

# Anti-oil protesters throw tomato soup on van Gogh's *Sunflowers*

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On Friday, two anti-oil activists threw two cans of tomato soup over Vincent van Gogh's *Sunflowers* (1888) at the National Gallery in London. The pair, Phoebe Plummer, 21, from London, and Anna Holland, 20, from Newcastle, are supporters of Just Stop Oil. The latter is a coalition of groups demanding that the British government "immediately halt all future licensing and consents for the exploration, development and production of fossil fuels in the UK."

Just Stop Oil has been staging protests in recent weeks, "part of a longer plan of disruption in London that will continue for the rest of this month."

During last Friday's action, Plummer asked onlookers, "Is art worth more than life? More than food? More than justice?"

She went on, "The cost-of-living crisis is driven by fossil fuels. Everyday life has become unaffordable for millions of cold, hungry families. They can't even afford to heat a tin of soup. Meanwhile, crops are failing and people are dying in supercharged monsoons, massive wildfires and endless droughts caused by climate breakdown. We can't afford new oil and gas, it's going to take everything. We will look back and mourn all we have lost unless we act immediately."

Holland said, "UK families will be forced to choose between heating or eating this winter, as fossil fuel companies reap record profits. But the cost of oil and gas isn't limited to our bills. Somalia is now facing an apocalyptic famine, caused by drought and fueled by the climate crisis. Millions are being forced to move and tens of thousands face starvation. This is the future we choose for ourselves if we push for new oil and gas."

The National Gallery protest and the outlook that guides it are politically bankrupt. The month-long "plan of disruption" reduces itself, in the end, to this pathetic

plea, according to the group's website, "Just Stop Oil invites the [Tory] Home Secretary Suella Braverman to come and meet with us and we will stop throwing soup."

Braverman is an extreme right-wing politician, who in March 2019 denounced "cultural Marxism," a term identified with anti-Semitic, fascist forces, including Norwegian terrorist Anders Breivik.

Neither the Conservative nor the Labour Party, both of them agents of big business, will do anything to stop climate change. To urge young people to orient themselves toward pressuring the capitalist politicians is a dead end and a serious diversion.

The assault on the van Gogh masterpiece, even though the activists knew the painting would be unharmed, is disoriented and reactionary from a number of points of view. It sends precisely the wrong signal.

This is not the first stunt in which members of Just Stop Oil have targeted works of art to gain attention. In July, several of the coalition's activists glued themselves to a copy of Leonardo da Vinci's *The Last Supper* (c. 1495) at London's Royal Academy of Art.

Nor does Just Stop Oil have a monopoly on these acts of vandalism. In May, a man tried to smash the glass covering da Vinci's *Mona Lisa* (c. 1503) before smearing cream across its surface. As security in the Louvre, where the painting is displayed in Paris, led the assailant away, he cried, "Think of the Earth! People are destroying the Earth!"

Just Stop Oil, in justifying the National Gallery protest, blames the population for its supposed apathy and inaction. Addressing the general public, it claims that people are outraged by the van Gogh attack, but "where is your outrage of 33 million people in Pakistan losing their livelihoods, 1000 million crabs gone from

our oceans, the fire service pushed to breaking point due to 40° C heat? What should we protect, the conditions that allow humanity to make art, to be creative—or the masterpieces that will have no one to gaze on them?”

Emphatically, the answer is, both.

To insist, as these activists do, that humanity must choose between “art and life” is thoroughly foul. Unconsciously or not, the protesters have adopted the position of the ruling class at which they are ostensibly furious.

The argument of the powers that be is that the population must decide whether it wants money spent on needed social services *or* culture. There isn’t money or resources enough for both, they claim.

The anti-oil group continues, “Art galleries aren’t just places to admire pretty pictures: they should challenge our comfortable view of things. Especially at a time like this where staying in our comfort zone will lead to the destruction of everything we value.” This is the voice of petty bourgeois protest. What “comfort zone”? British workers are under unrelenting attack.

As the SEP (Britain) explained recently, “October marks the start of a new and intensifying stage of the class struggle against a Truss government that has declared war on the working class. Amid the deepest crisis of global capitalism since the 1930s, the Tories and Labour are marching in lockstep with demands for austerity and ‘sacrifice’ to support escalating war against Russia that threatens World War III.”

In reality, capitalism threatens climate disaster and attacks culture at the same time. Through the politicians to whom Just Stop Oil appeals, the corporate and financial oligarchy systematically and mercilessly slashes funding for the arts and for arts education in the interest of maintaining its mega-profits. A report from the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization indicates that a staggering 10 million arts jobs were lost worldwide in 2020, largely due to the pandemic. Yet world governments provided trillions of dollars to protect investors and corporations from the economic crisis generated by the homicidal response of the ruling class to COVID-19. Thus, while the moneyed elite hoards the world’s wealth, the great mass of people has access to neither culture nor the means to make ends meet.

There is no constituency within any of the capitalist

parties for taking the scientifically necessary measures to address the threat of climate change. When they have come to power, the world’s Green and other pseudo-left forces have rapidly shown their allegiance to the system that is driving the world toward ecological disaster.

The response of the Just Stop Oil activists is not simply wrongheaded. Because it encourages damaging or destroying mankind’s cultural treasures, it displays a shocking philistinism and an unhealthy misanthropy. Again, the suggestion that art is a luxury that must be sacrificed to ensure human survival is false and dangerous. On the contrary, not only must the environment be protected and restored, the cultural level of the broad mass of the population must be raised based on humanity’s greatest artistic achievements.

The ruling elite has shown its inability to develop, preserve or provide broad access to human culture, just as it has proven incapable of organizing production in a way that does not risk destroying the planet’s ecological balance. The resources and technological means of achieving these basic needs already exist. The question is not technical, but political. It entails the abolition of a social order that subordinates all other considerations to the generation of private profit. Only the working class, acting consciously to reorganize global economic life, can solve this problem.



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