

Soup à la Mona Lisa: A Reaction to Climate Activists' Soup-Centered Actions

By Nadia Schoenauer

In recent years, climate activists have directed their frustrations at the art world, throwing food such as soup on iconic paintings, like the Mona Lisa, to draw attention to the escalating climate crisis. Their actions, however unconventional, have sparked global conversations surrounding topics including natural gas use, food insecurity, and lack of wide-scale sustainability efforts. Yet, the target of their efforts, priceless paintings, has brought global controversy.

Many hold the opinion that the Mona Lisa, or other paintings targeted by these activist groups, are too valuable and culturally significant to risk damaging. Despite protective measures like temperature-controlled glass, concerns persist about the potential harm these soup-based protests may cause.

When one imagines typical action by climate activist groups, their minds often go to efforts such as organizing protest marches or climbing into trees in efforts to stop deforestation. But the fact that the paintings at the center of their actions *are* culturally significant and priceless is why I am so intrigued by these protests.

Yes, their methods may seem outlandish and senseless. But in my opinion, these activists are calculated and highly effective in their efforts to bring attention to their cause, which (at its core) is the climate crisis.

For years, decades even, climate activists and ordinary people have attempted to have their voices heard through peaceful protest; school strikes for climate, boycotts, and implementation of small-scale sustainability efforts. At times it feels like no one is listening, like we're screaming into an endless void hoping someone will listen before it's too late.

As a student, as a young person, as someone who loves art and this planet, the escalation of the climate crisis makes me feel helpless. And even though I know my voice and actions have power, no individual effort (changing habits, recycling, opting for vegan/vegetarian options) will ever undo decades of environmental damage caused by those who prioritized profit and personal comfort over people and the planet.

At the end of the day, if effective climate action isn't taken, there won't be a planet for future generations to inhabit. And in my opinion, that takes precedence to any paintings or worries held by concerned individuals. We're *slowly* running out of time. It's 57 degrees in early February, in upstate NY. I'm sweating through a T-Shirt; it's going to snow 5 inches next week. I think everyone should be a little bit scared, I know I am.

Without environmental protections and regulatory laws, we will not have a planet to inhabit. Without a planet, we will not have the opportunity to appreciate the art at the center of these discussions. All the efforts, the protection of art and protests by activists, would have been for nothing.

These ideas I have, like the protests and sentiments expressed by various climate change activists, aren't new. They aren't revolutionary. They're simply a collective cry for help, a collective cry magnified by soup-related protest.

Despite how unconventional and controversial their efforts may be, the climate activists in question are doing important work. And maybe I might just be naive, but if throwing soup on the Mona Lisa's protective glass casing gets someone to protest Exxon Mobile or forces companies with *true* global power to implement sustainability efforts, I think in some ways, it would have been worth it.

Yet, I know these food-related protests are damaging to art and museum culture. I know if they continue at a growing rate, there will be a decrease in the public's already limited access to art. But I also know failure to address climate change will lead to the inability to access art at all.

In many ways I'm scared for my future—the responsibilities that come with adulthood, entering the workforce, bills and loan payments and Roth IRAs—but more importantly, I'm scared for what my future will look like, what the planet will look like if we do not do something about climate change.

At the end of the day, when the safety and security of this planet (and everything we hold dear) is in jeopardy, I do not mind what happens if a painting's glass cover gets a little splash of tomato soup on it.

I love art, I love this planet, I love being able to appreciate art on this planet. But, without collaborative action to create change, it would have been all for nothing. These activists have shown that action gets people to start conversation. With conversation comes collaboration, and with collaboration comes change. If we want to experience the joys of art, the emotions and range of human experience expressed, we need to do something. We need to protect this planet and its inhabitants, before we think about protecting its paintings from a soup splatter.