



Art Without Oil – The People Trying to End Fossil Fuel Cultural Sponsorship

Fossil Free Culture NL has been working to remove Shell from the city's museum quarter.

SK

By [Sophie Knight](#)

November 10, 2020, 6:17pm



ALL PHOTOS: LAURA PONCHEL

A group of “artivists” has successfully managed to rid Amsterdam’s museum quarter of fossil fuel money, after a series of artistic performances in the Van Gogh Museum and the Concertgebouw.

Fossil Free Culture NL (FFCNL), a collective of artists, activists, researchers and critics, celebrated their victory on the lawn of Amsterdam’s Museumplein, after the Concertgebouw made public in September that Shell was no longer part of



balconies at the end of a concert.

The Concertgebouw was the last institution on Amsterdam's museum square still to have ties to the fossil fuel industry – the Rijksmuseum quietly dropped Saudi oil conglomerate Aramco in 2017, and in 2018, the Van Gogh Museum cut its ties with Shell after intense pressure from FFCNL, which performed six times in and around the gallery.

Environment

50 Examples of Climate Privilege to Show People Who Still Don't Get It

YEWANDE ADENIRAN

09.25.20



FFCNL CELEBRATING FOSSIL FUEL FREE MUSEUMPLEIN. PHOTO: LAURA PONCHEL

FFCNL is part of an international movement to stop “artwashing” – attempts by fossil fuel companies to clean up their image by sponsoring cultural institutions. Arguing that accepting oil money in the midst of a climate emergency is ethically



And they're increasingly successful: since October last year, the Royal Shakespeare Company, the National Theatre, National Galleries Scotland, the Southbank Centre & BFI, and Amsterdam's Concertgebouw have dropped either Shell or BP as sponsors. Artwashing is fast becoming a doomed strategy for fossil fuel companies. Oil money now looks to institutions almost as rancid as cash from arms and tobacco companies. And that's worrying Shell and BP.

BP's new CEO, Bernard Looney, acknowledged the impact of activists' opposition on the business's social standing, while Shell has overhauled its sponsorship strategy as a result, moving away from the arts to focus on scientific institutions. Its CEO, Ben van Beurden, has said that hanging onto the company's social license to operate — which is under threat from a resurgence of climate activism and shifting public sentiment — is one of the company's top three priorities. Van Beurden is right to worry: in January, the chair of the UK's Oil and Gas Authority warned that the industry would struggle to attract investors and to maintain public approval if it did not drastically change.

FFCNL began targeting the Van Gogh Museum in 2017, blending artistic performances with protest (they renounce the term "activist"). In one of their first performances, seven women (or "muses") dressed in white sipped molasses from shells and let it dribble down to the steps. They were arrested and held for three days for "damaging private property" — a move that triggered public disbelief and widespread support. Later, they dropped 12-metre long banners in the central staircase while Naomi Pieters, a queer and anti-racist activist, read out their manifesto to "End the fossil fuel age now".

World News

South Africa Risks Cutting the People Who Matter Out of its Climate Crisis Response

GEORGE SICHINGA,
MARTA VIGANÒ

10.30.20



PHOTO: LAURA PONCHEL

After the Van Gogh caved, followed swiftly by The Hague's Mauritshuis and Museon also dropping Shell, FFCNL turned its sights to the Concertgebouw, the most prestigious classical music venue in the Netherlands. Last autumn, members of the group handed out glasses of black champagne at the opening of the cultural season, and unrolled a poem written on enormous banners during an encore. While the Concertgebouw's press officer says that it was Shell's decision to leave the business club, the director of the Concertgebouw, Simon Reinink, emailed FFCNL three times complaining about the disruption caused by their performances, and asking to meet and negotiate.

Shell says that it decided to leave the business club because it "was no longer a fit with [its] renewed focus" on "science, technical education and sustainable entrepreneurship". "Activities from FFC [sic] had nothing to do with that decision," wrote press officer Laura van Lingen in an email.

The Van Gogh Museum also denies that its decision to end its contract with Shell had anything to do with FFCNL. But the museum's 2017 annual report said it was



And in contrast to UK institutions, which have tended to drop BP with a declaration of a climate emergency and a commitment to no longer accept fossil fuel money, the silence from Dutch institutions is striking: none of the institutions that have cut their ties with Shell have linked this publicly to either climate change concerns. Last December, the Dutch daily Het Financieele Dagblad published an article about the remarkable lack of debate in the Netherlands around unethical sponsorship in the arts. None of the directors at Dutch artistic institutions approached by the paper were willing to speak about the ethics of sponsorship.

“The whole cultural sector does not say a word. And I feel that we are being gently censored. If you don’t speak about it, it doesn’t exist,” said Daniela Paes Leão, a member of FFCNL.

One reason for this hush might be that Shell still enjoys a relatively positive image in its homeland, where many can name a family member or friend that works for the company. However, its public image has been soured in recent years as the Dutch arm of Friends of the Earth and more than 17,000 Dutch co-plaintiffs sued the company for aggravating the climate crisis, and increasing protests hit the news. Along with the rest of the Dutch climate movement, FFCNL is keen to dismantle the image that Shell tries to present: the innovative homegrown multinational that the country can be proud of.

With the shift in sponsorship policy, Shell is apparently hoping to avoid criticism of incongruent public relations deals, and cast itself as a hero of the energy transition and science and education. While Shell acknowledges the climate crisis and the need to embrace renewable energy, its current plan of cutting emissions in half by 2050 fails to meet the Paris Agreement, which requires that reduction by 2030. Along with its sponsorship strategy, its advertising and marketing is entirely focused on its renewable energy efforts, but 90 percent of



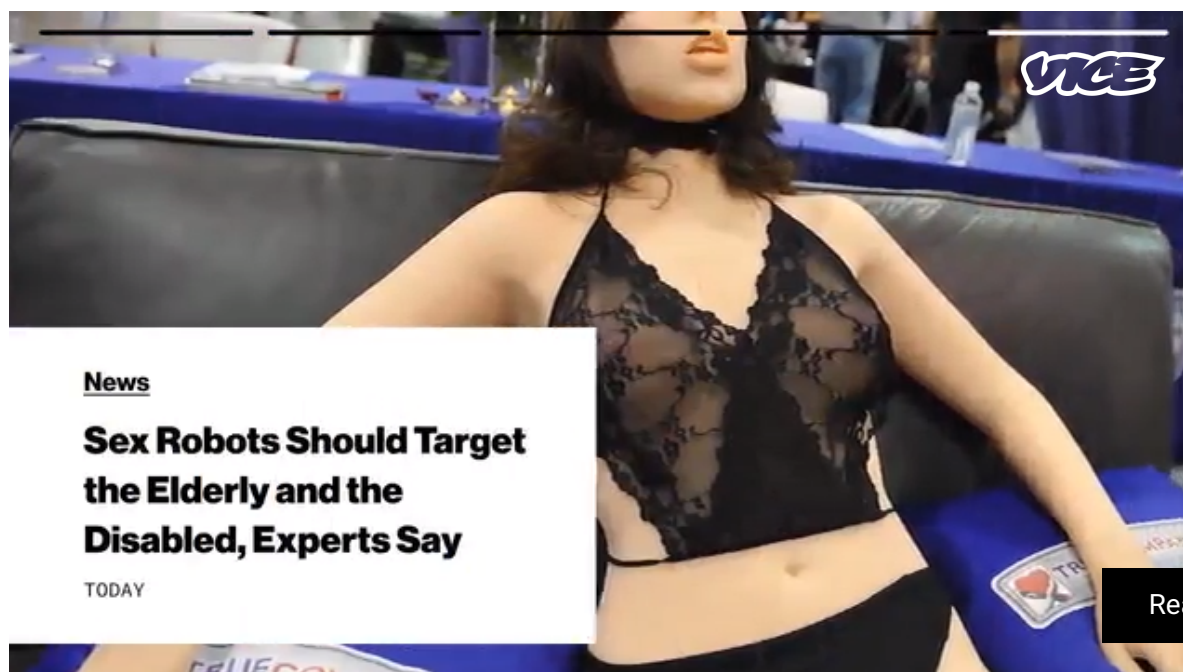
FFCNL is not planning to let Shell's pivot in strategy go quietly: it has already announced NEMO, a science museum in Amsterdam that is the city's last cultural institution sponsored by Shell, as its next target. Teresa Borasino, another member of the group, says: "It is unacceptable that an oil company that has a track record in spreading misinformation discrediting climate science gets to have a say in educational programmes of the science museum. When NEMO drops Shell as a partner, Amsterdam will finally have a cultural sector completely free of oil and gas sponsorship."

TAGGED: [CLIMATE CHANGE](#), [VICE INTERNATIONAL](#), [WORLDNEWS](#)

GET A PERSONALIZED ROUNDUP OF VICE'S BEST STORIES IN YOUR INBOX.

[Subscribe](#)

By signing up to the VICE newsletter you agree to receive electronic communications from VICE that may sometimes include advertisements or sponsored content.





MORE FROM VICE

Tech

A Massive Oil Spill in the Arctic Has Turned a River Red

BECKY FERREIRA

4.6.20

Climate Uprise

Can Geoengineering Fix the Climate Crisis?

CHARLOTTE NIJHUIS

25.9.20

World News

An Abandoned Oil Tanker In the Caribbean Is an Environmental Time Bomb

LILLIAN PERLMUTTER

23.10.20

Environment

How Exxon Silences Staff Alarmed by the Climate Crisis, According to a Former Employee

GEOFF DEMBICKI

29.10.20

Environment

50 Examples of Climate Privilege to Show People Who Still Don't Get It

YEWANDE ADENIRAN

25.9.20

News

Gen Z Climate Activists You Should Know Who Aren't Greta Thunberg

KATHERINE TUTRONE

28.9.20







VICE media group

[ABOUT](#)

[JOBS](#)

[PARTNER](#)



[PRIVACY & TERMS](#)

[DO NOT SELL MY INFO](#)

© 2020 VICE MEDIA GROUP