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ACTIVIST EXPRESSIONISM, THE NEO-ICONOCLASM

How Climate Activists' Interventions Expand Aesthetic Semiotics and Add a New Context to Classic Art

by Khaled Ramadan

Social Justice, Civil Disobedience, and Cultural Ownership

The 1961 theft of Francisco Goya's Portrait of the Duke of Wellington from London's National Gallery represents a unique convergence of art, civil disobedience, and social justice. Kempton Bunton, a retired bus driver from Newcastle, confessed to the theft, asserting that his actions were a form of political protest rather than criminal intent. Bunton aimed to pressure the British government into providing free television licenses for pensioners, viewing access to public information and entertainment as a fundamental right. By appropriating a nationally treasured artwork, Bunton challenged institutional authority and class privilege, highlighting the notion that public art should be democratically accessible rather than reserved for an elite minority. His actions transformed the museum into a site of protest, using the painting as a symbolic tool to critique cultural elitism.[1]

Based on the story of the painting theft, the 2020 film *The Duke*, directed by Roger Michell, portrays Bunton not as a conventional criminal, but as an individual who repurposed national heritage to advocate for compassion, inclusion, and civic responsibility. In 1965, Bunton surrendered himself and the painting to the police, and during his trial it was revealed that he had taken the painting temporarily to draw attention to his cause. Remarkably, the court acquitted him of stealing the painting but convicted him of stealing its frame, which was never recovered. He served three months in prison. Bunton's case stands as one of the earliest examples of individual activism in which a renowned artwork was taken as a form of hostage, leveraging the symbolic and institutional power of art to express a socially engaged political manifesto.

Climate Activist Canvas: The Aesthetics of Protest

In recent years, major institutions like the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Guggenheim Museum have hosted events and actions involving climate activists, including groups like Extinc-

tion Rebellion. These actions, ranging from "silent sit-ins" at the Met to banner displays at the Guggenheim, were designed to raise awareness of the urgency of climate issues. At the American Museum of Natural History, activists staged a "die-in" by lying in front of exhibits as a symbolic protest against the institution's fossil fuel funding ties.[2]

During these protests, activists and museum representatives frequently engaged in discussions on whether museums should leverage their influence to support the climate discourse actively. Advocates argue that museums, given their reach and cultural authority, bear a responsibility to spotlight environmental issues. Such events have also sparked a broader debate over how museums balance the preservation of their artifacts with engagement in activism aligned with their institutional values.[3]

Curators here and there hold varied opinions on these actions. While some appreciate the performative aspects of such protests, others express concerns about potential risks, including increased security demands and the possibility of copycat actions that could endanger the artworks.[4]

Yet, activists continue to challenge traditional boundaries within the art world, transforming performative and action-based art into direct interventions that extend beyond academic and institutional confines. By staging their actions in public and semi-public spaces, they seek to generate immediate, tangible effects, bypassing the limitations imposed by galleries and museums. In this way, their approach aligns with what Claire Bishop[5], Shannon Jackson[6], and Nato Thompson[7] describe as socially engaged art practices that deliberately blur the role of art in public life. Rather than relying on symbolic representation, these interventions compel spectators to confront political, social, and environmental issues firsthand, positioning artistic action as an urgent and participatory force within contemporary society.[8]

These iconoclastic activist actions, often categorized as crimes against art, prompt us to analyze not just the actions themselves but also their physical outcomes through a visual forensic lens. Their interventions transform original artworks, altering their appearance, style, and aesthetics. Regardless of whether one appreciates or condemns these performative actions, they invite us to interpret their impact beyond mere defacement. As these acts continue to provoke public discourse, the underlying question remains: what holds greater value, art or life?

Notably, some art societies and agencies have begun to incorporate these activists, who once challenged traditional norms from the outside, into their programs as speakers and exhibitors, compelling us to reconsider the boundaries dividing activism and the arts. In this way, several

art institutions, particularly museums, have begun engaging with climate activists who have vandalized artworks as part of their efforts to critically address and negotiate climate change.

Important examples include the Whitney Museum of American Art and the Birmingham Museum of Art, both of which have hosted events featuring activists to foster dialogue on the intersections of art and activism. In the UK, the Royal Academy and the Tate have collaborated with activists from Just Stop Oil to explore the implications of their protests on the art world. Additionally, the Institute of Contemporary Arts (ICA) in London has organized discussions with activists to address these urgent issues. This leads to a critical question: Could such institutional interventions contribute to the normalization or legitimization of acts that are, by their very nature, deemed vandalistic by nearly all art institutions?

Historically, such disruptive practices echo the spirit of action painting, which redefined artistic creation in the 1940s and 1950s. Figures like Jackson Pollock and Willem de Kooning turned the act of painting into a performance, with Pollock's "drip painting" style focusing attention on the artist's movements and transforming the canvas into an arena of action.[9] This genre, identified by Harold Rosenberg as "action painting," became a distinctly American response to European art traditions, valuing spontaneity, raw expression, and the process of formation as much as the final image.[10]

In recent years, climate activists have adopted similar methods within art spaces, initiating a contentious discourse on preservation versus intervention, which can also be seen as the expansion of an old style into a more experimental modern one. Groups such as Just Stop Oil, Last Generation, and Extinction Rebellion target iconic artworks, like Van Gogh's *Sunflowers* and Monet's Les Meules, reshaping public relationships to these pieces through acts of "transformation through destruction." These interventions recall earlier art vandalism that challenged socio-political norms and cultural values, adding a complex new layer to the historical, symbolic, and social significance of these artworks.[11]

Historical Precedents of Art as Activism

Throughout art history, some artists have sought rapid career advancement by engaging in provocative actions designed to swiftly capture public and media attention. Similarly, activists often target renowned works of art, not for personal recognition, but because attacking a famous object makes one famous and ensures significant media coverage, driven by the sensational nature of such acts. While such high-profile actions effectively draw attention to their causes, they simultaneously provoke critical debates about the boundaries of protest, the sanc-

tity of art, and the ethics of using cultural heritage as a platform for a manifesto of activism.
Interestingly, there has been little to no substantial push to ban the organizations affiliated with these activists, even when their members carry out controversial interventions. Groups like Just Stop Oil remain operational and free from prosecution, despite inspiring or facilitating disruptive acts. Legal accountability is instead directed at individual members, who are prosecuted for their personal actions without implicating their organizations.[12] This selective approach to accountability has sparked broader discussions about institutional responsibility.[13] Should organizations that encourage or inspire such acts bear some degree of legal responsibility, or is prosecuting individual actors sufficient to address these disruptions?[14]

The approach mirrors previous actions in which art was transformed or attacked as a statement against broader social or political issues. In the early 20th century, suffragettes targeted art institutions across the UK, slashing paintings like Velázquez's *Rokeby Venus* as a protest against women's disenfranchisement. This act was not just about damaging the artwork but symbolized the violence and disregard that women faced, thus recontextualizing the painting's representation of femininity into a rallying cry for equality.[15]

Additionally, during the Vietnam War, activists targeted art institutions to protest governmental complicity in the conflict for instance, the Art Workers' Coalition organized demonstrations at New York's Museum of Modern Art, demanding that the museum sever ties with its trustees who had contracts with the US defence establishment. A similar action was manifested in 2024 during the war on Gaza, major museums and galleries found themselves under pressure from artists and protesters for their perceived complicity via funding, board membership, or institutional silence. At MoMA in New York, for example, protesters physically occupied galleries and held banners accusing trustees of funding the war, demanding their removal. At the Brooklyn Museum, activists occupied the lobby, unfurled banners with messages such as "Free Palestine, Divest From Genocide," and there was reported damage to outdoor (and some indoor) works of art and sculptures during the protests. These actions suggest that cultural artifacts even those long revered are regarded as legitimate "collateral" in protest when institutions do not respond to what activists consider urgent moral and political failures.[16]

Though differing in form and concept, graffiti culture emerged as a means of reclamation and expression in marginalized communities, often challenging the exclusivity of the art world. Artists like Jean-Michel Basquiat and Banksy elevated the so-called vandalism to an art form,[17] repurposing public spaces

to comment on social injustice and inequalities.[18] Eventually, the artistic value of graffiti art gained greater recognition through exhibitions in renowned art museums across the US, UK, the Netherlands, Switzerland, France, and Germany.[19] This development highlights the role of art institutions in shaping what is recognized as art and deemed worthy of exhibitions and critical discourse.

Today's activists draw from this tradition, repurposing classic art in institutional spaces to democratize and liberate the message to bring critical awareness to issues of environmental and social justice. Recent interventions targeting specific artworks are worth examining in this light, as they highlight a pattern of artworks serving dual roles: as revered objects and as activist canvases.

On October 14, 2022, activists from Just Stop Oil threw orange colored soup on Vincent van Gogh's Sunflowers in London's National Gallery.[20] They carefully selected their target, and by doing so, they symbolized the paradox of beauty versus the harsh reality of environmental degradation. The transformation of the piece, even if temporary, suggested a provocative recontextualization from static beauty to an agile, energetic commentary on impermanence and decay.

On October 23, 2022, a few days after the action at London National Gallery, Last Generation activists threw yellow color mashed potatoes on Claude Monet's *Les Meules* at the Museum Barberini in Germany, connecting the pastoral themes of Monet's landscapes to the destruction wrought by climate change.[21] Their campaign act, though impermanent, forced audiences to consider the fragility of natural landscapes not only in art, but in reality, as climate policies continue to falter.

Also, on October 9, 2022, the Extinction Rebellion activist group glued themselves to the protective covering of Pablo Picasso's Massacre in Korea in Melbourne's National Gallery of Victoria. Here, the act brought an anti-war painting into dialogue with contemporary issues of environmental degradation, symbolically linking political violence like the ongoing Israeli war on Gaza and Lebanon with the ecological violence perpetrated by the climate crisis.[22]
Picasso's anti-war message was thus expanded to include ecological themes, a reflection of how art's intended meaning can be stretched to encapsulate urgent global concerns.[23]

A March Towards a New "Ism" in Art History?

While acts of vandalism have often been classified as mere destruction, their effects on the art pieces in question suggest a new category of transformation. Classic art works temporarily shift to an abstract or conceptual state as their physical appearance and integrity are

altered, leading to a redefinition of their symbolic meaning. These artworks might even achieve a hybrid status of aesthetics as both historical artifacts and contemporary commentaries. Evidently, this dual identity disrupts conventional boundaries in art, highlighting the potential for art to evolve and serve as a catalyst for discourse on issues that transcend the work's original aesthetic intent, story, and even history.[24]

In embracing such transformations, one might contend that these protest actions form part of a new "ism," with a small i, a movement where activist interventions in art reshape our interpretation of classic pieces, merging them with complex, pressing contemporary narratives. This perspective argues that acts of protest go beyond mere vandalism; they reframe classic artworks as vehicles for building awareness. They not only maintain the original message of the artworks but also infuse them with current human affairs, giving them additional relevance in our view. For instance, by targeting iconic pieces like Van Gogh's Sunflowers or Klimt's Tod und Leben, activists transform these artworks into symbols of urgency regarding climate change and much-needed social justice.

Rather than being viewed solely as objects of aesthetic value, they now serve as platforms for the message of activism, bridging the unbridgeable gap between classicism and activism. This evolution reflects a profound interconnection between classic art and modern activism, wherein the latter elevates the significance of the former by positioning it within a broader discourse on current social matters.

Expanding on the idea of transforming classic artworks through activist interventions, we might consider these acts as generating an "aesthetic of protest" that both disassembles and reconstructs visual narratives. By disrupting the stability of the original aesthetic form, activists inadvertently establish a new visual and conceptual vocabulary. This process produces a form of "protest abstraction" in which the piece oscillates between its historical meaning and an urgent, politically charged reinterpretation.[25]

Whether we like it or not, the history and reality of targeted artworks have changed irrevocably. The visual elements, look, color, and shape of these pieces have been expanded to a degree where the titles and representations have also been altered. For instance, Van Gogh's *Sunflowers* can no longer exist solely as it once did, regardless of the restoration process. It now occupies a dual existence, characterized by its pre- and post-intervention states. Considering such interventions, we could propose a redefined title: *Sunflowers with Potato Soup*, by Vincent van Gogh, Phoebe Plummer, and Anna Holland. Originally created in 1888, with additional modifications introduced on October 14, 2022. Courtesy of the National Gallery in London.

The redefinition alters the artwork's aesthetic significance within both cultural and political contexts. Such modifications further challenge viewers to engage with the artwork on multiple levels, prompting critical discussions about its implications today rather than merely reflecting upon an artwork produced more than 150 years ago. This shift highlights the evolving role of art in contemporary discourse, where its relevance is inextricably linked to current social and political realities.

The Altered Visual Language of Classic Artworks

These actions paradoxically imbue the targeted objects with new layers of significance, leaving a legacy of transformative interpretation. The aesthetic of protest in these cases operates within a constructivist framework, wherein the destruction and alteration of the artwork are not merely negative actions but creative ones that engage the object directly with the current socio-political landscape.[26] [27]

When Just Stop Oil threw yellow soup on Van Gogh's Sunflowers, the splatter introduced a new visual layer that diverged from Van Gogh's original brushwork, transforming this classic piece into something reminiscent of Jackson Pollock's style. The visual chaos created by such acts speaks to themes of fragmentation and crisis, echoing the instability of the environmental issues at hand and recasting a once serene and stable artwork into one of volatility.

The soup throwing also introduced an element of "excess" into a tightly composed aesthetic form, drawing parallels to the Dada movement's assault on traditional art conventions. This interrupts the initial harmony of color, line, and form, compelling viewers to confront both the alteration and its implications. The introduction of these transient materials, substances foreign to the world of fine art, reshapes the artwork's semiotic field, temporarily recontextualizing it from a purely aesthetic artifact into a vehicle for urgency and alarm, much like the aggressive brushstrokes found in abstract expressionism.[28]

These interventions further add a layer of intertextuality; the works are no longer simply historical masterpieces but are modernized, carrying contemporary socio-political weight. This "new look" repositions the art within a system of signs that demand action, encouraging viewers to reconsider the purpose and relevance of the piece. Thus, the activists transform these works into complex signifiers that function on dual levels: as canonical art and as a form of protest.[29]

"Aesthetics of Protest": An Emerging Form of Abstract Expr-activism

The notion of the "aesthetics of protest" suggests that artworks become living objects within an expanded narrative framework, transcending their historical or visual foundations and origins. In this sense, the modifications enacted by activists may be giving rise to a new art movement akin to abstract expressionism, which could be termed "Abstract Expr-activism." However, this emerging movement is firmly rooted in political immediacy rather than personal introspection.[30]

The altered artworks adopt a transient quality that conveys chaos, urgency, and aggression, resonating with urgent social issues while challenging viewers to move beyond passive observation.[31]

These activist-led transformations can be conceptualized as "protest de-constructivism," wherein the artwork gains a new conceptual framework as a hybrid form. This process elevates vandalism from an act of destruction to one of re-production. Each intervention constructs an additional layer of meaning, transforming classic beauty into a medium for reflecting the fractured state of today's world with all its complexity and materiality. This emerging movement encourages viewers to perceive these masterpieces as living art, fluid, evolving objects that can be reconfigured and recontextualized, embracing a form of political abstractionism that is as disruptive as it is reconstructive.[32]
Ultimately, this "aesthetic of protest" underscores how activist interventions do not compromise art's integrity but rather renew it, constructing a hybrid form that serves as a symbol both historically and contemporarily. By doing so, these actions duplicate a new dialogic space in which art becomes both witness and participant in activism, embodying a temporal fluidity that defines its new constructivist form.[33]

The disruptive actions of climate activists on classic artworks introduce a new layer of semiotic meaning by altering the established visual language of these masterpieces. Through physical interventions such as throwing liquids or gluing themselves to surfaces, these activists create an unintentional yet persuasive layer of abstraction, positioning the artwork within a context far beyond its original scope. While inherently transgressive, these acts arguably represent a new form of aesthetic production: a "political abstraction" that fuses elements of protest, performance, and visual art.[34]

Can Site-Specific Performative Activist Acts be Considered a New Form of Art?

One could argue that the activists' actions create a new artwork through "unauthorized collaboration" with the original piece, blending classic high art with the

gritty immediacy of political street art. This merging aligns with the concept of "happening" in performance art, where intentional shock and impermanence become integral components of the artwork. Activists assume aesthetic agency, repurposing classic forms into vehicles for immediate and impactful statements. This approach aligns with semiotician Roland Barthes' idea of the "death of the author," wherein the original artist's intent is eclipsed by the new meanings generated through activist intervention. In this sense, classic paintings evolve into "living texts," rather than dead objects, open to reinterpretation and, in this case, physical transformation, thus becoming unique, ephemeral pieces of political abstraction in themselves.[35]

The notion of vandalism as an art form isn't novel but gains unique meaning in these instances. The layers of material and the site-specific performative acts surrounding the interventions can be interpreted as a complete, temporary piece, a "protest sculpture," where both the original art and the protest materials coalesce into a hybrid artwork carrying a powerful, albeit transient, message.[36]

Activists as Autodidactic Artists: A New Category or a Clash of Territories?

Not as inspiration but as an observation and reflection on the act of those activists, let me at this stage share a brief remark. Rather than relentlessly searching for new forms and formats, contemporary art might be better understood as a practice of revisiting, expanding, and reinterpreting existing works within evolving cultural and historical contexts. Particularly among young contemporary artists, the pursuit of absolute originality often proves elusive, as artistic expression, whether produced in the West or the East, inevitably adheres to recognizable structures shaped by historical precedents and institutional frameworks. In this sense, artistic innovation does not necessarily require the abandonment of past works but rather a critical engagement with their physical and conceptual transformation. By engaging with existing artworks, contemporary artists do not merely reproduce the past but actively renegotiate its meanings, exposing latent tensions, revising dominant narratives, and inserting previously excluded voices. This investigative archival approach challenges the conventional distinction between conservation and creation, suggesting that the future of art may lie not in complete rupture but in the continuous reconfiguration of its inherited legacies.

Nevertheless, labeling these activists as "autodidact artists" sparks a debate on the boundaries of art and the qualifications necessary for contribution. Despite lacking formal training, these activists demonstrate a profound understanding of art's role in public discourse and its potential. This autodidactic site-specific performative approach parallels the

punk and street art movements, where raw energy and political statements often eclipse formal education.[37] Their interventions challenge and expand the definition of art, proposing a new kind that prioritizes the visual shock of urgent messages over traditional notions of beauty and permanence.

These activists engage in "situational aesthetics," where the situational context, public response, and altered artwork form an integrated performance. Recognizing these actions as legitimate artistic performances would enable galleries and museums to explore themes of protest and environmental crisis directly within their walls, thus embracing art as a living, responsive medium. By allowing activists to represent and address their actions in institutional spaces, art and cultural institutions could validate their messages, transforming them into active dialogues rather than mere preservers of aesthetics.[38]

The assertion that invitations to activism may incite similar acts is fundamentally flawed. Historically, particularly in the realms of political and social activism, individuals who are resolute in their intent to act will do so independently of external inspiration, encouragement, or stimulation. Research in social movements indicates that the motivations for activism are deeply rooted in personal convictions and experiences, which compel individuals to engage in transformative actions regardless of external influences.[39] This understanding highlights the complexity of activist behavior and underscores that significant movements often arise from intrinsic motivations rather than as mere responses to specific provocations or artistic interventions. Thus, to suggest that exposure to activist art might catalyze similar actions simplifies the multifaceted nature of activism and the diverse motivations that propel individuals toward political engagement.

However, there is a growing argument for viewing these activists as performance artists, at least from the perspective of a few curators and art critics. Yet, this interpretation has received only limited and cautious engagement within academic discourse and critical analysis. Traditionally, performance art has challenged the boundaries between artist and audience, encouraging active engagement with the work. This aspect aligns with the actions of activists who intervene in established artworks to communicate urgent social and political messages.
While there are instances of art critics acknowledging this connection, comprehensive discussions that critically assess the implications of viewing activist acts as a form of performance art remain scarce. As noted by scholars such as Amelia Jones and Peggy Phelan, the relationship between performance and activism is rich with potential for discourse, yet it often goes underexplored within the contemporary art narrative.[40] This gap in analysis suggests a need for a more thorough examination of how these

interventions not only challenge artistic conventions but also contribute to broader conversations about social change and the role of art in activism.[41]

Performance art traditionally seeks to blur the boundaries between art and life, exploring themes of disruption, provocation, and public engagement, all elements central to these climate and political protests. The activists meticulously select spaces rich in historical and cultural significance, leveraging the symbolic power of art to amplify their performative manifesto. By entering the art space, these activists transform it into a stage for their message, employing performative gestures that provoke public and institutional responses similar to the established performance artists.[42]

The concept of impactful art as a performative act traces back to artists like Yves Klein and Marina Abramović, whose works frequently involved physical engagement, audience interaction, and immediate, raw expression. The activists' interventions resonate with these principles, creating unsanctioned, ephemeral acts that thrive on public engagement, media coverage, and the shock value they generate. This immediacy and visibility not only spotlight pressing issues but also transmute the targeted artworks into symbols of political struggle and environmental urgency.[43]

This approach also serves as a form of "institutional critique," interrogating art institutions and conventions to create provocative, boundary-pushing works. Much like the Dadaists or Situationists, these activists employ anti-establishment tactics to generate dialogue between art and socio-cultural issues, amplifying their statements through high-profile institutions. Thus, the artworks they target become canvases for performance, merging art and activism and compelling the public to confront uncomfortable truths. Viewing them as autodidact performance artists opens avenues for recognizing these acts as legitimate components of the art world, prompting further exploration of the relationship between protest, art, and institutional spaces.[44]

These activist interventions appear to epitomize a modern performance art movement, yet again blurring the lines between art and activism while revitalizing the discourse on public engagement and social issues. Controversially, they may have a greater direct impact on society than professional performance artists, at least in the media. However, by embracing these actions as legitimate forms of performance art, museums and galleries can redefine their roles, transforming into platforms for critical dialogue and acknowledging art's capacity to evolve and respond to society's most pressing challenges. This transformation not only legitimizes the activists' voices but also revitalizes the very essence of art, positioning it as a catalyst for change in contemporary society.

Activist Expressionism and Neo-Iconoclasm: The Symbolism of Socio-Cultural Recontextualization

The case of Kempton Bunton's theft of *Portrait of the Duke of Wellington* further exemplifies this continuum between symbolic appropriation and activist intent. Rather than destroying the artwork, Bunton tactically repurposed it as a form of cultural leverage, an act of reverse iconoclasm aimed at confronting institutional neglect of the working class. Holding a nationally treasured painting as a "hostage" to manifest his demands redefined the museum, not as a passive site of aesthetic appreciation, but as a contested arena of public accountability. Bunton's intervention stands as a critical moment in the genealogy of socially engaged art, foreshadowing more recent activist gestures that exploit the symbolic capital of museums and cultural icons. Like the climate protests at art institutions and the contested visibility of cultural symbols such as the keffiyeh, Bunton's act reminds us that the institutional sanctity of art is never neutral. Instead, it is continually redefined through conflict, negotiation, and the demand for change and justice.

The practice of activist expressionism, particularly through acts of neo-iconoclasm, compels a reexamination of aesthetic semiotics and the socio-political implications of art. These interventions challenge the conventional framing of art as apolitical or immutable, instead positioning it as a contested space of ideological negotiation, transformation, and protest.

A prominent instance of reverse institutional iconoclasm can be seen in the exclusion of visitors from New York museums for wearing the keffiyeh, a traditional Arab garment deeply embedded in cultural identity and symbolism. According to Hyperallergic, on March 16, 2024, two visitors were denied entry to New York's Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) because one was carrying a keffiyeh, prompting public criticism and raising questions about cultural expression within art institutions. In a separate incident, Reuters reported that the Noguchi Museum in New York City dismissed three employees in September 2024 for wearing keffiyehs, citing a violation of the institution's policy. These cases highlight how cultural symbols, such as the keffiyeh, become contested markers of identity and visibility within institutional spaces, reflecting broader tensions surrounding the regulation of cultural expression and the politics of representation.[45]

Similarly, the dismantling of political monuments during revolutionary uprisings illustrates how iconoclasm functions as a means of challenging hegemonic ideologies. The toppling of statues of Bashar al-Assad during the December 2024 uprisings in Syria is emblematic of this phenomenon. Such actions serve not only to reject political authority but also to reframe collective memory and dominant visual narratives. Historical precedents, such as the removal of Edward Colston's

statue in Bristol in 2020, further highlight the role of iconoclasm in anti-colonial and liberation movements.[46] These acts are less about mere destruction and more about constructing alternative narratives that resist entrenched systems of power.

Contemporary instances of neo-iconoclasm, however, challenge the traditional understanding of the term. Activist interventions frequently seek to politicize or recontextualize cultural objects rather than completely destroy them. The 2022 protest by Just Stop Oil activists, who threw soup at Van Gogh's *Sunflowers*, exemplifies this shift. Rather than aiming to destroy the painting, the protest sought to provoke discourse surrounding climate change and the perceived complicity of cultural institutions in exacerbating environmental crises without taking sufficient action. This reimagining of iconoclasm shifts its focus from physical destruction to symbolic transformation, making art a vehicle for broader socio-cultural critique.[47]

The ethics of neo-iconoclasm demand deeper scholarly engagement. While the removal of oppressive symbols can catalyze socio-cultural progress, it raises critical questions about the consequences of erasure. As Bennett argues, the removal of public monuments can risk obscuring difficult histories rather than fostering critical engagement with them.[48] Do acts of destruction necessarily lead to meaningful change, or can they perpetuate cycles of conflict and historical amnesia? These questions highlight the need to critically assess both the intentions behind and the outcomes of iconoclastic actions.

Ultimately, activist *expressionism and neo-iconoclasm* exemplify the enduring power of art as a site of socio-cultural contestation and transformation. By challenging established narratives, these acts reveal the mechanisms through which erasure, recontextualization, and the creation of new meanings occur. As Bishop, Jackson, and Thompson suggest,[49] such practices underscore the capacity of art to blur the boundaries between aesthetic expression and public life, motivating audiences to confront their roles as spectators, participants, and, at times, complicit actors in ongoing socio-cultural struggles.

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