

Jaime A. Teixeira da Silva^{1*} 

Abstract

A sector of society is concerned about issues related to climate change and energy policies. In this article, passive and active forms of climate activism are distinguished. In the latter, the expression of disagreement may take on an aggressive, violent, or even criminal form. In 2022, there were several instances of attempts to damage or destroy high-value (cultural and economic) objects of art as a form of eco- or climate activism. In this article, it is argued that the destruction of, or attempts to destroy, any property is not a peaceful form of protest, and may constitute a criminal act. If unique art is destroyed through acts of violent climate activism, this can result in an irretrievable loss of socially important cultural icons. It might also induce a “boomerang effect”, i.e., the audience that such activists intend to alert might distance themselves from such actions. Such activists might also - through their destructive actions - land up irreversibly changing the culture of the appreciation of art by restricting the public’s access to artwork. Even though these acts garnered global attention, there are other productive non-destructive ways of drawing widespread attention to issues related to the environment, such as climate change, or energy policies, without harming humanity’s precious socio-cultural art.

Keywords: Climate change. Cultural appreciation. Eco-activism. Global warming. Vandalism.

¹Independent researcher, Ikenobe 3011-2, Kagawa-ken, 761-0799, Japan

*Corresponding author: jaimetex@yahoo.com

Submitted on: 7 Jan. 2023

Accepted on: 13 Jan. 2023

Published on: 30 Apr. 2023



1 Climate activism as a social construct

There is a sector of society that wishes to express its discontent with policies related to energy or other aspects that result in a reduction in social well-being or environmental distress, such as climate change, deforestation, or eroded genetic diversity. Concerns with such issues are valid, and there is heightened social conscientiousness of aspects related to climate change and the impact of humanity on the Earth's precious environment and its resources (SOVACOOOL et al., 2022). How then can this dissatisfaction with official policies be expressed? A recent survey found that the majority of recent climate activists (or more broadly, eco-activists) were female (BOUCHER et al., 2021). A popular way of voicing discontent and to seek environmental justice is via public protests (TEMPER et al., 2020).

However, the effective transmission of points of disagreement, issues with which protesters are dissatisfied, and ultimately a satisfactory outcome, relies on the ability of the protestor or activist to have a firm grasp of the social context of that conflict, scientific and technical knowledge of the conflict and its sources, and an effective messaging platform or means of communication that encourages wider public participation, and thus a desired outcome (HESS; SOVACOOOL, 2020). In other words, a technologically educated and moderate eco-activist that is able to effectively transmit their concerns via a platform that garners wide local or international social adherence (MASON et al., 2022) is likely to achieve a positive outcome, i.e., their voices and opinions will be heard, policy might be reformed or enacted, and ultimately concrete improvements might be made in defense of the issue that they are trying to defend.

2 Art as a form of climate education and awareness

Anyone who has ever been to a renowned international (e.g., Louvre, Tate Gallery, Prado, Rockefeller, etc.) or even a local art gallery can understand the culturally enriching experience that is associated with appreciating art with one's own eyes and not via a virtual experience on the Internet. That realistic tangible experience is what makes an art gallery such a cultural treasure. Art provides a unique view into the customs, beliefs and traditions of that era, in addition to the artist's personal depiction of fantasy or fiction, thereby enriching a society's socio-cultural values. In these times of cultural as well as environmental awareness, art museums are perfectly positioned to serve as one vehicle for the education of society about these topics, and for raising awareness in a

peaceful manner through, for example, group discussions (CLOVER, 2018).

Art itself can also serve as a very powerful vehicle for transmitting a message associated with climate change or eco-conscientiousness, creating a visually impactful form of expression that can leave a lasting impression on the viewer, and thus also serve as a peaceful yet powerful form of eco- and climate activism (INNWOOD; KENNEDY, 2020). Art museums can also serve to preserve highly contentious items associated with humans' exploitation of nature and the environment, such as ivory, thereby serving as a "peaceful" vehicle for raising awareness of contentious human practices that endanger nature (GOOD et al., 2019).

3 Destruction of art as a form of eco- and climate activism

For the reasons indicated above, it is troubling when art is destroyed, even more so through purposeful actions, because it gives the impression of, and is in fact, an affront on culture as well as a desecration of socio-cultural values. And when the destruction of culture and art is used as a tool to advance ideologies about an unrelated or indirectly related theme or struggle, such as climate change or environmental awareness, then such destructive actions - and the message they send - become highly misguided. Destruction-based activists may even induce a "boomerang effect" in which the target audience that they intended to alert about such issues might land up distancing themselves from such actions and from such groups of climate activists to avoid being associated with acts of violence, because such activists only tend to transmit their message to like-minded individuals (FINE, 2022).

In 2022, there was a spate of attacks on art that represented instances of climate activism. One example was the attack on a painting ("Death and Life") by Gustav Klimt at the Leopold Museum (Vienna, Austria) in November 2022 by the activist group *Letzte Generation Österreich* (Last Generation Austria) (THE GUARDIAN, 2022). Another example was an attack on a painting ("Sunflowers") by Vincent van Gogh in London's National Gallery of Art by the activist group Just Stop Oil (VOX, 2022). The same activist group was found guilty of property destruction after attacking another van Gogh painting ("*Peach Trees in Blossom*") at the Courtauld Institute (ARTNEWS, 2022). Even if some of these (or other) works of art were placed behind protective glass screens, panels, or barriers, and even if they were not directly damaged, the actions of these eco-activists not only caused pain and distress to the art community and art fans, they also introduced a previously non-existent security threat to art and art museums.

To their “credit”, the eco-activists who spear-headed these attacks on art managed to capture the attention of a global audience. However, they may have, through their intolerant actions, truncated a path of communication with the public and thereby negotiation with policy makers.

These acts of vandalism and criminality - because they involve the destruction of private and/or public property, causing economic and cultural losses - may be misguided and might achieve an opposite effect to that which was originally intentioned or desired, i.e., the “boomerang effect” (FINE, 2022). This is because while their passionate grievances about climate-related issues might be perfectly valid, and while indeed it is important to raise awareness and even protest climate change inaction, it makes little or no sense (to the author) to use a destructive means to protest another destructive process. Despite this, there is a rich history of anarchist interventions and multiple forms of violent pro-environmental protest to advance agendas related to environmental reform, including aspects related to climate change and energy policies (SOVACOO; DUNLAP, 2022).

4 Non-destructive forms of eco-activism

Such groups of violent-leaning eco-activists could use other available tools to make their grievances known. These include cost-free social media-based tools such as Twitter, Instagram, Facebook (META) or TikTok, regional community gatherings that can try and draw the participation of different sectors of society, or town-hall style events that encourage a debate that can be uploaded to YouTube and freely and widely viewed. Social media is a popular form of expression of climate activism by the FridaysForFuture movement, as one example (BELOTTI et al., 2022). Global coalitions established by social media to advance local environmental justice movements with a common agenda can focus similar viewpoints and concerns (SHAH et al., 2021).

Even individual efforts can make a difference, and these can take on an artistic nature to promote their message. As one example, the protest by Hannah Bourne-Taylor, who painted her body as a bird, to protest declining bird populations in the UK (MIRROR, 2022). Courageous voices who are willing to speak out passionately but non-violently, even when they are young, set a model example for, and inspire, other youth to follow that example. The most obvious recent case would be the profound effect on global eco-activism by Greta Thunberg (SABHERWAL et al., 2021).

It has been proposed that psychiatrists are ideally positioned to serve as a non-violent vehicle for the transmission of health-related activism (CLERY et al., 2022). Science-based inter-disciplinary action groups have the collective power of sending a science evidence-based robust message to peers, the public and policy makers in a clear, strategic and non-violent way (RACIMO et al., 2022). These efforts can draw like-minded individuals who share the same grievances and concerns from all walks of life from global audiences without having to resort to violence, destruction and a depreciation of culture. How to channel anger about an issue, such as deforestation (KAUFER, 2023), without entering the realm of criminality and vandalism, while still achieving a favorable (i.e., pro-forest) outcome is a challenge that faces all eco-activists, independent of their culture or ideology.

Participation in or support of experimental climate interventions (LOW et al., 2022) would surely attract wider societal support than the destruction of art or property because the latter would marginalize a peace-loving and law-abiding sector of the potential target audience. By applying the concept of communication and networking at scale, such as the ‘Powers of 10’ concept, a message or action by local, regional or global action groups can be established, even if it originates from a single or few individuals, provided that the message is effectively propagated, amplifying the “power of one” or the “power of a few” several times (BHOWMIK et al., 2020).

5 Unintended consequences for the art world

One of the potential consequences of these attacks on art in the name of climate activism is that art museums might begin to restrict public access to unique or high-valued pieces, or visitors might have to observe art pieces from a “safe” distance and from behind protective screens, protective actions that will negatively impact the personalized interaction that so typifies the experience of visiting an art museum. The management of dozens of international art museums signed a declaration decrying these acts of vandalism (ICOM, 2022). Whether these concerns translate into heightened security and restricted public access to art museums (and thus art) has yet to be seen.

CREDIT AUTHORSHIP CONTRIBUTION STATEMENT

The author contributed to all aspects of the ideas, writing, development and editing of the paper, all drafts and takes responsibility for its content.

DECLARATION OF INTEREST

The author declares no relevant conflicts of interest.

FUNDING SOURCE

This paper and project is not funded.

REFERENCES

- ARTNEWS. **Just Stop Oil Protestors Found Guilty of Property Destruction in England**. 2022. Available from: <https://www.artnews.com/art-news/news/just-stop-oil-protestors-found-guilty-property-destruction-england-1234647715/>. Accessed on: 12 Jan. 2023.
- BELOTTI, F.; DONATO, S.; BUSSOLETTI, A.; COMUNELLO, F. Youth activism for climate on and beyond social media: Insights from FridaysForFuture-Rome. **The International Journal of Press/Politics**, v. 27, n. 3, p. 718-737, 2022. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1177/19401612211072776>
- BHOWMIK, A. K.; MCCAFFREY, M.S.; RUSKEY, A.M.; FRISCHMANN, C.; GAFFNEY, O. Powers of 10: seeking 'sweet spots' for rapid climate and sustainability actions between individual and global scales. **Environmental Research Letters**, v. 15, n. 9, article n. 094011, 2020. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1088/1748-9326/ab9ed0>
- BOUCHER, J.L., KWAN, G.T., OTTOBONI, G.R.; MCCAFFREY, M.S. From the suites to the streets: Examining the range of behaviors and attitudes of international climate activists. **Energy Research & Social Science**, v. 72, article n. 101866, 2021. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.erss.2020.101866>
- CLERY, P.; EMBLISS, L.; CUSSANS, A.; COOKE, E.; SHUKLA, K.; LI, C. Protesting for public health: A case for medical activism during the climate crisis. **International Review of Psychiatry**, v. 34, n. 5, p. 553-562, 2022. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1080/09540261.2022.2093627>
- CLOVER, D.E. Critical adult education and the art gallery museum. **International Journal of Lifelong Education**, v. 37, n. 1, p. 88-102, 2018. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1080/02601370.2017.1397785>
- FINE, J.C. Closing the concern-action gap through relational climate conversations: insights from US climate activists. **Climate Action**, v. 1, article n. 26, 2022. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1007/s44168-022-00027-0>
- GOOD, C.; TYRRELL, P.; ZHOU, Z.; MACDONALD, D.W. Elephants never forget, should art museums remember too? Historic ivory collections as ambassadors for conservation education. **Biodiversity and Conservation**, v. 28, n. 6, p. 1331-1342, 2019. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10531-019-01735-6>
- HESS, D.J.; SOVACOO, B.K. Sociotechnical matters: Reviewing and integrating science and technology studies with energy social science. **Energy Research & Social Science**, v. 65, article n. 101462, 2020. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.erss.2020.101462>
- ICOM (INTERNATIONAL COUNCIL OF MUSEUMS). **Statement: Attacks on artworks in museums**. 2022. Available from: <https://icom-deutschland.de/de/nachrichten/564-statement-attacks-on-artworks-in-museums.html>. Accessed on: 12 Jan. 2023.
- INWOOD, H.; KENNEDY, A. Conceptualising art education as environmental activism in preservice teacher education. **International Journal of Art & Design Education**, v. 39, n. 3, p. 585-599, 2020. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1111/jade.12308>
- KAUFER, R. Social movements in and for the forests. In: **Forest Politics from Below**. Contributions to Political Science. Springer, Cham, Switzerland, p. 29-47, 2023. Available from: https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-18965-4_3
- LOW, S.; BAUM, C.M.; SOVACOO, B.K. Taking it outside: Exploring social opposition to 21 early-stage experiments in radical climate interventions. **Energy Research & Social Science**, v. 90, article n. 102594, 2022. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.erss.2022.102594>
- MASON, L.R.; MELTON, C.C.; GRAY, D.; SWALLOW, A.L. Climate change, social work, and the transition away from fossil fuels: A scoping review. **Sustainability**, v. 14, article n. 7086, 2022. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.3390/su14127086>
- MIRROR. **Near-naked bird lover in protest march to save her feathered friends**. 2022. Available from: <https://www.mirror.co.uk/news/uk-news/near-naked-bird-lover-protest-28417367>. Accessed on: 12 Jan. 2023.
- RACIMO, F.; VALENTINI, E.; RIJO DE LEÓN, G.; SANTOS, T.L.; NORBERG, A.; ATMORE, L.M.; MURRAY, M.; HAKALA, S.M.; OLSEN, F.A.; GARDNER, C.J.; HALDER, J.B. The biospheric emergency calls for scientists to change tactics. **eLife**, v. 11, article n. e83292, 2022. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.7554/eLife.83292>

SABHERWAL, A.; BALLEW, M.T.; VAN DER LINDEN, S.; GUSTAFSON, A.; GOLDBERG, M.H.; MAIBACH E.W.; KOTCHER J.E.; SWIM J.K.; ROSENTHAL S.A.; LEISEROWITZ A. The Greta Thunberg Effect: Familiarity with Greta Thunberg predicts intentions to engage in climate activism in the United States. *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, v. 51, n. 4, p. 321-333, 2021. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1111/jasp.12737>

SHAH, E.; VOS, J.; VELDWISCH, G.J.; BOELEN, R.; DUARTE-ABADÍA, B. Environmental justice movements in globalising networks: A critical discussion on social resistance against large dams. *The Journal of Peasant Studies*, v. 48, n. 5, p. 1008-1032, 2021. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1080/03066150.2019.1669566>

SOVACOO, B.K.; DUNLAP, A. Anarchy, war, or revolt? Radical perspectives for climate protection, insurgency and civil disobedience in a low-carbon era. *Energy Research & Social Science*, v. 86, article n. 102416, 2022. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.erss.2021.102416>

SOVACOO, B.K.; HESS, D.J.; CANTONI, R.; LEE, D.; BRISBOIS, M.C.; WALNUM, H.J.; DALE, R.F.; RYGG, B.J.; KORSNES, M.; GOSWAMI, A.; KEDIA, S.; GOEL, S. Conflicted transitions: Exploring the actors, tactics, and outcomes of social opposition against energy infrastructure. *Global Environmental Change*, v. 73, article n. 102473, 2022. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.gloenvcha.2022.102473>

TEMPER, L.; AVILA, S.; BENE, D.D.; GOBBY, J.; KOSOY, N.; BILLON, P.L.; MARTINEZ-ALIER, J.; PERKINS, P.; ROY, B.; SCHEIDEL, A.; WALTER, M. Movements shaping climate futures: A systematic mapping of protests against fossil fuel and low-carbon energy projects. *Environmental Research Letters*, v. 15, n. 12, article n. 123004, 2022. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1088/1748-9326/abc197>

THE GUARDIAN. Climate activists throw black liquid at Gustav Klimt painting in Vienna. 2022. Available from: <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2022/nov/15/climate-activists-throw-black-liquid-at-gustav-klimt-painting-in-vienna>. Accessed on: 12 Jan. 2023.

VOX. Can art destruction save us from climate destruction? 2022. Available from: <https://www.vox.com/podcasts/2022/12/22/23522831/just-stop-oil-uk-climate-protests-sunflowers-van-gogh>. Accessed on: 12 Jan. 2023.