps to create this aesthetic and impressive re-enactment of an oil spill. The black umbrellas against the light museum surrounding created a sharp and effective contrast. It is evident that the performance attracted and drew in a large crowd into the Great Hall of the museum (Fig. 2.).

The third protest was spontaneous and undertaken on the 19th July 2015. It was centred around the creation of a piece of theatre, which involved different ‘characters’, including a British colonial explorer, a crowd of dying animals and birds, and a climate scientist.¹⁰⁷ It occupied the same part of the museum as their previous protest, similarly creating an oil spill (Fig. 3.). The photographs released by *BP or not BP?* demonstrate again a crowd gathered around the protest, and they describe that the performance drew in a “hundreds-strong crowd” (Fig. 3.).¹⁰⁸

The performance involved active participation from the crowd, in which at the end of their performance, members of the audience were invited to share stories relating to topics of repatriation and climate change.¹⁰⁹ This successfully got some of the spectators involved, bringing them further into the cause. *BP or not BP?*, described the performers as ‘actor-vists’.¹¹⁰ This also highlights the verbal and non-verbal approach to the performances, through their interplay of using actions, words and signs to get across the message. As a participatory artform, this emphasises Bishop’s argument that participatory art is not solely focused on visuality and spectatorship, but engages the audience in a variety of ways.¹¹¹

This exhibition on indigenous Australia was curated with the intention to open up conversations with indigenous communities and raise awareness among visitors on Britain’s shocking colonial activities in Australia.¹¹² Howard Morphy, the leading curator of the exhibition described that in curating the exhibition, the team collaborated with source communities and involved them in the process of developing the exhibition.¹¹³ Questions can arise therefore as to the role of *BP or not BP?* in their aim to speak and protest for minority groups and indigenous populations. Serafini and Garrard suggest

¹⁰⁷ “Actor-vists are occupying the British Museum”, *BP or not BP?*, 19 July 2015, Accessed on 29 April 2022, <https://bp-or-not-bp.org/2015/07/19/actor-vists-are-occupying-the-british-museum/>.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹¹ Bishop, *Artificial Hells*, 7.

¹¹² Giblin, Ramos & Grout, “Dismantling the Master’s House”, 474.

¹¹³ Morphy, “Indigenous Australia”, 15.

that the members of *BP or not BP?* are white, middle class British activists based in the UK, whereas the exhibition involved aboriginal artists and curators.¹¹⁴ Therefore, the protests can come across as hypocritical. This highlights what Jelinek suggests, in which “collaborative groups may also repress difference”.¹¹⁵ Have *BP or not BP?* in protesting for the repatriation of objects, Britain’s colonialism and BP’s sponsorship, excluded the aboriginal people involved in the putting together of the exhibition?

However, the exhibition came against substantial criticism from aboriginal people. There was uproar among some indigenous Australians who demanded that the museum return their stolen property instead of hosting an exhibition.¹¹⁶ This is backed up by evidence uncovered by *The Guardian*, in which not all source communities involved in the curation of the exhibition were contacted and informed that BP were sponsoring the exhibition. They uncovered that the museum only contacted two Australian Indigenous communities, who had connections with the objects on display, to inform them that BP was sponsoring the exhibition.¹¹⁷ Moreover, as Michael Ames argues, in holding the exhibition in the museum space, the curators of the museum are ultimately making the final decision, so therefore, “they described arrangements that most frequently reflect the perspectives of the museum”.¹¹⁸ The protests were as a result essential in exposing the museums hypocrisy in relation to their sponsorship deal with BP, and their lack of real collaboration with source communities.

Moreover, what really outraged *BP or not BP?* and was the focus of their protests, was the fact that BP continued to investigate into potential oil drillings in the Great Australian Bight while sponsoring this exhibition.¹¹⁹ This only further undoes the good work and progress that the exhibition could have and was attempting to make. This exploration damaged key heritage sites and land, just as Britain’s colonialism and ‘stealing’ of aboriginal objects did centuries ago. BP’s drilling plans saw a large number

¹¹⁴ Serafini & Garrard, “Fossil Fuel Sponsorship and the Contested Museum”, 73.

¹¹⁵ Jelinek, *This Is Not Art*, 9.

¹¹⁶ Paul Daley, “Preservation or plunder? The battle over the British Museum’s Indigenous Australian show”, *The Guardian*, 9 April 2015, Accessed on 8 April 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2015/apr/09/indigenous-australians-enduring-civilisation-british-museum-repatriation>.

¹¹⁷ Paul Daley, “Enduring controversy: BP sponsorship ignites new row over British Museum’s Indigenous exhibition”, *The Guardian*, 21 July 2015, Accessed on 10 April 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/postcolonial-blog/2015/jul/21/enduring-controversy-bp-sponsorship-ignites-new-row-over-british-museums-indigenous-exhibition>.

¹¹⁸ Peers & Brown, *Museums and Source Communities*, 2.

¹¹⁹ Serafini & Garrard, “Fossil Fuel Sponsorship and the Contested Museum”, 70.

of protests among local indigenous communities, and the company has also encountered previous tensions with indigenous people as a result of their activities. Therefore, BP's sponsorship of this exhibition comes across as even more ironic.¹²⁰ A clear parallel can be drawn between the past activities of the British colonists, which remains present in the objects and artefacts owned by the museum, and BP's current activities. BP can be described as neo-colonists. This demonstrates that little has really changed, and BP's sponsorship of the exhibition makes the museum's aim to collaborate with source communities and engage in conversations of restitution come across as disingenuous. BP has clearly used this exhibition to cover up their activities and *artwash* their company.

While the protests addressed vital issues and put together an impressive performance in their embodied, repetitive and participatory actions, as evident from the photographs and descriptions, they received little media attention. This indicates that the voices of the protesters have not been heard and relayed to the wider public. The discussion in regards to the exhibition among newspaper reports and articles was dominated by the debate over the repatriation of indigenous objects, rather than also the actions of *BP or not BP?*, in uncovering the hypocrisy of the exhibition's sponsorship in relation to repatriation issues. This highlights further how the actions of protesters is often brushed over and forgotten. Moreover, while *BP or not BP?* link the issues of repatriation and oil sponsorship together, the media views the two as separate issues. By doing so they largely ignore the actions of *BP or not BP?*.

Moreover, when some newspaper reports did cover the protests, they took no strong stand in siding with the protesters. Jenny Kidd undertook research on newspaper reports on museums alongside the term's 'activism', 'activist' and 'protest' from 2015 to 2017 in the United Kingdom. She discovered that most reports that included these words related to protest groups against oil sponsorship.¹²¹ She argued that the highly visual protests are what makes them stand out for journalists. However, she evidences that the protests were "presented with attempts at impartiality and little or no journalistic interpretation".¹²²

¹²⁰ Paul Daley, "Enduring controversy: BP sponsorship ignites new row over British Museum's Indigenous exhibition", *The Guardian*, 21 July 2015, Accessed on 10 April 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/postcolonial-blog/2015/jul/21/enduring-controversy-bp-sponsorship-ignites-new-row-over-british-museums-indigenous-exhibition>.

¹²¹ Kidd, "Unprecedented Times? Shifting press perceptions on Museums and Activism", 388.

¹²² *Ibid.*, 391.

This becomes evident when analysing reports on these performance protests. *The Guardian* was one of the few mainstream newspapers found to briefly cover the protests, and described how the actions of the protests disturbed the British Museum.¹²³ While they uncovered BP's sponsorship and continuing drilling activities, they presented a more neutral perspective by including the side and response of the museum. They describe how the museum in preparation for the backlash from the exhibition which they knew was coming, prepared a statement of appreciation for BP's 'benevolence', and that their support of such exhibitions, deepens our "understanding of the world's many and varied cultures".¹²⁴ The use of the word benevolence in combination with BP, presents the sponsorship in a positive light and demonstrates a more neutral standpoint in addressing the sponsorship deal.

Despite the protests uncovering how BP is using its sponsorship deal to *artwash* their company, the British museum has continued to support BP, allowing them to cover up their damaging activities. In 2016, a year after these protests and controversies, *Unearthed* undertook an investigation which discovered that BP used "their sponsorship deal with the British Museum and a specific 'Day of the Dead' exhibition to further their oil plans in Mexico and Australia".¹²⁵ This shocking discovery, only emphasises how destructive and unethical BP are as a company, and through the sponsorship deal, it reflects the underlying unethical core values of the British Museum.

Additionally, in May 2016, *Art Not Oil* uncovered information that demonstrated BP's "influence over the institutions it sponsors, from its input into curatorial decision-making and event planning, to its role in managing anti-BP protests".¹²⁶ The British Museum has endorsed such a company to have influence over the nations culture. Moreover, it highlights that the protests had little impact at this point within the museum structure, its relationship with BP, as well as shifting opinions within the media. Their actions and arguments were ignored by both the British Museum and BP. This was made

¹²³ Paul Daley, "Enduring controversy: BP sponsorship ignites new row over British Museum's Indigenous exhibition", *The Guardian*, 21 July 2015, Accessed on 10 April 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/postcolonial-blog/2015/jul/21/enduring-controversy-bp-sponsorship-ignites-new-row-over-british-museums-indigenous-exhibition>.

¹²⁴ Ibid.

¹²⁵ "Ban Fossil Fuel Advertising and Sponsorships", *Europa*, 16 June 2021, Accessed on 26 April 2022, https://europa.eu/citizens-initiative/initiatives/details/2021/000004_en.

¹²⁶ Serafini & Garrard, "Fossil Fuel Sponsorship and the Contested Museum", 69.

most evident when the British Museum signed a new five-year sponsorship deal with BP in 2016, emphasising even further the lack of impact of the protesters.

While the Museum did not drop BP as a sponsor, and little was changed as a result of the protests, the protesters have only continued to protest and expand in impact and size. This becomes evident in the analysis of their most recent performance protests, in which outcry against the museum and BP has continually grown as a result. As *BP or not BP?* have repeatedly taken action against the museum, their impact has increased and advanced outside the museum, as well as arguably within the museum, as they have accumulated supporters over time. After a lack of impact on the elite, *BP or not BP?* have only become more determined in their protest, with the aim of protesting until the museum ultimately drops BP as a sponsor.

3.2: A Trojan Horse?

In February 2020, *BP or not BP?* undertook their biggest performance to date, in which the group “smuggled a 13-foot-tall Trojan horse into the London Museum’s entrance”.¹²⁷ A makeshift Trojan horse was brought into the museum courtyard, with the protesters dressed up in black and holding shields with BP’s logo printed on (Fig. 4.). What is noticeable straightway in this photograph, is BP’s familiar bright sunflower logo which has intentionally been made to stand out, demonstrating clearly who the protest is aimed at (Fig. 4.). Against the dark coloured costumes, the logo is not only clearly visible to those watching the protest live, but also to those who only view photographs of the protest. Moreover, within their performance they tore “up leaflets emblazoned with the BP logo” (Fig. 5.).¹²⁸ Capturing this moment of ripping apart BP’s logo, further forms this narrative that BP are the ‘bad guys’, and consequently need to be removed from within the museum space.

In sponsoring special exhibitions, BP have received a large amount of publicity, predominantly by having their logo present on all the leaflets and posters promoting the

¹²⁷ Mel Evans, “How Activists Made the Art World Wake Up to the Climate Crisis”, *Frieze*, 11 February 2020, Accessed on 5 April 2022, <https://www.frieze.com/article/how-activists-made-art-world-wake-climate-crisis>.

¹²⁸ Cristina Ruiz, “Climate activists take over British Museum in all-night protest against BP sponsorship”, *The Art Newspaper*, 10 February 2020, Accessed on 3 April 2022, <https://www.theartnewspaper.com/2020/02/10/climate-activists-take-over-british-museum-in-all-night-protest-against-bp-sponsorship>.

exhibition. Greenpeace demonstrates that this is extremely harmful, as it highlights the influence that fossil fuel companies have on culture, and leads to these companies even going to the extent of censoring artworks that relate to the climate crisis.¹²⁹ In tearing up the logo, *BP or not BP?* are seeking to transform the way in which BP's logo is portrayed.

The picturesque backdrop that the museum offers for this protest makes it even more captivating (Fig. 4.). Robertson describes how museums often provide very photogenic backdrops for protests.¹³⁰ The Greek like temple format of the British museum in combination with the 'armed' protesters and Trojan Horse seamlessly fit together. As Serafini discusses, there is clearly a strategic approach behind these artistic protests.¹³¹ In bringing together a collective of individuals from outside the framework of the museum, to creatively protest within the framework of the museum, the protesters are changing and adapting the cultural and artistic use of the museum space. *BP or not BP?* have turned the museum into a site of theatrical protest, weakening its principal role as a site that houses artefacts and objects.

The group claimed that there were 1,500 protesters that took part, with one article maintaining that the protest saw "1600 activists occupy the British Museum".¹³² Another organiser of the event argued that this was the "largest protest in the history of the museum".¹³³ A spokeswoman for the British Museum claimed instead that the figures were more in the 'high hundreds'.¹³⁴ While it is not apparent as to the exact number, and the museum is evidently trying to downplay the size of the protest, whereas the protesters want to exaggerate the largeness of the protest, what is clear is that this was the largest protest organised by the group against BP's sponsorship of the British Museum. It reveals that *BP or not BP?* are growing in size, demonstrating that their protests are having increasing impact.

¹²⁹ Mehdi Leman, "We must break the soft power of the fossil fuel industry", *Greenpeace*, 6 September 2021, Accessed on 16 April 2022, <https://www.greenpeace.org/international/story/49328/break-fossil-fuel-soft-power/>.

¹³⁰ Robertson, *Tear Gas Epiphanies*, 8.

¹³¹ Serafini, *Performance Action*, 11.

¹³² Lucas Jones, "BP or not BP? Art Washing and the British Museum", *Cherwell*, 11 June 2020, Accessed on 4 April 2022, <https://cherwell.org/2020/06/11/bp-or-not-bp-art-washing-and-the-british-museum/>.

¹³³ Cristina Ruiz, "Climate activists take over British Museum in all-night protest against BP sponsorship", *The Art Newspaper*, 10 February 2020, Accessed on 3 April 2022, <https://www.theartnewspaper.com/2020/02/10/climate-activists-take-over-british-museum-in-all-night-protest-against-bp-sponsorship>.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*

Nevertheless, while this remains the biggest protest undertaken by the group to date, these performance protests are not even close to being on the same scale as protests such as those undertaken in June 2020 in regards to Black Lives Matter. It is however, not possible for these performance protests to be on the same scale, as their focus is specifically on the British Museum, which does not concern a large majority of the population. Moreover, *BP or not BP?* can be argued to be a specific sub-section and part of the wider and much larger protests that are continually taking place globally in relation to climate change. Additionally, as their protests take place within the museum space, there is also a limited space for performers and spectators. As a result, the small scale of the protests arguably allows the museum to largely ignore them, as it feels little real threat and disruption. As is argued throughout, it is however, the repetitive nature of the protests that is more impactful, rather than the size of any specific protest.

The protest was visually effective and thought through carefully. The protesters occupied the museum throughout the night and filled up the museum entrance with all the participants. Bayryam Bayryamali, a member of *Bp or not BP?* made a statement as to the purpose of the protest, saying that “the oil giant is continuing to extract fossil fuels as the world literally burns around it, while using its sponsorship of the British Museum to style itself as a responsible climate leader”.¹³⁵ BP should not be allowed to use the museum to improve its image, instead they should be made accountable for their actions.

In response to the protest that took place, Hartwig Fischer stated that “the museum is a public space where people can come to debate and we respect other people’s right to express their views”.¹³⁶ While making no claim of support for the group and no statement of disapproval towards the protest, the museum attempts to take a stance of neutrality, falsely presenting itself as a place in which different viewpoints can be expressed. *BP or not BP?* noticeably stated in response to this statement their dissatisfaction that Fischer failed to really engage with the protest, especially considering

¹³⁵ Valentine Di Liscia, “Toga-clad Activists Crashed British Museum’s Reopening to Protest Oil Sponsorship”, *Hyperallergic*, 24 May 2021, Accessed on 21 April 2022, <https://hyperallergic.com/647997/toga-clad-activists-crashed-british-museum-reopening-to-protest-oil-sponsorship/>.

¹³⁶ “Protesters leave British Museum after two-day action over BP sponsorship”, *Daily Mail*, 9 February 2020, Accessed on 5 April 2022, <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/wires/pa/article-7983751/Protesters-leave-British-Museum-two-day-action-BP-sponsorship.html>.

that it was the largest protest undertaken to date by the group.¹³⁷ Museums arguably tend to avoid direct interaction with ‘activism’, as they do not want to alienate certain visitors in appearing biased.¹³⁸ However, in taking no action in regards to the protest, it demonstrates a complete lack of engagement with the pressing issue at hand. As Raicovich argues, no museum has ever been neutral, which is evidenced primarily by the fact that the museum was built to display wealth, prestige and power.¹³⁹ The British Museum is far from neutral and should not continue to attempt to claim they are. Moreover, in avoiding engaging with these debates, the museum is preventing itself from becoming a real place of debate. In claiming neutrality, which Robert R. Janes has described as a ‘myth’, museums therefore perceive themselves as places that can discuss issues, as a way to demonstrate their openness to free speech, but not as places to ‘solve’ issues.¹⁴⁰ They cannot claim to be a site in which people express their viewpoints, if they themselves don’t take part and lead the way.

While, *Bp or not BP?* did not achieve its main aim, which was for the museum to drop its sponsorship with BP, it is evident that the impact and spread of their protests grew as a result of their repetitive actions. Some of the museum’s staff members took part in demanding that the leaders of the museum remove BP as a sponsor.¹⁴¹ Staff took part in signing a letter to the museum condemning their sponsorship deal. A former museum trustee Ahdaf Soueif also signed the letter, after he “resigned last summer over the BP sponsorship, the treatments of works and the issue of repatriation of artefacts”.¹⁴² Sommer and Klockner argue that what makes activist and performance art unique and different from just activism or just art, is that through its aesthetic nature, it is generally more stimulating, and therefore inspires the public to fight against societal issues.¹⁴³ In creating impact, performance and participatory art is not just about being moved by something you see, but by wanting to go further and actively aim to implement these changes. This is demonstrated in the protests, that as a result of the engaging and

¹³⁷ Claire Selvin, “British Museum Workers and Former Trustee Issue Statement in Support of BP or not BP Protest”, *Artnews*, 10 February 2020, Accessed on 26 April 2022, <https://www.artnews.com/art-news/news/british-museum-bp-or-not-bp-trojan-horse-1202677412/>.

¹³⁸ Rodegher and Freeman, “Advocacy and Activism”, 337.

¹³⁹ Raicovich, *Culture Strike*, 42.

¹⁴⁰ Janes, “The End of Neutrality”, 3.

¹⁴¹ Matthew Taylor, “British Museum staff join outcry against BP sponsorship”, *The Guardian*, 10 February 2020, Accessed on 24 March 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2020/feb/10/british-museum-staff-join-outcry-against-bp-sponsorship>.

¹⁴² Ibid.

¹⁴³ Sommer and Klockner, “Does Activist Art Have the Capacity to Raise Awareness in audiences”, 60.

aesthetic protest which was witnessed by some of the staff, they were encouraged to take further action and sign a letter of protest.

How the protests have been framed within the media, gives further insight into their impact. The protest got a considerable amount of media coverage from a range of different news outlets, largely due to the fact that the protesters occupied the museum for two days. The protest was mentioned in popular news outlets such as *The Guardian* and the *Daily Mail*.¹⁴⁴ Their success in attracting media attention demonstrates that they are gaining increasing visibility and are no longer as ignored as when they first started protesting.

However, in analysing how the protest was framed within these more popular news sources, it can be argued that again a more balanced argument continues to be presented. Both articles described the protest and included a statement from *BP or not BP?* as to why they were protesting, while also presenting the response of the museum and their need for the oil sponsorship deal. This demonstrates that *BP or not BP?* have yet to get more mainstream newspapers onto their side. This would have a huge impact on the public perceptions of the British Museum, and assist towards pushing the museum to realising its damaging sponsorship deal with BP.

Within more art specific news outlets such as *Frieze*, *Artnews*, *The Art Newspaper* and *Cherwell*, the authors were evidently on the side of the protesters, not only documenting the protest themselves but also arguing against the actions of the museum.¹⁴⁵ Mel Evans, an editor for *Frieze*, for example, argued that “by accepting sponsorship, cultural institutions are giving power and legitimacy to this toxic

¹⁴⁴ Aaron Walawalkar, “Activists try to occupy British Museum in protest against BP ties”, *The Guardian*, 8 February 2020, Accessed on 24 April 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2020/feb/08/activists-try-to-occupy-british-museum-in-protest-against-bp-ties>; “Protesters leave British Museum after two-day action over BP sponsorship”, *Daily Mail*, 9 February 2020, Accessed on 24 April 2022, <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/wires/pa/article-7983751/Protesters-leave-British-Museum-two-day-action-BP-sponsorship.html>.

¹⁴⁵ Mel Evans, “How Activists Made the Art World Wake Up to the Climate Crisis”, *Frieze*, 11 February 2020, Accessed on 24 April 2022, <https://www.frieze.com/article/how-activists-made-art-world-wake-climate-crisis>; Claire Selvin, “British Museum Workers and Former Trustee Issue Statement in Support of BP or not BP Protest”, *Artnews*, 10 February 2020, Accessed on 26 April 2022, <https://www.artnews.com/art-news/news/british-museum-bp-or-not-bp-trojan-horse-1202677412/>; Cristina Ruiz, “Climate activists take over British Museum in all-night protest against BP sponsorship”, *The Art Newspaper*, 10 February 2020, Accessed on 3 April 2022, <https://www.theartnewspaper.com/2020/02/10/climate-activists-take-over-british-museum-in-all-night-protest-against-bp-sponsorship>.

industry”.¹⁴⁶ It needs to be acknowledged, however, that the reach of these art specific newspapers is less than *The Guardian* and *The Daily Mail*, as its readership is directed to individuals specifically interested in arts and culture. Therefore, this highlights that “while *BP or not BP?* has enjoyed successful protests, they are still a long way away from this level of public engagement”.¹⁴⁷

As the protesters repeat their performative protests and get increasing coverage, the aim in the repetition of the protests is for the more mainstream press and media to slowly turn against the British Museum, and as Lucas Jones from *Cherwell*, describes, it results in “consistent, negative press for the British Museum”.¹⁴⁸ At some point this consistent negative press will outweigh the economic benefits of the sponsorship deal. This is an important intangible that needs to be taken into account, as described in the museums ‘Acceptance of Donations and Sponsorship Policy’.¹⁴⁹

The museum however, continues to stand by its sponsorship deal with BP. Fischer made a further statement in response to the protests saying that the museum is “grateful to BP for their ongoing support, without which important exhibitions such as these would simply not be possible”.¹⁵⁰ The involvement of the staff and the role the protest played in increasing their awareness of the need to take action, does demonstrate that as a result of the protest, pressure was and is building up against the museum. The protests are therefore slowly having a ripple effect. The pressure however, has yet to build up enough, as the elite of the museum and BP continue to ignore their actions. However, as the global climate crisis becomes more evident, it is only a matter of time before the British Museum is forced to take action, which leads us onto the next protests.

3.3: Climate Reparations

On November 6, 2021 “100 brightly dressed performers”, including members of *BP or not BP?* teamed up with New York performance activist Reverend Billy and the Stop

¹⁴⁶ Mel Evans, “How Activists Made the Art World Wake Up to the Climate Crisis”, *Frieze*, 11 February 2020, Accessed on 24 April 2022, <https://www.frieze.com/article/how-activists-made-art-world-wake-climate-crisis>.

¹⁴⁷ Lucas Jones, “BP or not BP? Art Washing and the British Museum”, *Cherwell*, 11 June 2020, Accessed on 4 April 2022, <https://cherwell.org/2020/06/11/bp-or-not-bp-art-washing-and-the-british-museum/>.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid.

¹⁴⁹ The British Museum, “British Museum Acceptance of Donations and Sponsorship Policy”.

¹⁵⁰ “Protesters leave British Museum after two-day action over BP sponsorship”, *Daily Mail*, 9 February 2020, Accessed on 24 April 2022, <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/wires/pa/article-7983751/Protesters-leave-British-Museum-two-day-action-BP-sponsorship.html>.

Shopping Choir, and lead a “surprise musical action in the British Museum courtyard” (Fig. 6).¹⁵¹ In teaming up with the Choir and Reverend Billy again, *BP or not BP?* have created and re-enforced an increasing community of activists. The visually aesthetic performance stood out for its use of colour and musical addition. A sign was also held up that read ‘colonialism x fossil fuels = climate crisis’ (Fig. 7.).

BP or not BP? have again drawn comparisons between climate change, repatriations and Britain’s colonialism. They have also maintained their arguments from past protests, such as the protests mentioned previously that were directed against the Indigenous Australia exhibition. This indicates that the protesters are persistent in their goal, and will continue to protest until the museum drops BP as a sponsor. Alice Proctor argues that the two movements between repatriation and oil sponsorship are generally separated by the public, however *BP or not BP?* demonstrate the interconnectivity between the two.¹⁵² People think that colonisation is in the past, but BP’s actions illustrate that it is very much still present today. Moreover, climate change impacts our population disproportionately. For example, Indigenous Australians are facing the impact of climate change more, due to the fact that they are already at an economic and social disadvantage, with a poorer quality of life, and therefore less prepared for the increasing floods and fire as a result of climate change.¹⁵³ Museums are similarly disproportionate in their representation, and therefore by not dropping BP as a sponsor, this is accentuated even further, drawing parallels between the disproportion impact of climate change and the disproportionate representation in the museum.

This protest further came in response to the negotiations of COP26 that were taking place among world leaders in Glasgow, as well as the new ‘sustainability ethos’, that the British Museum published in coordination with COP26. The sustainability ethos released by the museum stated that “we are committed to reducing that impact and improving our sustainability throughout all aspects of the British Museum’s operation and supply chains”.¹⁵⁴ For *BP or not BP?* the release of the museum’s sustainability ethos

¹⁵¹ “British Museum hit by musical protest calling for “climate reparations””, *BP or not BP?*, 6 November 2021, Accessed on 10 April 2022, <https://bp-or-not-bp.org/2021/11/06/british-museum-hit-by-musical-protest-calling-for-climate-reparations/>.

¹⁵² Alice Proctor, “The Backlash Against Oil Sponsorship Can Push for Broader Change in Museums”, *Hyperallergic*, 20 March 2022, Accessed on 26 April 2022, <https://hyperallergic.com/717649/backlash-against-oil-sponsorship-can-push-for-broader-change-in-museums/>.

¹⁵³ Green, King & Morrison, “Disproportionate Burdens”, 4.

¹⁵⁴ The British Museum, “Sustainability Ethos”.

comes across as extremely ironic, especially as they continue to be sponsored by “one of the world’s most polluting fossil fuel companies”.¹⁵⁵

BP or not BP?'s actions against the British Museum can be seen as a form of climate change activist art. Activist art that discusses climate change and looks to address the societal issue of climate change is something that has become extremely prominent today, especially as climate change is becoming more pressing and urgent. Galleries and Museums are filling their exhibitions up with activist climate change artworks in order to inform the public on the need to act now in order to protect our planet, especially as museums are seen as the key way to educate the public on climate change.¹⁵⁶ In 2018 an artist from Denmark-Iceland, Olafur Eliasson, put together a temporary installation that he called *Ice Watch*, in which he put 30 blocks of ice from glaciers around green areas in London and in front of the Tate.¹⁵⁷ The message was clear, and it proved to be a big statement piece.

This is an example of artists working together with cultural institutions to seek change. However, we see little attempt from the British Museum to address the issue of climate change in radical and transformative ways with artists, despite the museum evidently having the means. The British Museum’s most ‘radical’ attempt at change is their new sustainability ethos. In this ethos they mention their 2020 Citi exhibition, that they argue was a reminder that “climate change will affect us all”.¹⁵⁸ As Sutton argues the most impact that museums can have in climate change is in “public facing activities”, such as exhibitions.¹⁵⁹ With this being the only exhibition to mention climate change, it is evident that the museum has done little to take an important lead in educating the public on climate change. *BP or not BP?* have taken on this role for the British Museum, introducing innovative performance ‘exhibitions’, that address climate change within the museum space.

Moreover, through their protests, *BP or not BP?* bring forward a strong argument in claiming that the museum is hypocritical. If the museum really was committed to being sustainable in all aspects of the museum, then BP would not be sponsoring their special

¹⁵⁵ “British Museum hit by musical protest calling for “climate reparations””, *BP or not BP?*, 6 November 2021, Accessed on 10 April 2022, <https://bp-or-not-bp.org/2021/11/06/british-museum-hit-by-musical-protest-calling-for-climate-reparations/>.

¹⁵⁶ McGhie, “Evolving Climate Change Policy and Museums”, 658.

¹⁵⁷ Decker, “Climate of Change”, 643-44.

¹⁵⁸ The British Museum, “Sustainability Ethos”.

¹⁵⁹ Sutton, “The evolving responsibility of museum work in the time of climate change”, 624.

exhibitions. This sustainability ethos further comes across as a marketing scheme and half-hearted attempt to appear 'sustainable'. It could be argued that BP itself is looking to become more sustainable, and therefore this has been taken into consideration by the British Museum. In response to the protests the museum argued that "the director and trustees think carefully about the nature and quality of sponsorship before accepting".¹⁶⁰ BP have argued that they "are committed to being part of the solution and are working every day to advance the transition to a low carbon future".¹⁶¹ Greenpeace revealed that by 2030 BP are planning to cut oil and gas production by 40%, which they described as a "credible and encouraging start from BP".¹⁶² Moreover BP have pledged to deliver 'net zero' emissions by 2050.¹⁶³

However, despite these promises made by BP, they have continued to "advance and engage in mega gas initiatives, including two plants in Burrup Hub that environmental activists have called 'the most polluting fossil fuel project ever to be proposed in Australia'".¹⁶⁴ This has been backed up by hundreds of heritage and archaeology professionals. As a result of the protest, and the museums lack of response to the protest and its sponsorship deal, these professionals signed an open letter to the British Museum demanding that they end their sponsorship deal with BP.¹⁶⁵ The open letter described that there has been clear analysis that proves that BP are far off from achieving 'net zero' emissions by 2050.¹⁶⁶ Moreover, it describes that BP's \$9 billion investment into fossil fuel in 2021 hugely overshadows their "low carbon energy

¹⁶⁰ Geraldine Kendall Adamas, "Heritage professionals call on British Museum to end BP sponsorship", *Museum Association*, 12 November 2021, Accessed on 20 April 2022, <https://www.museumsassociation.org/museums-journal/news/2021/11/heritage-professionals-call-on-british-museum-to-end-bp-sponsorship/>.

¹⁶¹ "Why we fund the arts", *BP*, Accessed on 26 April 2022, <https://www.bp.com/en/global/corporate/who-we-are/sponsorship/uk-arts-and-culture/why-we-fund-the-arts.html>.

¹⁶² Emily Davies, "BP to cut oil and gas production by 40% by 2030", *Greenpeace*, 4 August 2020, Accessed on 26 April 2022, <https://www.greenpeace.org.uk/news/bp-to-cut-oil-and-gas-production-by-40-by-2030/>.

¹⁶³ "Why we fund the arts", *BP*, Accessed on 26 April 2022, <https://www.bp.com/en/global/corporate/who-we-are/sponsorship/uk-arts-and-culture/why-we-fund-the-arts.html>.

¹⁶⁴ Valentina Di Liscia, "Toga-clad Activists Crashed British Museum's Reopening to Protest Oil Sponsorship", *Hyperallergic*, 24 May 2021, Accessed on 28 March 2022, <https://hyperallergic.com/647997/toga-clad-activists-crashed-british-museum-reopening-to-protest-oil-sponsorship/>.

¹⁶⁵ Geraldine Kendall Adamas, "Heritage professionals call on British Museum to end BP sponsorship", *Museum Association*, 12 November 2021, Accessed on 20 April 2022, <https://www.museumsassociation.org/museums-journal/news/2021/11/heritage-professionals-call-on-british-museum-to-end-bp-sponsorship/>.

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

expenditure”.¹⁶⁷ This proves that the British Museum yet again fails to see the damaging role in the climate crisis that BP plays, and instead continues to insist that they need BP’s sponsorship. It highlights the argument made by Lyons and Bosworth, that museums claim that they cannot do much to address certain issues because they simply don’t have the resources.¹⁶⁸ The museum has evidently not thought through their sponsorship deal with BP carefully enough, which is why *BP or not BP?* and other protesters continue to protest for the museum to drop BP as a sponsor.

After every protest, we see the museum repeatedly taking a position of defence towards the sponsorship deal, rather than attempting to engage with the arguments put forward by the protesters. This is highlighted further by the fact that the museum releases the same statement after every protest, stating that they, “respect other people’s right to express their views and allows peaceful protest onsite at the museum as long as there is no risk to the museums’ collection, staff or visitors”.¹⁶⁹ Permitting the protests to take place without engaging with them further, allows the museum to continue to ignore the protests and take no substantial action.

Nonetheless, the letter signed by museum professionals as a result of the protest, demonstrates that the protests are having some sort of impact and that the uproar against BP’s sponsorship is increasingly growing. *BP or not BP?* are no longer the only ones protesting, which is a huge improvement from when they started out in 2012. Although this remains largely within the circles of the cultural and museum sector and not necessarily the wider public, it shows that their cause is growing and will continue to do so. This brings us onto the latest actions undertaken by *BP or not BP?* in February, March and April 2022.

3.4: Your Future is History

In one of their most recent performance protests from February 20, 2022, *BP or not BP?* created a fake Stonehenge drilling exhibition within the Great Hall of the British Museum

¹⁶⁷ Natasha Reynolds, “An open letter to the British Museum concerning BP sponsorship”, 16 February 2022, Accessed on 26 April 2022, <https://www.natashareynolds.net/2022/02/an-open-letter-to-the-british-museum-concerning-bp-sponsorship/>.

¹⁶⁸ Lyons and Bosworth, “Museums in the Climate Emergency”, 175.

¹⁶⁹ Geraldine Kendall Adamas, “Heritage professionals call on British Museum to end BP sponsorship”, *Museum Association*, 12 November 2021, Accessed on 20 April 2022, <https://www.museumsassociation.org/museums-journal/news/2021/11/heritage-professionals-call-on-british-museum-to-end-bp-sponsorship/>.

(Fig. 8.).¹⁷⁰ The museum has recently opened an exhibition on Stonehenge that is being sponsored by BP. The protest took place in front of the entrance to the exhibition, which ensured that they were visible to all the visitors attending the exhibition. The group handed out leaflets, and acted as if this was a legitimate exhibition being held by the museum. Their fake exhibition was sarcastic, in portraying a ‘dystopian’ future, with the clear underlying message that BP is destroying our planet. They invited visitors and spectators to view the real exhibition in a different light, to demonstrate the irony of BP’s sponsorship.

Stonehenge is a world-renowned heritage site, and this play on a dystopian future in which BP damages this heritage sites, mirrors the reality of the damages that BP has and is inflicting on the planet as a result of drilling for oil. In Australia, BP continue to undergo drillings which has destroyed Indigenous rock art more ancient than Stonehenge.¹⁷¹ The use of Stonehenge as an example, brings the case of BP’s actions closer to home and therefore more relatable to members of the British public. A member of *BP or not BP?* who took part in the performance stated:

“It’s beyond ironic that BP is sponsoring an exhibition of ancient art, while simultaneously pushing forward with destroying one of the largest, densest and most diverse collections of ancient artworks in the world. How can the British Museum even be considering renewing their partnership with this cultural and ecological vandal? It’s time the museum stopped cosyng up to its corporate buddies and acted to preserve the world’s climate and cultural heritage”.¹⁷²

Their actions further came in response to evidence that was brought to light by the research group *Culture Unstained* in which they uncovered that the British Museum is planning to renew their sponsorship deal with BP.¹⁷³ This was evidenced through the exposure of private emails between Fischer and BP. As a result, *BP or not BP?* are putting

¹⁷⁰ “We create fake “Stonehenge drilling” exhibit inside BP- sponsored British Museum”, *BP or not BP?*, 20 February 2020, Accessed on 26 April 2022, <https://bp-or-not-bp.org/2022/02/20/we-create-fake-stonehenge-drilling-exhibit-inside-bp-sponsored-british-museum/>.

¹⁷¹ Ibid.

¹⁷² Ibid.

¹⁷³ Alex Thomson, “Revealed: Secretive corporate group guiding British Museum”, *Channel 4 News*, 17 February 2022, Accessed on 21 April 2022, <https://www.channel4.com/news/revealed-secretive-corporate-group-guiding-british-museum>.

in all their efforts to protest, however big or small, in order to attract continued attention and ensure that the deal is not renewed. Their repetitive actions indicate that *BP or not BP?* are in this for the long haul and are not giving up any time soon. Sarah Horne, who has been a member of *BP or not BP?* for a while, stated that “if the museum signs a new BP sponsorship deal, that would be the worst possible signal to the world about the role of fossil fuels in society right now”.¹⁷⁴

One change that demonstrates that the museum is aware of the negative connotations of being sponsored by BP, arguably as a result of the persistent protests and growing outcry, is the fact that the museum has dropped BP’s logo from the exhibition leaflets.¹⁷⁵ To some extent this takes away the recognition of BP as sponsor of the exhibition, and therefore diminishes their ability to use the British Museum to *artwash* their company. However, BP is still mentioned in name as a ‘supporter’ in the exhibition leaflets and catalogue.¹⁷⁶ Moreover, the lack of logo comes across as an attempt by the museum to hide the sponsorship deal and divert the conversation and debate surrounding it, especially at a time when a potential renewal is being discussed. By attempting to make it less evident that the exhibition is sponsored by BP, the museum is avoiding debate and backlash over the evident questions of concern that the sponsorship deal arises.

Nonetheless, the most recent protests by *BP or not BP?* have brought back the BP logo. In their re-interpretation of the Stonehenge exhibition, they displayed it as a logo associated with damaging consequences on ancient artefacts and the climate. Their actions and protests, in which the group ensured that the BP logo was prominent, is working towards changing how people associate the logo. After the protest on the 22nd February, the number of academics who signed the open letter created by Natasha Reynolds in November rose to over 300.¹⁷⁷ The open letter to the museum is “demanding

¹⁷⁴ Isabella Boneham, “British Museum: BP sponsorship called ‘inappropriate’, protests explained and should oil firms fund the arts?”, *National World*, 22 April 2022, Accessed on 26 April 2022, <https://www.nationalworld.com/news/environment/british-museum-bp-sponsorship-protests-explained-oil-firms-fund-arts-3663747>.

¹⁷⁵ Chris Garrard, “Where are the red lines on ethical fundraising”, *Arts Professional*, 2 February 2022, Accessed on 26 April 2022, <https://www.artspromotional.co.uk/magazine/351/feature/where-are-red-lines-ethical-fundraising>.

¹⁷⁶ “The World of Stonehenge”, *The British Museum*, 17 February 2022 – 17 July 2022, Accessed on 27 April 2022, <https://www.britishmuseum.org/exhibitions/world-stonehenge>.

¹⁷⁷ Alex Thomson, “Revealed: Secretive corporate group guiding British Museum”, *Channel 4 News*, 17 February 2022, Accessed on 21 April 2022, <https://www.channel4.com/news/revealed-secretive-corporate-group-guiding-british-museum>.

it sever ties with BP".¹⁷⁸ A formal submission of the letter was sent in April 2022 to the British Museum's Board of Trustees.¹⁷⁹ Evidently the protests and their message is having increasing impact, as *BP or not BP?* are no longer alone in their protests. It demonstrates the accumulative number of people in the museum and heritage sector recognising the irony and hypocrisy of the British Museum being sponsored by BP.

Moreover, *BP or not BP?* are no longer the only activist group standing up against BP's sponsorship of the British Museum. In April this year, both *Extinction Rebellion Grandparents and Elders*, and *Save Stonehenge* staged protests at the British Museum against the sponsorship deal.¹⁸⁰ Their protests were similar in their performative actions to *BP or not BP?*, in which for examples members of *Save Stonehenge* poured oil over themselves. Performance protests are growing in popularity and have become one of the major ways to protest in the museum space. This is arguably because they are effective, especially as other cultural institutions have dropped oil sponsors as a result. Most recently as a result of the backlash from the evidence uncovered by *Culture Unstained*, and protests undertaken, the National Portrait Gallery and The Scottish Ballet, have both ended their sponsorship deals with oil companies.¹⁸¹ This is a huge success for *BP or not BP?*.

BP or not BP? have refused to give up, and their determination in this crucial year of decisions is made further evident by their latest protest on April 23, 2022. This is an accumulation of four protests that have occurred so far in the month of April against the museum's sponsorship deal. As a reporter described, all this demonstrates an "escalating campaign", in which the British Museum has never received so much backlash over its sponsorship deal.¹⁸² Their protest on April 23, was undertaken on this day to mark ten years since their first ever protest at the Royal Shakespeare Company in 2012.

¹⁷⁸ Natasha Reynolds, "An open letter to the British Museum concerning BP sponsorship", 16 February 2022, Accessed on 26 April 2022, <https://www.natashareynolds.net/2022/02/an-open-letter-to-the-british-museum-concerning-bp-sponsorship/>.

¹⁷⁹ Eleanor Mills, "Activists continue calls for British Museum to ditch BP", *Museums Association*, 19 April 2022, Accessed on 26 April 2022, <https://www.museumsassociation.org/museums-journal/news/2022/04/activists-continue-calls-for-british-museum-to-ditch-bp/>.

¹⁸⁰ Ibid.

¹⁸¹ "National Portrait Gallery's BP sponsorship to end", *BBC News*, 22 February 2022, Accessed on 26 April 2022, <https://www.bbc.com/news/entertainment-arts-60476760>.

¹⁸² Nadia Khomami, "Climate and heritage experts call on British Museum to end BP sponsorship", *The Guardian*, 19 April 2022, Accessed on 26 April 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2022/apr/19/climate-and-heritage-experts-call-on-british-museum-to-end-bp-sponsorship>.

There were estimated to be around 300 people who joined the protest, which would make it one of the biggest protests against the museum since the pandemic hit.¹⁸³ Members of the protest reconstructed BP's logo in the Great Hall, and in the middle of the logo, it read 'Drop BP' (Fig. 9.). A performance was also undertaken, in which the protesters acted out a 'non-fictional' play where other cultural institutions had dropped BP as a sponsor. This aimed to highlight that the British Museum is one of the only remaining cultural institutions not to have done so. The protesters then "led the crowd in song".¹⁸⁴ The huge logo was thereafter dramatically pulled apart, and the protesters separated and moved around the rest of the museum with parts of the logo. They drew on and changed the BP logo, writing phrases such as 'Wind Not Oil' (Fig. 10.). They also occupied some of the rooms, refusing to leave after closing time. The protest involved multiple elements and different levels of participation.

The core of the protest focused on the symbolised ritual of breaking apart the BP logo. The actions were therefore directed solely against BP as the essence of the issue. Through constantly re-interpreting the logo in a negative light, at some point the sponsorship deal will not be beneficial for BP itself, as the protesters are continually and increasingly damaging their reputation. BP owned a 19.75% stake in Rosneft, a Russian oil giant. As a result of Russia's attack on Ukraine, BP has dropped all their shareholdings in Rosneft.¹⁸⁵ It was alarming that BP had such a huge stake in the first place, and even more alarming that it takes such a horrific moment such as this war for BP to realise the issue of having had this stake. It further questions BP's running as a company, and highlights that the British Museum cannot associate itself any longer with BP. This necessity is accentuated further by Deborah Locke, a member of *BP or not BP?*, who stated at the protest that, "we know from the latest UN climate report that we can extract NO

¹⁸³ Naomi Polonsky, "Hundreds Storm British Museum to Protest Fossil Fuel Sponsorship", *Hyperallergic*, 25 April 2022, Accessed on 26 April 2022, <https://hyperallergic.com/727204/british-museum-protest-fossil-fuel-sponsorship/>.

¹⁸⁴ "Mass BP action at British Museum ends with creative occupation of four galleries", *BP or not BP?*, 24 April 2022, Accessed on 26 April 2022, <https://bp-or-not-bp.org/mass-bp-action-at-british-museum-ends-with-creative-occupation-of-four-galleries/>.

¹⁸⁵ Mason Bissada, "BP Drops Nearly 20% Stake In Russian-Owned Oil Firm After Invasion Of Ukraine", *Forbes*, 27 February 2022, Accessed on 26 April 2022, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/masonbissada/2022/02/27/bp-drops-nearly-20-stake-in-russian-owned-oil-firm-after-invasion-of-ukraine/?sh=4b0c2769ecb8>.

new fossil fuels to have any hope of avoiding the worse climate scenarios. Yet, BP is planning to spend £23 billion on new oil and gas fields between now and 2030”.¹⁸⁶

The museum’s response to the information uncovered by *Culture Unstained*, the protest of *BP or not BP?* and the letter signed by museum workers, was to state that “no decision as to a future potential renewal is currently under consideration, nor is it likely to be relevant for some time”.¹⁸⁷ The museum again hides behind a defensive, passive and in denial approach. Considering that the current agreement comes to an end this year, proves that this is an extremely relevant topic at this time. Moreover, BP spoke to Channel 4 news and commented that:

“We’re proud of our partnership with the Museum which has now run for over 30 years and our current agreement runs until the end of this year. We don’t disclose the value of our sponsorship. And more generally, we respect people’s views and understand that some do not welcome our involvement. We believe that the rapid solutions needed to the critical climate issues facing the world will be reached most quickly through dialogue and engagements, with companies, governments and individuals working together”.¹⁸⁸

It is however yet to be seen how their sponsorship of the museum is opening the dialogue of climate change, suggesting that the British Museum is doing a lot of talking (arguably for good publicity), but taking little real action. Moreover, their claim that climate change issues can be addressed more quickly by working together is ironic, especially as ‘working together’ excludes the voices of the mass population, and refers largely to the elite and wealthy in society. The British Museum continues to say little in response to the actions of the protesters, but attempts to say enough to silence its critics without engaging with them. While they have moved away from calling BP ‘benevolent’, their continued positive outlook on the sponsorship deal suggests that they are not

¹⁸⁶ “Mass BP action at British Museum ends with creative occupation of four galleries”, *BP or not BP?*, 24 April 2022, Accessed on 26 April 2022, <https://bp-or-not-bp.org/mass-bp-action-at-british-museum-ends-with-creative-occupation-of-four-galleries/>.

¹⁸⁷ Brendan Montague, “British Museum will not shelve BP”, *The Ecologist*, 21 February 2022, Accessed on 30 April 2022, <https://theecologist.org/2022/feb/21/british-museum-will-not-shelve-bp>.

¹⁸⁸ Alex Thomson, “Revealed: Secretive corporate group guiding British Museum”, *Channel 4 News*, 17 February 2022, Accessed on 21 April 2022, <https://www.channel4.com/news/revealed-secretive-corporate-group-guiding-british-museum>.

listening to the protesters and are determined to renew the sponsorship deal. BP similarly has refused to indicate towards a possible renewal of the sponsorship deal. An author from the Times titled an article defending the increasing backlash of BP's sponsorship of the British Museum that, "our cultural world would be depleted if all sponsors have to be clean".¹⁸⁹ This suggests that within the media, and within generally more central and right leaning newspapers, supporters of the sponsorship deal remain. This will only work to encourage BP and the British Museum to continue their partnership.

However, Channel 4's publishing of the information uncovered by *Culture Unstained* and evident siding with the protesters demonstrates the turning tide within more popular media outlets. They expressed outrage towards the deal and the museum.¹⁹⁰ Channel 4's stand against the sponsorship deal is one of the first times a major and popular news source has taken such a stance, which is a huge development for *BP or not BP?* and highlights further that their protests are having increasing impact.

The analysis of these protests, up until the most recent protest by *BP or not BP?*, clearly demonstrate that their effectiveness and impact is escalating. We have seen more uproar in the past few months against the museum and BP, than at any point in the past 10 years. Therefore, arguably it has been *BP or not BP?*'s repetitive actions as a whole, rather than any action in particular that has seen this escalating outcry. Moreover, as climate change has become more critical, and attempts are being made to move away from the use of fossil fuels, people have started to listen to the protesters, recognising the importance of what they are fighting for.

BP or not BP? and the community of protesters that they have built, have however yet to see radical changes from those higher up in the museum as well as from BP. Whether the museum board has been listening to the protesters will be made evident within the year, dependent on the decision made in regards to the sponsorship deal. As they continue to protest again and again while the museum does little in response, the protests are having an increasing wider impact on the identity of the museum. This brings this research onto the following chapter.

¹⁸⁹ Richard Morrison, "Our cultural world will be depleted if all sponsors have to be 'clean'", *The Times*, The Arts Column, 25 February 2022.

¹⁹⁰ Alex Thomson, "Revealed: Secretive corporate group guiding British Museum", *Channel 4 News*, 17 February 2022, Accessed on 21 April 2022, <https://www.channel4.com/news/revealed-secretive-corporate-group-guiding-british-museum>.

Chapter 4: Impact on the wider museum identity

*“The backlash against oil sponsorship can push for broader change in museums”.*¹⁹¹

The performance actions of *BP or not BP?* have had wider implications on the identity of the British museum in questioning and highlighting what the museum should stand for and currently does not. To this day the British Museum continues to be run by the elite for the elite. Those running the museum present knowledge of art and history as facts and truths that cannot be argued against.¹⁹² Moreover, as the museum continues to display objects collected from Britain’s colonial era without really interacting with their complex histories, it remains a place of exclusion for minority groups and source communities.

Fleming highlights four reasons as to why museums remain places of social exclusion, because of “who has run them; what they contain; the way they have been run; and what they have been perceived to be for”.¹⁹³ These points become evident throughout the analysis of the British Museum. The structure of the museum has changed little within the past decades, as it continues to be run by white middle-aged men from the upper and middle class. Hartwig Fischer, the current director, is the prime example. The British museum has continued as it always had, with the same kind of director, whose own personal vision for the museum is put into action by the ‘public purse’.¹⁹⁴ Museums are consequently, as Raicovich argues, not welcome places for those who “do not identify as white, upper-middle class, college educated”.¹⁹⁵ As Minott describes, for a lot of people the museum is a place of cultural oppression.¹⁹⁶ The exclusion and unwelcoming feel for minorities begins before even entering the museum. Traditional Museum architecture built as ‘temples’ make reference to a ‘majestic’ past of war and colonisation, which for the colonised is a memory of destruction and pain. It seems as if the building itself has become more significant than the objects inside it.¹⁹⁷

¹⁹¹ Alice Procter, “The Backlash Against Oil Sponsorship Can Push for Broader Change in Museums”, *Hyperallergic*, 20 March 2022, Accessed on 17 April 2022, <https://hyperallergic.com/717649/backlash-against-oil-sponsorship-can-push-for-broader-change-in-museums/>.

¹⁹² Clover, “In Case of Emergency, Break Convention”, 309.

¹⁹³ *Ibid.*, 213.

¹⁹⁴ Knell, “Altered values”, 6.

¹⁹⁵ Raicovich, *Culture Strike*, 74.

¹⁹⁶ Minott, “The Past is Now”, 599.

¹⁹⁷ Fleming, “Positioning the Museum for Social Inclusion”, 216.

Instead of being a space used for elite cocktail parties, museums need to be at the forefront in addressing issues such as colonialism and the environment. This will allow them to take a more inviting stance for minority groups. In order to do so, as Hooper-Greenhill discusses, they need to properly take into account alternative viewpoints.¹⁹⁸ Museums as trusted institutions have a role in which to question the past in order to provide hope for the future. To achieve this, as Jenny Kidd discusses, museums are opening “their doors to alternative viewpoints, protest and controversy, recognising that dissent is an important riposte to their traditional positioning as ‘safe’ and ‘neutral’”.¹⁹⁹ Many museums, such as the British Museum, however have yet to open their doors wide enough to these viewpoints, and remain stuck in the past.

Through hosting exhibitions with high engagement that discuss climate change, as McGhie maintains, museums are one of the best ways to expand public knowledge on the critical climate situation.²⁰⁰ The British Museum has the capability to become an influential advocate for addressing climate change and become a place in which people can learn and engage with the critical issues facing our world today.²⁰¹ As the climate crisis is scientifically proven and a reality, the museum can no longer attempt to come across as neutral, it should be an advocate on all levels.²⁰² However, its sponsorship deal with BP continues to prove that it has not yet become a proper advocate in addressing the climate crisis. Ethical funding is a key part of the identity and values of a museum. Therefore, the unethical funding from BP of the British museum, clearly expresses the museums core values as a place that does not stand for the future of our planet.²⁰³ The British Museum has evidently not used its influence as one of the most predominant museums in the UK to raise public awareness.

The museum today is at a crucial point, in which if they are to remain relevant, they must be open to change. There is no guarantee that museums will remain in the future or even have a future.²⁰⁴ The Covid Pandemic and Black Lives Matter protests have

¹⁹⁸ Hooper-Greenhill, *Museums and the Shaping of Knowledge*, 7.

¹⁹⁹ Kidd, “Unprecedented Times?”, 388.

²⁰⁰ McGhie, “Evolving Climate Change Policy and Museums”, 658.

²⁰¹ Hebda, “Museums, Climate Change and Sustainability”, 329.

²⁰² Rodegher & Freeman, “Advocacy and Activism”, 337.

²⁰³ Chris Garrard, “Where are the red lines on ethical fundraising”, *Arts Professional*, 2 February 2022, Accessed on 26 April 2022, <https://www.artspromotional.co.uk/magazine/351/feature/where-are-red-lines-ethical-fundraising>.

²⁰⁴ Knell, “Altered values”, 12.

sped up this process of questioning the role of the museum and its purpose.²⁰⁵ The Pandemic has hit museums financially, and the Black Lives Matter protests have hit museums ideologically in questioning what they stand for, and whether they will respond to and join this voice of change. They have made it more difficult for museums to remain without a purpose. To some extent there is evidence that museums are increasingly open to change as well as actively attempting to change. For example, the publishing of the sustainability ethos in November 2021 by the British Museum demonstrates that they are aware of the increasing need to become environmentally sustainable. They aim to bring across this message to visitors of the vital importance of becoming more sustainable in order to protect the environment.

It is important to mention that workers and curators within an institution are not opposed to change, and can seek to produce some sort of change in their work. Maura Reilly coined the expression 'curatorial activism'.²⁰⁶ She brought about this term through looking at exhibitions from the 1970s, which discussed racism, sexism and homophobia. This looks at the idea of putting together exhibitions as a form of activism in demanding social change, therefore looking at the impact of a collection of artworks brought together in an institution. She argues that curators are key to questioning the cultural institution that they work in.²⁰⁷ When looking at the British Museum's attempt to curate exhibitions producing change, such as the 'Indigenous Australia' exhibition, it however becomes evident that within an institution, the exhibition becomes restrained in their discussions and impact. Moreover, any attempt at being honest and open towards discussing Britain's colonial history was wiped away by the exhibition's ironic sponsors. BP used the exhibition to minimize the negative impact of their plans to drill through ancient rock in Australia. Ultimately, it remains up to protesters to really break down the political and social barriers.

The term activism "is not a household word among museum practitioners and academics, and generates responses ranging from raised eyebrows, to mild panic, to outright criticism".²⁰⁸ Activism and protests are not words that are commonly used in combination with museums. Museums arguably tend to avoid direct interaction with

²⁰⁵ Decker, "Climate of Change", 646.

²⁰⁶ Reilly, *Curatorial Activism*, 21.

²⁰⁷ Ibid.

²⁰⁸ Janes & Sandell, "Prosperity has arrived: The Necessary emergence of museum activism", 3.

activists, as they do not want to alienate certain visitors in appearing biased.²⁰⁹ This is demonstrated by the interaction of the British Museum with the protesters, in which they repeatedly avoided direct interaction with the protest group. Museums have the power to educate people. Instead, as Sandell claims, museums are failing to address key societal issues, as they focus instead on increasing visitor numbers and incorporating new technologies.²¹⁰ Those in power, “who have nurtured and developed the heritage to its current position will find it difficult to change”, which means it is up to outsiders to bring about this change.²¹¹ Performance protests have hence become key to remaking the British Museum, and are pushing the museum to take a more activist role in society.

Their continued and repetitive participatory protests have built up a community of those working together to reshape the museum. In collaborating with other groups and minorities, by being extremely inclusive in the way they are run, as well as performing highly participatory protests, they stand out against the hierarchical structure of the museum. *BP or not BP?* represent ordinary people who are raising their voice against the museum. Their inclusive group of outsiders that oppose the museum space, is transforming the museum space for the better. They are no ordinary people; as outsiders have always been the real changers of history. These protesters are therefore essential to the future of the museum.

While these protests take place within the museum space and are therefore conforming to the space, they are formed outside the framework of the institution. This means that they are not influenced and subject to the rules of the museum, the hierarchical structure, the sponsors and donors.²¹² It is arguably only creative, performative protests formed outside the institution that can push for real change within the institution. The protesters have worked towards turning the museum space into a contested site.²¹³ In working with the architecture of the space, but forming themselves outside the framework of the museum, they are changing the use of the space. This becomes emphasised as news reports and articles publish photos in which the group have fit their performances seamlessly into the architectural space of the museum. For example, the use of the Trojan Horse in a protest was tactically brought in not only as a

²⁰⁹ Rodegher & Freeman, “Advocacy and Activism”, 337.

²¹⁰ Janes & Sandell, “Prosperity has arrived: The Necessary emergence of museum activism”, 18.

²¹¹ Young, “Rethinking Heritage”, 211.

²¹² Serafini, *Performance Action*, 179.

²¹³ Evans, *Artwash*, 141.

metaphor of the museum, but to co-ordinate with a space that houses renowned Greek sculptures. They don't aim to destruct the museum space and cause alarming havoc, but act as if they are part of the museum. For the benefit of the future of the museum, the protesters are turning this into a place of contestation and debate.

By contesting the space with their embodied and unauthorised performances, and bringing in the importance of minority voices, as argued by Serafini, the group are opposing “the institution, occupying a space, exerting pressure, and transgressing norms”.²¹⁴ It is the work of protesters that is making the museum a place of public debate and discussion rather than the museum itself. In their repetitive actions they have raised the issue of BP sponsoring the museum, resulting in open letters to the museum and growing outrage. The protests are consequently driving outsiders and even some inside the museum together in a common goal.²¹⁵ They are ultimately saving the museum for future generations in their mission to bring justice to the museum space. It is the actions of *BP or not BP?* that have ensured that the fossil fuel sponsorship of cultural institutions is at the forefront of current museological debates.²¹⁶ Through their participatory performance protests that engage spectators, their actions have increased the public awareness on climate change. *BP or not BP?* have been essential in reflecting the disproportionate effect of climate change.

While their focus is on oil sponsorship, they represent and stand for so many more, and are key to transforming the broader identity of the museum. There is a clear link between the climate crisis and colonisation, as companies such as BP buy oil from war torn countries, as well as destruct ancient artifacts through oil drilling. Artefacts in the past were arguably similarly collected through war and destruction. While the media tends to separate the controversies of repatriation and oil sponsorship, *BP or not BP?* have demonstrated that the two are very much interconnected, and both need to be overcome for the museum to move forward.

Moreover, protesters are often forgotten in their role of changing the museum. Sholette argues that collective art practices in the past have largely been forgotten and are rarely mentioned in museum collections.²¹⁷ When the Tate dropped BP as a sponsor back in 2016, the museum and BP claimed that their decision to end the sponsorship deal

²¹⁴ Serafini, *Performance Action*, 171.

²¹⁵ Raicovich, *Culture Strike*, 167.

²¹⁶ Serafini, *Performance Action*, 196.

²¹⁷ Sholette & Charnley, *Delirium and Resistance*, 49.

was not related in any way to the protests that had been taking place.²¹⁸ However, it is evident that the pressure from activists in bringing the controversial sponsorship to light played an essential role. Lyons and Bosworth, have credited in their research the role of grassroots activism in ending these sponsorships.²¹⁹ Similarly, *BP or not BP?* will likely not go down in history as the ones who changed the British Museum if they are successful in their aims. Ultimately that is not the goal of *BP or not BP?*, the goal is for a better museum and consequently a better society.

Their highly visual and participatory protests have created this growing sense of community, as more individuals have sought to get involved. The repetitiveness of their actions and protests have been key to their success and growing impact. Lilja argues that repetitive actions “construct knowledge and shake existing cultural boundaries”.²²⁰ She further argues that in order for repetitive actions to have a long term impact, while the primarily message remains the same, the actions need to change slightly to ensure that interest is maintained and grows rather than increasingly ignored.²²¹ In the actions of *BP or not BP?* we see this occur, as their repetitive protests have maintained the same discourse of the dangers of oil sponsorship, while at the same time the formation of their protests have changed. Moreover, in ensuring that every protest is different visually and includes different and new members, they have grown in impact and effectiveness over the past 10 years.

The unregulated actions of the protests enable them to demand real change, and avoid the restrictions placed by the museum regulations and curators. These performance protests in their participatory and inclusive nature, are making up for the lack of real democracy in current day cultural institutions. In refusing to engage with the protests, the leaders of the museum and BP are increasingly alienating themselves. If the museum engaged with the protesters, the two groups could work together to build a better museum. Instead, the museum and its board continue to be seen as ‘old imperial villains’, which the protesters have only highlighted further.²²² Despite their lack of engagement, the escalating backlash on oil sponsorship is working and will work towards broader change of the museum identity.

²¹⁸ Motion, “Undoing Art and Oil”, 740.

²¹⁹ Lyons and Bosworth, “Museums in the Climate Emergency”, 175.

²²⁰ Lilja, *Constructive Resistance*, 32.

²²¹ Ibid.

²²² Jason Farago, “To return or not: Who should own indigenous art?”, *BBC*, 21 April 2015, Accessed on 25 April 2022, <https://www.bbc.com/culture/article/20150421-who-should-own-indigenous-art>.

Conclusion

This research sheds light on the important role that *BP or not BP?* are undertaking in challenging the British museum to change for the better. Although it becomes evident throughout the analysis of these protests that there has been a lack of engagement and any real change from those higher up in the museum and BP, especially as the British Museum has yet to drop BP as a sponsor, it does however demonstrate that their impact and effectiveness has been growing throughout their ten years of protesting. This is largely due to their repetitive actions, which has seen the most results within the past few months as increasing numbers of people have raised their voice in protest.

Performance protests are pushing the museum to become more transparent by spreading information that the museum and BP have chosen to withhold and keep secret. It has been demonstrated time and time again that BP has had a huge and damaging impact on the environment. The unethical sponsorship of BP reflects the core values of the museum, as one that does not acknowledge the critical situation of climate change. Moreover, *BP or not BP?* have been key in bringing together and demonstrating the link between the controversies faced by the museum, including that of repatriation and unethical sponsorship. As a result, they have pushed for broader change within the traditional museum and demonstrated that the museum must face all these controversies if they are to really change and remain relevant.

In the broader picture of oil sponsorship, *BP or not BP?* have been extremely successful and effective within the past 10 years. Other art institutions have slowly been dropping oil companies as sponsors. This suggests that it is only a matter of time until the British Museum is forced to do the same, especially if they wish to avoid increasing controversies and protests. Other cultural institutions have learnt that their agreements with oil companies are no longer mutually beneficial, as a result of consistent protests and controversies.²²³ The question remains as to when the British Museum will realise the same.

As Motion argues in relation to Liberate Tate's role in ending BP's sponsorship of the Tate, which can be applied to the current situation of the British Museum, "the lesson here is that activists do not give up and they do not go away; they collaborate and escalate

²²³ Justin Williams, "The Ethics of Sponsorship", *Arts Professional*, 9 February 2022, Accessed on 23 April 2022, <https://www.artspromotional.co.uk/magazine/article/ethics-sponsorship>.

resistance”.²²⁴ Moreover, as Evans describes oil companies “desire to associate themselves with prestigious arts institutions is a survival strategy of an industry that itself feels increasingly precarious, both upstream and downstream”.²²⁵ The British Museum’s attempt to retain their sponsorship deal with the oil giant is therefore a losing battle.

BP or not BP? have played a central role in the accelerating uproar against the British museum’s sponsorship deal with BP, through their repetitive, participatory and creative performances. Their refusal to give up has been rewarded within this past year through the escalating outcry and increasing number of people joining in the protests. If it continues to accelerate, the British Museum will have no choice but to drop BP as a sponsor, especially if they are to remain relevant.

²²⁴ Motion, “Undoing Art and Oil”, 741.

²²⁵ Evans, *Artwash*, 6.

Illustrations



Fig. 1. Amy Scaife, "On the steps leading up to the exhibition", 21 April 2015, photograph.



Fig. 2. Kristian Buus, 2 May 2015, photograph.



Fig. 3. Hugo Warwick, "Oh no! Our BP drilling rig suddenly exploded, causing a huge oil spill all over the Museum's floor", 19 July 2015, photograph.



Fig. 4. Hugo Warwick, "Protesters bring a BP Trojan Horse to the British Museum", 7 February 2020, photograph.



Fig. 5. Ron Fassbender, "Photos of the mass action at the British Museum", 10 February 2020, photograph.



Fig. 6. Ron Fassbender, 6 November 2021, photograph.



Fig. 7. Ron Fassbender, 6 November 2021, photograph.



Fig. 8. Ron Fassbender, "BP's 'Head of Questionable Projects' in action", 20 February 2022, photograph.



Fig. 9. *BP or not BP*, “The logo from above”, 23 April 2022, photograph.



Fig. 10. *BP or not BP*, “Some of the art created from the logo”, 23 April 2022, photograph.

Credits Illustrations

- Fig. 1. Downloaded 29 April 2022, <https://bp-or-not-bp.org/2015/04/21/protesters-gatecrash-exhibition-launch-over-stolen-culture-and-bp-sponsorship/>.
- Fig. 2. Downloaded 29 April 2022, <https://bp-or-not-bp.org/2015/05/02/we-create-an-oil-spill-inside-the-british-museum-with-reverend-billy-and-the-stop-shopping-choir/>.
- Fig. 3. Downloaded 29 April 2022, <https://bp-or-not-bp.org/2015/07/19/actor-vists-are-occupying-the-british-museum/>.
- Fig. 4. Downloaded 29 April 2022, <https://bp-or-not-bp.org/2020/02/07/breaking-weve-snuck-a-huge-trojan-horse-into-the-british-museum/>.
- Fig. 5. Downloaded 29 April 2022, <https://news.artnet.com/art-world/climate-activists-protest-british-museum-bp-1773738>.
- Fig. 6. Downloaded 29 April 2022, <https://bp-or-not-bp.org/2021/11/06/british-museum-hit-by-musical-protest-calling-for-climate-reparations/>.
- Fig. 7. Downloaded 29 April 2022, <https://bp-or-not-bp.org/2021/11/06/british-museum-hit-by-musical-protest-calling-for-climate-reparations/>.
- Fig. 8. Downloaded 29 April 2022, <https://bp-or-not-bp.org/2022/02/20/we-create-fake-stonehenge-drilling-exhibit-inside-bp-sponsored-british-museum/>.
- Fig. 9. Downloaded 29 April 2022, <https://bp-or-not-bp.org/mass-bp-action-at-british-museum-ends-with-creative-occupation-of-four-galleries/>.
- Fig. 10. Downloaded 29 April 2022, <https://bp-or-not-bp.org/mass-bp-action-at-british-museum-ends-with-creative-occupation-of-four-galleries/>.

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