

Defacing Art as a Form of Protest

Climate change is an increasingly pressing issue. With historically high temperatures around the globe, intense wildfires, and severe hurricanes, we're already seeing some of its effects. Hundreds of organizations are trying to draw attention to the issue by protesting peacefully and educating the public. However, when met with inaction, some protesters have turned to more disruptive forms of protest. A few incidents have gained attention worldwide. For example, two members of the group *Just Stop Oil* threw tomato soup at Vincent van Gogh's "Sunflowers" in 2022. As civil disobedience becomes a more common framework for protesting, questions arise about its morality and effectiveness as a form of activism.

During the *Just Stop Oil* protest involving van Gogh's Sunflowers, one of the protesters delivered a speech while glued to a wall near the painting, asking visitors whether they were "more concerned about the protection of a painting or the protection of our planet and people." Many activists consider these kinds of tactics necessary because other peaceful and non-disruptive methods have not been effective. They seek swift, effective publicity to convey the urgency of their cause, and involving works of art has become a pathway for them to reach this goal. "No art on a dead planet" is a popular slogan, which summarizes protesters' views on the issue.

Others oppose these protests, especially people involved with the targeted museums, which have faced great financial repercussions from the protests — having to pay for the restoration of the artwork, hiring additional staff members for security, and enacting proactive measures such as adding protective glass to paintings. The immediate consequences of the protests have also included heavy fines and jail time for protesters. Along with pointing out the protests' negative consequences, people also question their effectiveness. They argue that these kinds of disruptive tactics actually undermine the ideas and credibility of the organizations carrying out the protests and are therefore counterproductive. Critics question whether it is ethical to damage artwork, which originally had nothing to do with climate change, to draw attention to this cause.

Discussion Questions

1. Are these kinds of disruptive protests ethical? Why or why not?
2. If disruptive protests are not ethical, how can those in power be held responsible?
3. How should we balance the importance of one cause over another? Is there an objective way to do this?
4. What is the role of motive when deciding the appropriate consequences for an action?