

National College of Art and Design
Painting Department, School of Fine Art

Protest in the museum:
On the history of political protest in museums and the targeting of artwork for
political purposes

Guia Rossi

2023

Submitted to the School of Visual Culture in Candidacy for the Degree of
BA (Hons) in Fine Art



National College of Art and Design

School of Visual Culture

I declare that this **Critical Cultures Research Project** is all my own work and that all sources have been fully acknowledged.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'Gavin R.', written in a cursive style.

Signed:

Programme / department: BA (Hons) in Fine Art / Painting

Date: 27/1/2023

Table of Contents

INTRODUCTION.....	1
POLITICAL ACTION <i>ON</i> ARTWORK.....	2
The slashing of the <i>Rokeby Venus</i>	2
The action on <i>Guernica</i> during the Vietnam War	6
Reflections on the press reactions to the <i>Rokeby Venus</i> and <i>Guernica</i> actions.....	8
POLITICAL ACTION <i>IN</i> MUSEUMS.....	9
The emergence of the “Interstitial Critique”	11
Thoughts on why museums are chosen as sites of protest.....	14
POLITICAL ACTION <i>BETWEEN</i> THE ARTWORK AND THE VIEWER.....	15
A new mode of protest: “covering” works to shift attention.....	17
Social media and the amplification of the message.....	19
CONCLUSION	21
BIBLIOGRAPHY	25

List of Figures

- Figure 1 (A) The slashes on the Rokeby Venus caused by Mary Richardson, prior to the restoration of the canvas, 1914. Source: the National Gallery, London; reproduced by Georgina Born; (B) Suffragettes' photo IDs, distributed by guards at the National Portrait Gallery. Source: National Portrait Gallery, London, reproduced in MacLeod (2006). 5
- Figure 2 (A) Front page of the New York Daily News covering the Shafrazi's action on Guernica, March 1, 1974. Source: Gallery 98; (B) Close-up of restorers removing the spray paint from Guernica, March 1, 1974. Source: Associated Press. 8
- Figure 3 (A) *License to Spill* by the collective "Liberate Tate", 2010. Source: www.indymedia.org.uk; (B & C) PAIN protests in the Guggenheim and Louvre, 2019. Sources: New York Times and Stephane De Sakutin/AFP; (D) *Hidden Figures* at the Tate Modern, 2014. Source: Martin LeSanto-Smith; (E) Anti-fossil fuel protests at the Louvre, 2015. Source: Kate Aronoff. 13
- Figure 4 (A) Just Stop Oil protest on Van Gogh's Sunflowers, October 2022. Source: Just Stop Oil. B) Activists of the same group in action on Girl with a Pearl Earring in Mauritshuis museum, The Hague, October 2022. Source: @kolpen (C) Letzte Generation protest on Gustav Klimt's Death and Life at the Leopold Museum in Vienna, November 2022. Source: Letzte Generation. (D) Climate activists' action on Monet's Grainstacks at the Museum Barberini in Potsdam, Germany, October 2022. Source: Letzte Generation, Getty Images. 17

INTRODUCTION

Beginning in 2022, a wave of dramatic and attention-grabbing protests has taken place in art museums across the globe where climate activists have targeted highly recognized and priceless displayed works of art. Thanks to social media, the events are not only propagated throughout the world instantaneously, but they have become the cue (and impetus) for new protests with a similar format: activists attaching certain body parts to the works in question, communicating their messages directly to viewers and/or pouring liquids onto the works.

The phenomenon of protests in museums is not new and neither is the targeting of displayed works of art. To what extent is this new wave of protests unique? I will answer this question by examining instances of historical protests in museums throughout the 20th and 21st centuries, including this most recent wave. I will also analyse the differences and similarities among significant episodes of rebellion, while considering the role museums have always played in society. Additionally, I will explore the motivations behind these protests and how they reflect the current pressing issues of society. Furthermore, I will investigate the methodologies used by activists during these political protests and explore how these strategies have evolved over time.

In sum, the main goal of this essay is to contextualise this newest wave of protests within the history of political protest in museums since the 20th century. I will focus on three types of protest: protest *on* artwork, protest *in* the museum, and a new form, protest *between* the viewer and the artwork. These forms are not mutually exclusive, and I will use case studies to support two main claims. First, technology has greatly increased the impact and reach of these political actions. Today's protests can reach a larger audience through social media, and activist groups can coordinate on a large scale. The information is also broadcast unfiltered, reducing the ability of governments and media outlets to manipulate the facts. Second, the nature of protest in museums has changed, with current protests focusing on

"covering" artwork to shift public attention rather than conceptual engagement with the displayed artwork. I conclude the essay by discussing the unique features of the newest form of protest in art museums.

POLITICAL ACTION *ON* ARTWORK

This section focuses on two important episodes of political protests in art museums that involved actions against displayed works of art. In particular, I will discuss the historical events surrounding the slashing of Velázquez's *Toilet of Venus* in 1914 and the spray-painting of a political slogan onto Picasso's *Guernica* in 1974.

The slashing of the *Rokeby Venus*

In 1914, at the National Gallery in London, Mary Richardson, a member of a feminist group that was active in the Woman's Suffrage movement lashed out at one of the most important works as well as the only surviving nude by Spanish painter Diego Velázquez: the *Toilet of Venus*, also known as the *Rokeby Venus*. The work depicts the Roman goddess of love nude and lying on her side intent on admiring herself in a mirror supported by a cupid angel.

Richardson cut the canvas repeatedly with a meat cleaver in protest against the arrest of the leader of the British WSPU (Women's Social and Political Union) movement Emmeline Pankhurst (Treisman, 2022). Suzanne MacLeod (2006) offers an in-depth discussion of this episode within the context of the general political atmosphere of the time. Importantly, the author highlights the premeditated nature of the feminist's action, so much so that the case of this member of the Suffragettes was not isolated: from 1912 until 1914 (immediately before World War I) several attacks had taken place in England by different participants of the feminist group (MacLeod, 2006, p. 52). Suffragettes, who usually aimed to target both public and private property, lashed out at objects of both high monetary and cultural value, and

museums were thus central destinations for their actions (Ibid, p. 53), which had as a central goal equal rights for women and, first and foremost, the right to vote.

The choice of Velasquez's canvas seemed an inevitable target for the feminist cause that this group of women was advancing because of a combination of powerful meanings. The Venus in the painting represented both the symbol of the ideal of female beauty and that of a certain kind of femininity of the patriarchal ideal that was being imprinted in the national cultural heritage: young, fertile, and passive (Nead, 1992, p. 36-37, cited in MacLeod, 2006, p. 53). Attacking her would equate to a challenge to the dominant patriarchal culture (Ibid, p. 53). So much so that Richardson would say after her act that she did that act because of both the value of the painting and *"the way men visitors gaped at it all day long."* (Treisman, 2022).

Indeed, the painting, procured through national funds and presented to the National Gallery in 1906, had become a national icon. Moreover, an act of vandalism such as that to a painting of such high financial value would have forced the closure of museums and galleries, damaging the tourism industry (Gamboni, 1997, p. 96; Nead, 1992, p. 35, cited by MacLeod, 2006, p. 53). Visitors from America and British Commonwealth countries, in fact, eager to be delighted by the artistic treasures and historic buildings, were disappointed when faced with the closure of various venues including, in addition to museums, restaurants and theatres (where Suffragettes dropped leaflets). In the words of Christabel Pankhurst, who has written extensively about the history of the Women's Movement, the action was "wonderful propaganda," forcing these tourists and the public in general to "think more deeply than before on the matter of votes for women" (1959, p. 270, cited in MacLeod, 2006, p. 53).

It is important to take note of the consequences of this protest event for the protestor, Mary Richardson, the artwork itself and how society responded to the event immediately after. After cutting the canvas repeatedly, Mary Richardson was struck by German tourists

with two books, manhandled by guards, and ultimately arrested (*The Times*, 11 March 1914, p. 9; Richardson, 1953, pp. 168-169 cited in MacLeod, 2006, p. 50). Richardson was given the maximum sentence of six months; but after a short time was released (MacLeod, 2006, p. 51). The destiny of the *Toilet of Venus* was less dramatic: within three months Helmut Ruhemann, a painting restoration expert, was able to fully restore the painting (Newberry, 2020).

The immediate reaction of the English establishment to this protest was also notable. MacLeod (2006) refers to a lack of attention by both the press and the intellectuals involved in the British Museum's history to the *cause* that had led a member of the Women's Suffrage movement to this action (Ibid, p. 46). For example, writing a decade after the event, art historians Holmes & Baker (1924, pp. 73-74) generally ignored the reasons for the protest and, rather, focused their attention on the weakness of the security measures in the National Gallery. The impact on the art institutions at the time was more significant. Following Richardson's action, several London galleries were closed (*The Times*, 12 March 1914, p. 6, cited in MacLeod, 2006, p. 46) and various security measures were imposed for those that were open, such as the British Museum, which forbade entry to women unaccompanied by a gentleman unless they had with them a letter of recommendation written by a man. "No Muffs, wrist-bags or sticks" was another measure taken at the entrance to the Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery (Atkinson, 1996, p. 153; *The Times*, 12 March 1914, p. 6, cited in MacLeod, 2006, p. 46), and copies of suffragettes' photo IDs were distributed by guards at the National Portrait Gallery (Nead, 1992, p. 37, cited in MacLeod, 2006, p. 46).

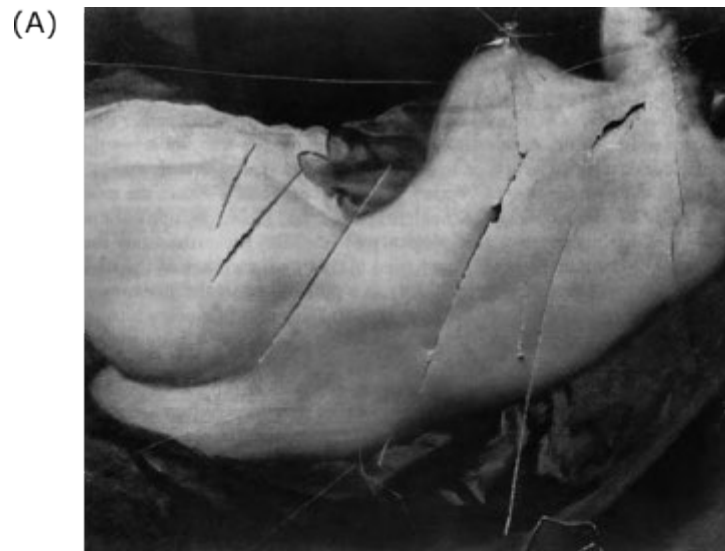


Figure 1 (A) The slashes on the *Rokeby Venus* caused by Mary Richardson, prior to the restoration of the canvas, 1914. Source: the National Gallery, London; reproduced by Georgina Born; (B) Suffragettes' photo IDs, distributed by guards at the National Portrait Gallery. Source: National Portrait Gallery, London, reproduced in MacLeod (2006).

The action on *Guernica* during the Vietnam War

In 1974, an Iranian artist named Tony Shafrazi pulled a red spray can from his pocket in front of Pablo Picasso's *Guernica* at New York's Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) and used it to write "Kill Lies All" in huge letters on the work, quoting a line from James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*: "Lies. All lies." His action was an act of protest against U.S. President Richard Nixon's decision to pardon U.S. Army officer William Calley, who was responsible for the 1968 My Lai massacre in Vietnam, despite the fact that he was the only one who went to trial (Treisman, 2022) and was found guilty and sentenced to life in prison. American soldiers under his orders killed over 500 unarmed civilians: mainly elderly people, women, children, and infants (Belknap, 2002).

According to the artist, who was a member of the Art Workers' Coalition (AWC) at the time, the gesture sought to restore the voice of *Guernica* in condemning wars and civilian deaths (Treisman, 2022). In other words, Shafrazi interpreted the action as a way to "re-activate" the meaning behind *Guernica*. Not coincidentally, the AWC group, which was formed in 1969, had launched direct protests against the board of trustees of MoMA because some of its members supported the Vietnam War. The group also carried out protests aimed at, among other goals, greater rights for artists, greater involvement of artists on boards of trustees, greater visibility of women, black and Latino artists, and allowing free access to the museum (Bryan-Wilson, n.d.).

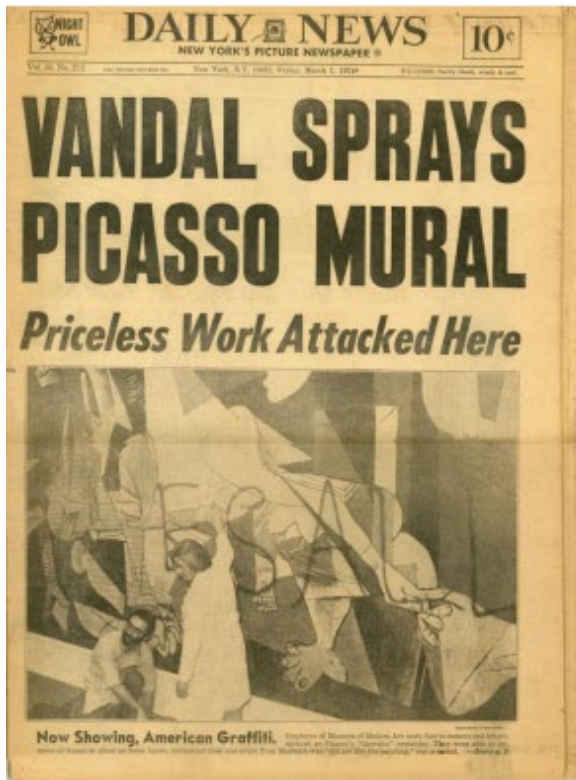
Considering the consequences of this protest on the protestor, in the aftermath of his action, Shafrazi insisted that his gesture was meant to "bring art absolutely up to date, to retrieve it from art history and give it life", thus confirming that he did not think he had done any harm to Picasso's 1937 work (Gamboni, 2002, p. 124, cited in Scott, 2014, p. 78).

Shafrazi had no intention in rejecting the significance of Picasso's work, rather *he* became the subject of rejection by, of course, the press, the mayor of New York, and even the very group

of which he was a member. The former leader of the AWC movement, Alex Gross, in fact distanced himself sharply from Shafrazi and his act, claiming that no artist would defend him, and calling him "a wild Persian" (Kaufman, 1 March 1974). At any rate, Shafrazi faced significant consequences for his protest. After being "grabbed" by guards, he was taken to the station and charged with criminal mischief. He ended up receiving 5 years of probation, without a trial (Grogan, 26 March 1984).

The damage caused to the painting was surprisingly minimal thanks to the fast reaction by the MoMA staff and restoration experts on site. The section of the gallery was immediately closed to the public and a team of experts led by the Museum's chief conservator Jean Volkmer began their work to save the painting. The team used an organic solvent, xylene, to erase the spray-painted inscription. Thanks to a layer of varnish that had been applied to the canvas a few years earlier by MoMA, the painting was not damaged at all: the varnish was dissolved along with the writing, and other, stronger residues were removed with surgical scalpels and needles. The operation lasted less than an hour (Kaufman, March 1, 1974).

(A)



(B)



Figure 2 (A) Front page of the New York Daily News covering the Shafrazi's action on *Guernica*, March 1, 1974. Source: Gallery 98; (B) Close-up of restorers removing the spray paint from *Guernica*, March 1, 1974. Source: Associated Press.

Reflections on the press reactions to the *Rokeby Venus* and *Guernica* actions

Comparing the governmental and press reactions in the respective eras of the events, and with the difference that Richardson maintained a certainly more solid bond than Shafrazi did with their respective activist groups, I cannot help but notice how public opinion reacted toward the two activists. In both cases they were described as dangerous and social outcasts. Both the *Times* article of more than a hundred years ago, which covered the *Rokeby* incident, and the *New York Times* coverage of the *Guernica* protest in 1974 share a crucial commonality: the *cause* of these two activists, equal rights for women on the one hand and justice for civilian victims of war on the other, were significantly downplayed by journalists. Most of the focus was on the incident itself in the context of vandalism and danger. Shafrazi and Richardson simply appeared as two lunatics, thanks perhaps in part to the fact that the Suffragette was a

woman and Shafrazi an immigrant to the United States from Iran. What's even more surprising is that not only was Shafrazi's case against the Vietnam War buried, but even the very significance of *Guernica* itself was questioned by the *New York Times* at the time:

“The attack on the town of Guernica by the air force of the rebel general Francisco Franco during the Spanish Civil War is generally thought to be the first instance of terror-bombing of a civilian population. Lately, [...] however, several writers have published articles contending that there were military targets in the area that they said *justified the attack in military terms*” (Kaufman, March 1, 1974; emphasis added by me).

Also, it is worth mentioning how Richardson and Shafrazi not only shared a common identity as political activists, but even more interestingly, both shared a deep connection to the art world. Richardson was an art student and Shafrazi was an artist who was part of an art collective at the time. However, when reading the immediate reactions of the press to both these incidents, I came away with the impression that there was no validation of these identities. The only reference to their artistic background is through direct quotes from the protesters' statements about their actions. By doing this, the protestors were marginalized, disempowered, and removed from the artistic context of the action.

POLITICAL ACTION *IN* MUSEUMS

Museums have been a site of protest by political activists for over a century. They are symbols of culture and artistic expression, but also hold great power as ideological, social, and political tools. There have been two types of protests in museums: those that target a specific museum to further a cause, and those where the institution is not directly related to the cause.

One historical example of the latter form is the 1921 protest in Liverpool's Walker Art Gallery, where the National Unemployed Workers' Committee Movement (NUWCM)

gathered in the museum as a public space while waiting for permission to protest. This gathering resulted in a violent crackdown by the police. The choice of the museum was not a conscious decision to stage a protest, but the fact remains that it was an optimal location for making the poor conditions of the unemployed visible (Macleod, 2006, p. 47-49, 51)

In contrast, beginning in the late 1960s, there were a series of waves of institutional critique in Western museums where the art institution itself was critiqued. The first wave of these protests focused on artists creating work that directly questioned art institutions for perceived abuses of power and capitalist-bourgeois institutional politics (Mahony, 2021, p. 411). One prominent example is Hans Haacke's *Manet-PROJEKT '74*, which included a series of frames displaying information on the museum's funding and the social and political connections of its board members (D'Souza, 2019). However, starting in the 1980s artists and activists challenged this form of protest which sought the consent of the institutional apparatus. Instead, this second wave "recognized that the agency of the first wave was undermined by virtue of the fact that it was authorized by the same art institution it sought to critique" (Ibid). Activism during this wave expanded the area of critique to also include the figure of the artist, who is also a part of the very art institutions that are being criticised. In the 1990s, a significant change occurred in European nations due to the implementation of Neoliberal policies. Public cultural institutions, including museums, no longer received sufficient funding from the government and became more dependent on funding from the private sector. Therefore, museums became increasingly influenced by private corporations. This led to the birth of a third wave of institutional critique, as described by Emma Mahony, which had a two-stage progression. In the first stage, activists and artists aimed to change public institutions from within. In the second stage, some activists and artists chose to leave the art institution itself because of its economic structures (Ibid).

The emergence of the “Interstitial Critique”

The latest wave of protests in museums began in 2010 and is referred to as “Interstitial Critique”, which is a term borrowed by Mahony from Simon Critchley’s radical political theorization of resistance *within* state institutions (Mahony, 2021, pp.410, 412; Critchley, 2007, p. 117 cited by Mahony, 2021, pp. 410, 412-413). Focusing first on institutions in the UK and then in the rest of Europe and America, this form of institutional critique involves artist and activist collectives staging a series of *creative* and often *disruptive* performances from within targeted museums and institutions (Mahony, 2017, pp. 131-138). These protests create a kind of distance and space within the institution, fighting against unethical and immoral aspects of the museum, while still maintaining a presence in order to not abandon the institution to negative influences. In most cases, these collectives use creative performances to draw public attention to the ways in which state-run artistic institutions are connected to and influenced by private corporations, which are often responsible for a range of negative impacts, including climate change, precarious working conditions, and the promotion of colonial narratives and white supremacy (Mahony, 2021, p. 410-411). The activists of this new type of protest recognize that they cannot get rid of private corporations and their actions in the short term. So, they choose to direct their efforts towards museums, and, through a strategy of shaming, they accuse them of having connections with donors who use art to hide their unethical and harmful actions, such as causing climate change and exploiting vulnerable communities. This helps raise awareness about crucial issues facing society and puts pressure on the art institution to change its ways. By doing this, the strategy creates a real territory of struggle and critique within the institution: thus, the term “Interstitial critique.” (Mahony, 2021, pp. 410, 412)

It is worth describing in detail some examples of this latest wave of protests in museums. The first is the *Licence to Spill* performance staged by the "Liberate Tate"

collective in 2010 at the Tate Gallery in London. The performance, which involved members of the collective infiltrating the Tate Britain's annual summer party celebrating the 20-year partnership between the Tate and the petrochemical group British Petroleum (BP), aimed to bring attention to the environmental disaster caused by the Deepwater Horizon oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico that same year, for which BP was responsible. The performance was a symbolic gesture, using the act of pouring an oil-like substance to mimic the Gulf disaster; but even more, during the "clean up" of the liquid at the party, the activists responded to the disapproving gaze of onlookers by echoing similar statements made by BP following the disaster, that (also) their spill, relative to the size of the gallery, was just a "a drop in the ocean"; the activists thus highlighted in dramatic fashion the harms caused by the company and the museum's association with it (Mahony, 2021, pp. 409-410; Demos, 2012, p. 32-33 cited in Mahony p. 409).

Similarly, in 2015 at the Louvre, a group of activists and artists came together to protest against the harms caused by the climate crisis and to demand justice for indigenous people and colonised peoples. They used the museum as a site to raise awareness about the harms caused by the fossil fuel industry by walking through the museum halls with their feet soiled with an oily substance and pointing out the donations the Louvre receives from Total and Eni (Mahony, 2021, pp. 414-415).

Focusing on another important social issue, the group PAIN (Prescription Addiction Intervention Now) organized a series of protests in 2018 and 2019 at museums such as the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Guggenheim, Louvre, and Victoria and Albert Museum. The protests targeted the donations that these museums received from the Sackler family, which owned the pharmaceutical company Purdue Pharma that produces OxyContin, which is a powerful painkiller that has been linked to the opioid crisis in America and is responsible for

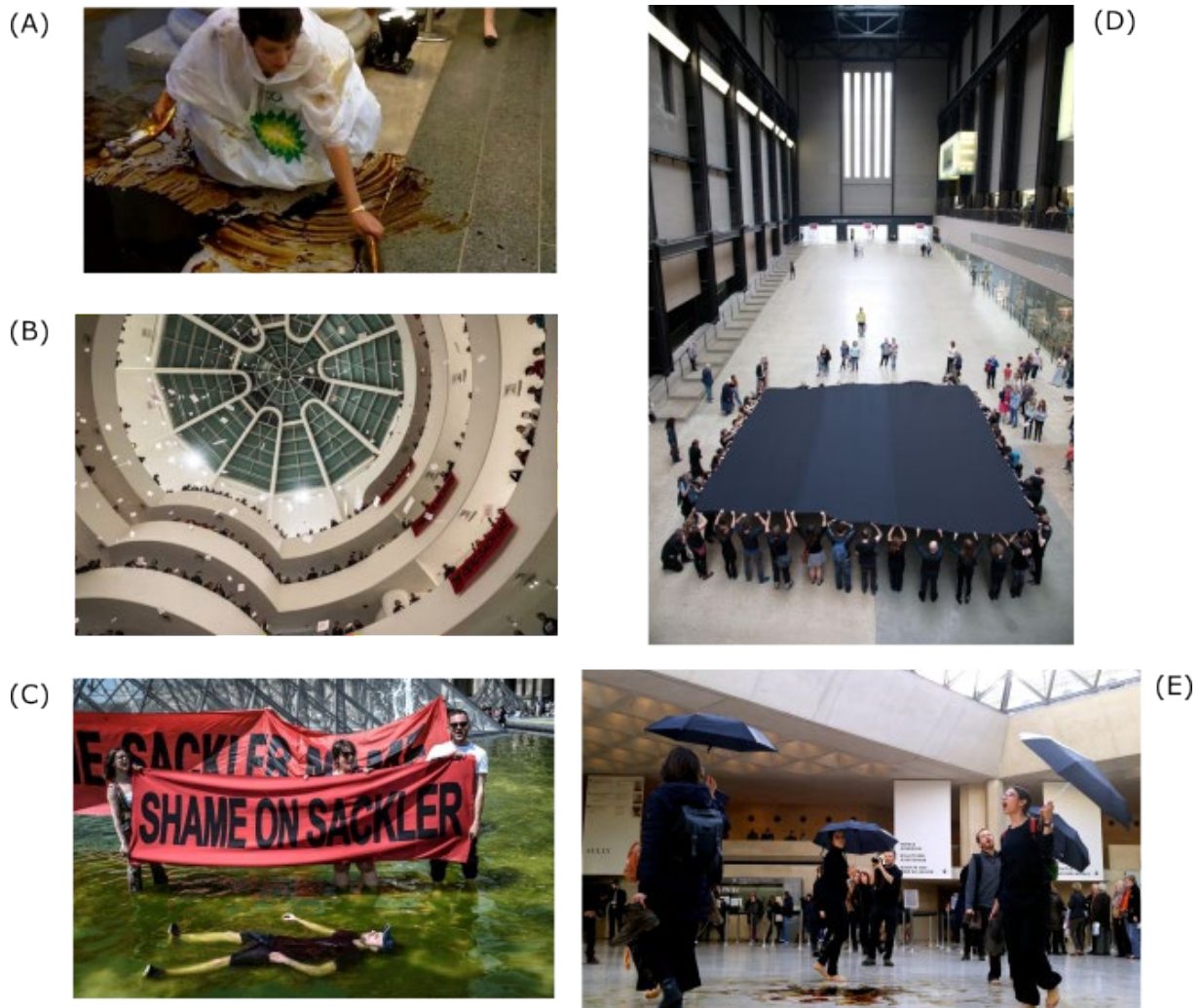


Figure 3 (A) *License to Spill* by the collective "Liberate Tate", 2010. Source: www.indymedia.org.uk; (B & C) PAIN protests in the Guggenheim and Louvre, 2019. Sources: *New York Times* and Stephane De Sakutin/AFP; (D) *Hidden Figures* at the Tate Modern, 2014. Source: Martin LeSanto-Smith; (E) Anti-fossil fuel protests at the Louvre, 2015. Source: Kate Aronoff.

tens of thousands of deaths (Treisman, 2022). One form of protest involved throwing thousands of slips of paper, simulating OxyContin prescriptions, from the central rotunda of the Guggenheim Museum in New York. This was in response to a statement made by a Sackler member that their release of the drug would be followed by "a blizzard of prescriptions that would bury the competition" (Ibid). Another protest at the Louvre in Paris involved staging a "die-in" and occupying the pyramid plaza, with participants lying down and holding banners calling on the museum to cut ties with the Sackler group (Ibid).

These protests have been effective in making change. For example, the group "Liberate Tate" had been campaigning for six years through others creative performances,

such as *Hidden Figures* which targeted the BP-Tate relationship in 2014, when their efforts finally paid off in 2016 when BP ended its partnership with the Tate (Mahony, 2021, p. 410). The PAIN group also successfully pressured museums in 2019 to cut ties with the Sackler family and to stop accepting donations from them, ultimately coinciding with the family's bankruptcy (Treisman, 2022). Importantly, the effectiveness of these protests can be attributed to their direct actions.

Thoughts on why museums are chosen as sites of protest

To understand the motivations behind the latest wave of protests in museums, it is important to consider the relationship that society has with these institutions. The *trust* that individuals have in museums is a key factor in the decision of activists to not abandon or boycott these institutions. For example, in 2018, 76% of Americans reported that they trust art museums, which is much higher than the 49% who say they trust the Federal government.¹ This trust in art museums can be genuine, betrayed, or even just desired, but it is evident that there is a connection between society and museums. Museums have played a role in shaping and forming society and identities, creating a unified Western culture while separating and distancing non-Western cultures. An example of this can be seen in the hierarchy established where Western societies are seen as capable of producing the highest forms of artistic expression, while non-Western cultures are seen as primarily producing artifacts of lesser quality (Duncan, 1995, p.5).

The museum is not a neutral institution, as its cultural values are being questioned in contemporary times. While efforts to “clean up” or “free” the museum from negative influences may be well-intentioned, it confirms the ongoing relationship between society and

¹ <https://www.colleendilen.com/2019/03/06/in-museums-we-trust-heres-how-much-data-update/>

the museum. It is crucial for museums to continue educating and inspiring society, and to remind us of what we really need to consider important. Choosing the museum as a site of protest (whether from internal causes within the museum, or from external ones) confirms its powerful role as a representative of the values of our societies. These values have historically come into conflict with the aspirations of groups such as the suffragettes and the NUWCM, and continue to betray or disappoint our trust in contemporary times. However, as MacLeod argues these conflicts have contributed to democratization processes in the past century. The museum, although only to a small extent, can be held responsible for these processes (2006, p. 47).

POLITICAL ACTION *BETWEEN* THE ARTWORK AND THE VIEWER

Since the summer of 2022, the world has experienced a new form of political protest in art museums which I will argue below has used a new approach to activism. The protests that I am discussing here are centred on the issue of climate change and the aim is to increase awareness about the dangers of continuing to burn fossil fuels. In this section, I will first give a description of the protests themselves, including the new methodology used by the activists. I then contextualise these protests within the era of social media and discuss how social media and the Internet have impacted the effectiveness and consequences of these protests.

The climate change campaign that we have witnessed began in June 2022 by the climate activist group “Just Stop Oil”, which launched a simultaneous action in four museums across the UK targeting the following artworks: *Peach Trees in Blossom* (Vincent Van Gogh) in London’s Courtauld Gallery², *The Hay Wain* (John Constable) in the National Gallery³, *My Heart’s in the Highland* (Horatio McCulloch) in the Kelvingrove Museum in Glasgow, and

² <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3rD399eR3vl>

³ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v7av6Nv0AIY&t=8s>

Aeolian Harp (JMW Turner) in the Manchester Art Gallery⁴. The form that these actions took were unprecedented. Protesters glued themselves to the artwork while facing the viewers (and the cameras) in the gallery and delivered their slogans and speeches. One month later, a series of similar styled protests were carried out by the climate activist group Ultima Generazione in the Uffizi in Florence⁵ and the Museo del Novecento in Milan⁶. Both these protests again involved activists gluing themselves to artwork and delivering speeches that were immediately shared to the world through social media. In August 2022, Italian demonstrators again glued themselves to *Laocoön and His Sons* in the Vatican Museum. Since then, similar actions happened in Dresden's Galerie Alte Meister (*Sistine Madonna* by Raphael), Madrid's Museo de Prado (*The Clothed Maja* and *The Naked Maja* by Goya), and Melbourne's National Gallery of Victoria (*Massacre in Korea* by Pablo Picasso).

⁴ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=viqNTrHLB6M>

⁵ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g6pzTC1pEAc>

⁶ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oFhaXxo1XvE>

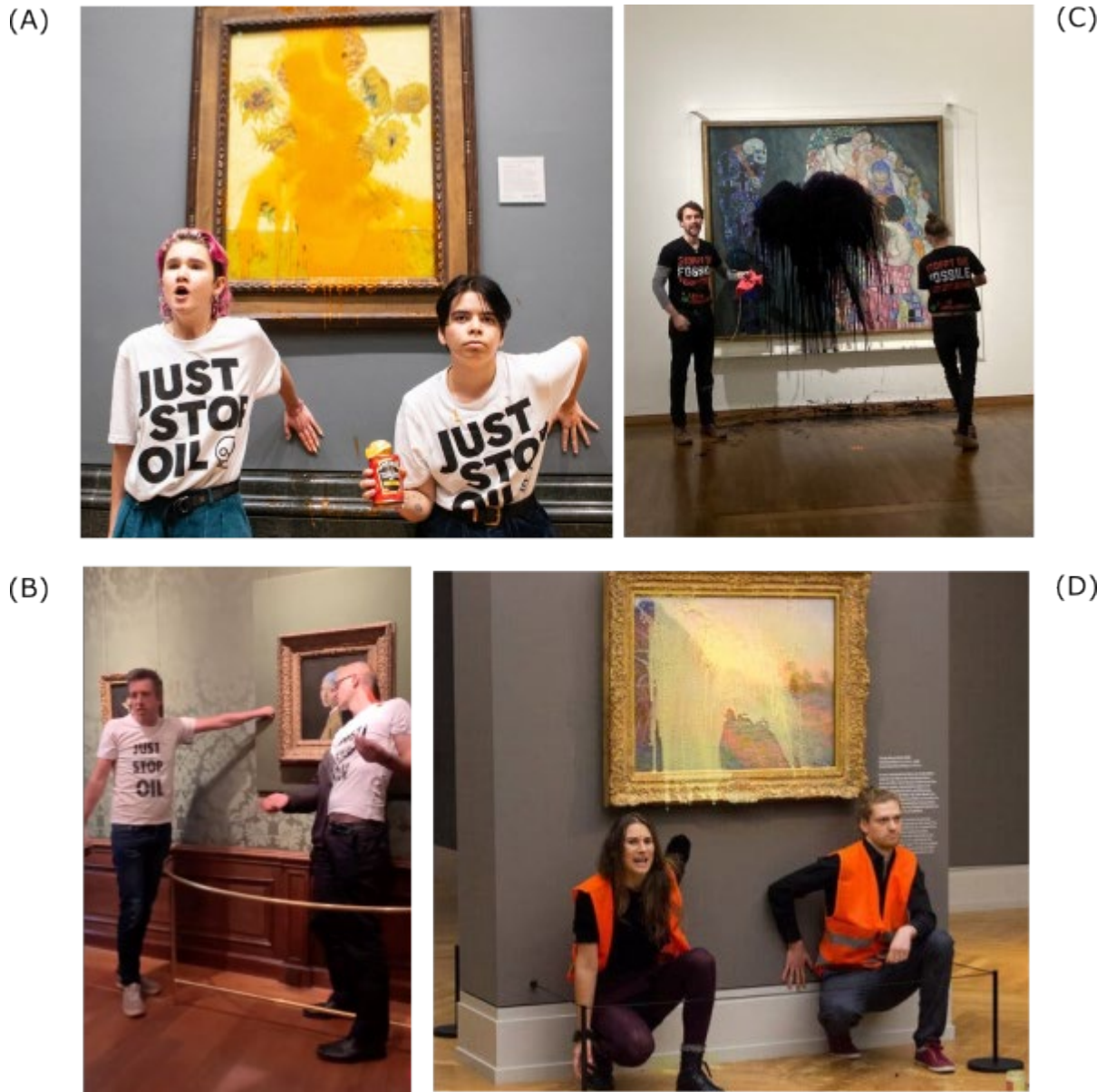


Figure 4 (A) Just Stop Oil protest on Van Gogh's *Sunflowers*, October 2022. Source: Just Stop Oil. B) Activists of the same group in action on *Girl with a Pearl Earring* in Mauritshuis museum, The Hague, October 2022. Source: @kolpen (C) Letzte Generation protest on Gustav Klimt's *Death and Life* at the Leopold Museum in Vienna, November 2022. Source: Letzte Generation. (D) Climate activists' action on Monet's *Grainstacks* at the Museum Barberini in Potsdam, Germany, October 2022. Source: Letzte Generation, Getty Images.

A new mode of protest: “covering” works to shift attention

The protest style soon began to add a new feature which includes the “covering” of the artworks, including liquids such as soups and even body parts onto the artwork itself. On 14 October 2022, two activists from “Just Stop Oil” threw a can of tomato soup onto *Sunflowers*

(Vincent Van Gogh) that is on display in the National Gallery of London and glued themselves to it while chanting slogans to raise awareness about climate change. This led to a new wave of similar protests involving the throwing of mashed potatoes onto *Haystacks* (Claude Monet) in Potsdam⁷, pea soup onto *The Sower* (Vincent Van Gogh) in Rome⁸, fake blood onto *Clown* (Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec) in Berlin, and gluing the actual head of a protestor onto *Girl with a Pearl Earring* (Vermeer) in The Hague.⁹

The act of spilling organic substances such as soup or mashed potatoes or scribbling onto the protective glass of the works, as in the case of Andy Warhol's Campbell's soup cans on 9 November 2022 (*The Guardian*, 9 November 2022), in effect obscures the artwork. But the fact of "covering" them, whether with substances or scribbles, especially with the intention of not damaging them (activists claim to choose works that they know they cannot damage) makes it clear that activists are not questioning the direct meaning of those artworks, but rather they are questioning *our own relationship with these objects*. For this reason, those who protest put themselves *in between* the viewer and the artwork. The work itself is not the real focus of the protest. While the artwork seems to be taken hostage, the intention is to shift the attention from the artwork to the political message. The protesters are creating a space in between the artwork and the viewer, and the covering of the artwork is necessary for this aim. With their backs to the paintings or sculptures, it is clear that the protestors have nothing against the artwork and not trying to engage with the meaning of the work *per se*. Rather, they wish to engage with the viewers in the gallery (and on the Internet) with speeches that call on the viewer to reflect on their morality and to compare the value of an object such as a work of art with that of a climate catastrophe. Taking the example of the *Sunflowers* protest where

⁷ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fCJwSWDeoeE>

⁸ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f_hhNym3s8

⁹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2ltuPg-viro>

after covering the painting with tomato soup and gluing her hands to the wall of the gallery, activist Phoebe Plummer asked the audience:

“What is worth more? Art or life? Is it worth more than food? Worth more than justice? Are you more concerned about the protection of a painting or the protection of our planet and people? [...]”

Similarly, a protestor at the *Girl with a Pearl Earring* action asked,

“How do you feel when you see something beautiful and priceless being apparently destroyed before your eyes? Do you feel outrage? Good. Remember that feeling when you see the planet being destroyed before our very eyes.”

The content of the artwork therefore is not the subject of the engagement, but rather the viewer’s experience is being interrupted through the covering of the artwork and the shift of attention on the bodies and the messages of the protestor. Also, importantly, at the time of my writing, none of these artworks involved in the episodes were damaged.

Social media and the amplification of the message

Reflecting on the events described above, one important element that is worth discussing further is the role of social media. Clearly, social media serves as a potent amplifier of the message of the protest and allows the activists to *directly* communicate to the globe without the interference of the traditional media. In the case of the *Guernica* protest, the director of the MoMA initially intended to suppress the news about the incident in fear of the activist’s action becoming an example for “copy-cat” actions (Kaufman, 1 March 1974). Notably, the *New York Times* coverage of this protest describes the reactions of individuals present, complete with first and last names, as the only ones witnessing the action at the time it happened. Today, on the other hand, through the rapid dissemination of news via social media

and the Internet, *we are all spectators in real-time* of such actions that take place in important international art museums.

Again, with reference to the reactions of the *New York Times* to the *Guernica* protest, it is also noteworthy that traditional media have the power to steer public opinion. Especially in the past, these news outlets basically had a monopoly on information and the views expressed in their articles had a profound impact on how the public perceived the world. Shafrazi's action could not only have remained secret if the director of MoMA had decided not to make it public, but it could have also been manipulated by the press, since the reporting of the incident only includes the filtered responses of eyewitnesses and the interpretation of the event by the journalist. As evidence of this biased filtration of the political message of the protest, consider how the Reina Sofia Museum, where *Guernica* is currently displayed, describes the protest to the coverage of the *New York Times*. The Reina Sofia describes the events that took place at the MoMA in 1974 with crystal-clear clarity about the intention of Shafrazi and also a validation of the meaning of the painting in contrast to the coverage of the *New York Times* in the immediate aftermath of the event.¹⁰ In essence, the museum provides us a contextualization of the protest and allows us to interpret the action through the motivation of the protestor while also perhaps gaining a new interpretation for the artwork itself.

In the social media era that we live today, it is simply not possible to omit activists' actions. Activist groups can directly communicate with the global community and share their actions unfiltered. In contrast to the past, the eyewitnesses are now across the globe and number in the millions, rather than the handful of people who happened to be present in the galleries of the past protests.

¹⁰ <https://guernica.museoreinasofia.es/en/agente/tony-shafrazi-5342>

CONCLUSION

In this paper, I investigated the history and evolution of political protests in art museums from the early 20th century to the current day. I have focused on three main forms of protest: the targeting of displayed artworks, the selection of art institutions as a site of protest, and a new form which I refer to as a protest *between* the artwork and the viewer in the museum. Based on my observation and analysis, I believe that this latest form of protest is very different from the observed types of protests in the past. Below, I provide a synthesis of my observations and a summary of my reflections on the characteristics of these new kinds of demonstrations that are occurring in art museums across the world today.

Today's cases of protest in museums apparently have much in common with the protests of the earlier "Interstitial Critique" wave. In both cases, the protagonists are almost exclusively activist groups fighting against climate change and for social justice for the world's most disadvantaged groups. The two forms of protest also share a commonality of methodology, particularly the use of liquids and oily substances during the demonstrations. Further, while there was a long-standing debate among artists and activists since the 1960s about whether the museum should be "reformed" and to what extent the art community should engage with the art institutions, the Interstitial Critique period settled this dispute to a certain extent: the museum is worth saving because there is an inherent trust between society and the institution which is worth preserving. The new form of protest that I have discussed has, in a way, built upon this space of trust to further its political message on the climate crisis.

However, in my view, the apparent commonalities between these forms of protest essentially end here. One important difference, if not a vulnerable aspect, between Interstitial Critique and today's protests lies in the fact that the former was impeccable in terms of the precision and accuracy in defining its goals to be achieved and the recipients of the message that the activists wanted to communicate. For example, consider the naming strategies of

major Interstitial Critique collectives: Liberate (goal) Tate (target). Or consider the slogans used by such groups, e.g. "Take down the Sackler name" from the Louvre. All are goal-oriented and specific to the institution. Today, the messages we see and hear are aimed, on the one hand, at all of us (people, corporations, countries, governments, and fossil fuel companies). But, on the other hand, this wide net also carries a risk: who takes the responsibility to reflect on and respond to the demands? Me, my government, someone else? In short, if the message is about everyone, the risk may be that no one responds.

Further, if the clear and primary objective of activist groups like Liberate Tate was precisely to rid the institution of negative influences, the goal of the “between” protests is a dialogue with the public and not reforming the institution. The use of the museum as a site of protest by the “between” activists seems to be more of a strategic choice dictated, above all, by urgency. The museum is conceived of as a space to capture a moment of absolute attention and then to divert this attention to the message at hand. It’s not by chance that the “Just Stop Oil” campaign have also disrupted, among other events, football matches in England by activists tying themselves to goalposts.¹¹

The diversion of attention is rooted in the psychological conditioning that viewers in museums undergo when observing displayed artwork. This moment of absolute concentration, wonder, and dedication between us (the viewers) and the displayed work is part of a process that enters almost automatically as soon as we cross the threshold between the outside world and the museum. This “ritualized” process of “liminality” (Duncan, 1995, pp. 4, 10-12, 14) is one where the viewer “strips off” their bodies and notions of the outside world and only the Eye and Mind of the viewer remains (O’Doherty, 1986, p. 15).

¹¹ <https://www.bbc.com/news/newsbeat-60795041>

The “between” activists place themselves exactly between the viewer and the artwork in order to interrupt this sort of spell, and to awaken the viewer. This abrupt “awakening” comes in two stages: first, by *covering* the object in which we are absorbed and, secondly, *speaking* directly to the intended audience. With respect to the latter stage, the “between” activists do not deliver a conceptual or extremely symbolic message requiring interpretation and decoding from the audience, as was the case of Shafrazi’s action on *Guernica*. Rather, the choice of simple and direct language can more effectively deliver the urgent message to a broader audience and is not hung up on elitist communication. Further, covering the artwork reveals the intention of interrupting the intense interaction that the viewer has with the displayed work. Also, by turning their backs to the covered artwork, the activists are demonstrating that they themselves also do not wish to engage with the displayed work: the central focus is the cause, and not the art. The attack on the *Rokeby Venus* demonstrates the unique character of the “between” approach. Mary Richardson not only attacked a canvas as a material object in the museum, but also intended to destroy the very subject of the same canvas because of its significance in representing the ideal of women and femininity in the society. In addition to the canvas, Richardson’s stabs appear to be inflicted on the body of Venus, as if a murder has been committed, demonstrating a true engagement with the work and its meaning.

Contrastingly, the “between” protestors have openly stated that they have no desire to destroy the artworks, nor to flee the scene of their action. Indeed, the choice of attaching their bodies to the artwork and facing us while speaking directly challenges the so-called rules of only the Eye and Mind being welcome within Brian O’Doherty’s “White Cube.” This imposed physicality brings into focus the importance of the body as a biological entity, as well as the world outside and its concerns. The positioning of the activist in front of the covered work also attempts to rank the order of importance of human life over objects, which is what a displayed work is after all.

Finally, throughout history, art institutions have dictated the values of our cultures. They have helped form our identities, unify our societies, and shape our nations. The museum has united the sacred with the intellect. It has replaced the religious with the secular, becoming the temples of our cultures. It has established a covenant between knowledge and the divine. It has solidified the apparent order of the value attached to things, which we generally fail to question. These new activists are telling us that the time has come to change this order of values: the museum and its works must be discussed in terms of priorities. We are past the transition from religious to secular; now is the time to transition to the era of our planet.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Atkinson, D. (1996) *The Suffragettes in Pictures*. London: Museum of London.
- Belknap, M.R. (2002). *The Vietnam War on trial: The My Lai massacre and the court-martial of Lieutenant Calley*. Landmark Law Cases & American.
- Bryan-Wilson, J. (n.d.) The Present Complex. *Unpublished manuscript*. Accessed at <https://arthistory.berkeley.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/jbw-alloway.pdf>
- Critchley, S. (2007). *Infinitely demanding: Ethics of commitment, politics of resistance*. Verso Books.
- D'Souza, A. (2019). "What Can We Learn from Institutional Critique?" ARTnews.com. Accessed at <https://www.artnews.com/art-in-america/features/hans-haacke-new-museum-retrospective-institutional-critique-63666/>
- Demos, T. J. (2012). *Against the Anthropocene: Visual Culture and Environment Today*. Berlin: Sternberg Press.
- Duncan, C. (1995). *Civilizing rituals: Inside public art museums*. Routledge.
- Gamboni, D. (2013). *The destruction of art: iconoclasm and vandalism since the French Revolution*. Reaktion books.
- Grogan, D. (1984, March 26). "Once he vandalized Picasso's Guernica, but now Tony Shafrazi is a successful patron of the arts" *People Magazine*, 21(12).
- Holmes, C.J. and Baker, C.H.C. (1924). *The Making of the National Gallery, 1824-1924: An Historical Sketch*. National gallery.
- Kaufman, M. T. (1974, March 1). 'Guernica' Survives a Spray-Paint Attack by Vandal. *The New York Times* (accessed at: <https://www.nytimes.com/1974/03/01/archives/guernica-survives-a-spraypaint-attack-by-vandal-floor-is-sealed-off.html>)
- MacLeod, S. (2006). Civil disobedience and political agitation: the art museum as a site of protest in the early twentieth century. *Museum and Society*, 5(1), 44-57.
- Mahony, E. (2017). Opening spaces of resistance in the corporatized cultural institution: Liberate Tate and the Art Not Oil Coalition. *Museum and Society*, 15(2), pp.126-141.
- Mahony, E. (2021). From Institutional to Interstitial Critique: The Resistant Force that is Liberating the Neoliberal Museum from Below. In *The Routledge Companion to Contemporary Art, Visual Culture, and Climate Change* (pp. 409-417). Routledge.
- Mathiesen, K. (2015) "Climate change activists occupy Tate Modern's Turbine Hall" *The Guardian*. Accessed at <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jun/13/climate-change-activists-occupy-tate-moderns-turbine-hall>
- Nead, L. (2002). *The female nude: art, obscenity and sexuality*. Routledge.

Newberry, M. (2020, September 15). Those Who Destroy Art. *The Atlas Society* (accessed at: <https://www.atlassociety.org/post/those-who-destroy-art-copy>)

O'Doherty, B. (1986). *Inside the white cube: The ideology of the gallery space*. The Lapis Press.

Pankhurst, C. (1959). *Unshackled: The Story of How We Won the Vote*, ed. Lord Pethick-Lawrence of Peaslake, London: Hutchinson.

Richardson, M.R. (1953). *Laugh a defiance*. London: G. Weidenfeld & Nicolson.

Scott, H.E. (2014) "Iconoclasm as Art: Creative Gestures And Criminal Acts Inside Museums And Galleries" in Walden, J. (Ed.). *Art and destruction*. Cambridge Scholars Publishing.

The Guardian (2022) "Climate activists target Andy Warhol's Campbell's soup cans at National Gallery of Australia", 9 November, accessed at: <https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2022/nov/09/climate-activists-target-andy-warhols-campbells-soup-cans-at-australias-national-gallery>

The Times (1914) "National Gallery Outrage", 11 March, p. 9.

The Times (1914) "The Damaged Venus", 12 March, p. 6.