

Museums Association Ethics Committee Response to Art Not Oil Allegations

August 2016

Following a direct request from the Art Not Oil Coalition, the Museums Association Ethics Committee considered the Coalition's report published in May 2016 that sets out a number of allegations of unethical behaviour by several national museums relating to their sponsorship deals with BP. The Committee, which is independent and consists of senior museums professionals from across the UK, has discussed these allegations at length and sets out its response and guidance below.

The Committee recognises that a range of interest groups and members of the public have strongly held convictions about the business practices of BP, and its relations with cultural organisations. We recognise their right to campaign on these issues, and to question the impact of individual sponsors on public trust in museums. However, it is important to note that the Ethics Committee's remit extends to a consideration of the relationship between a museum and a sponsor; it does not extend to commenting more generally on the global practices of BP.

The MA's Code of Ethics for Museums sets out an expectation that museums should "Exercise due diligence in understanding the ethical standards of commercial partners with a view to maintaining public trust and integrity in all museum activities." (Para 3.6).

The Committee understands that the museums involved in this case have made a commitment to upholding this principle through their internal ethics committees or similar means of ethical oversight, and encourages them to carefully scrutinize all sponsorship deals in light of the recently revised Code of Ethics for Museums to ensure that the values of the museum and the sponsor are aligned and that public trust is maintained. However, the Committee does not believe that there can be a one-size-fits-all solution to sponsorship issues, and it is not the role of the Ethics Committee to hold a list of proscribed companies or industries that museums should avoid.

With regards to the specific allegations made by Art Not Oil relating to the behaviour of the museums' security teams, the Committee believes that it is legitimate and desirable for a museum to seek to protect its visitors, its staff, its collections and its assets when a protest is planned within the museum. It is common practice for a museum to share security knowledge with others in the sector and with the police.

Whilst the Committee acknowledges a general erosion of public space for peaceful protest, there is no evidence that the museums in question have prevented peaceful protest from taking place. Indeed, the Committee believes that these museums have gone to substantial effort to accommodate these protests. If there are cases in which staff members have been forced to control protests against their professional judgement, the employees in question should adhere to institutional policies and procedures for recording grievances. As regards the allegations relating to

incomplete FOI returns, this is a legal matter which should, if necessary, be resolved via the Information Commissioner's Office.

With regards to the allegations made by Art Not Oil relating to sponsor influence over museum programming, the Committee believes that it is common practice for a museum to update a sponsor on the planning and content of an exhibition. It is also common practice for a sponsor to be represented on a judging panel. With reference to sponsor influence over curatorial decision-making, the Committee recommends against seeking direct approval on acquisitions or exhibition content, as it may create pressures to self-censor or give the appearance of undue sponsor influence. However, the Committee also notes that updating a sponsor on the changing use of sponsorship funds - i.e. from a commission to an acquisition - is appropriate.

With regards to the allegations made by Art Not Oil relating to lobbying and policy access, the Committee believes that it is standard practice for sponsorship agreements to involve a range of events, which may involve networking between different sectors. There is no evidence that any of the museums mentioned have exceeded their position in supporting a sponsor in this way.

Furthermore, the Art Not Oil report quoted a number of emails between staff members and BP employees. None of the emails quoted in the report suggest anything other than polite correspondence and friendly working relationships. There is no evidence that these relationships undermined the broader public interest, and indeed the Committee would be concerned if museum staff felt unable to maintain polite professional relationships out of concern that these would be revealed in public. The inclusion of such correspondence in the Art Not Oil report was considered poorly judged.

The Ethics Committee wishes to acknowledge the difficult operating context in the museum sector at present whilst also recognising the productive roles that museums and the public can play in fostering debate. The Committee wishes to thank all parties involved in this issue for their co-operation and will continue to work with all the parties involved to ensure that museums are upholding the Code of Ethics for Museums.

NOTE: The Museums Association Ethics Committee is a committee of senior independent museum professionals, academics, those with legal expertise and museum users. Its role is to provide advice and guidance on ethical issues facing museums, based on the Code of Ethics for Museums and related guidance produced by the Museums Association.