**Just Stop Oil’s Iconoclasm: Provocative Protest and Necessary Activism**

**by**[**Pia Diamandis**](https://www.artshelp.com/author/piadiamandis/), ArtsHelp.com, 21 August 2024

For the past two years, a group of climate activists called [Just Stop Oil](https://juststopoil.org/?ref=artshelp.com) have made headlines by either throwing soup cans or gluing themselves onto important artworks across Western museums. Everything from [*Sunflowers* by Vincent Van Gogh](https://www.theartnewspaper.com/2022/10/21/how-dare-you-we-speak-to-just-stop-oil-the-eco-activists-that-threw-soup-over-van-goghs-sunflowers?ref=artshelp.com) to [*Girl with a Pearl Earring* by Johannes Vermeer](https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2022/oct/27/girl-with-a-pearl-earring-vermeer-just-stop-oil-protest-mauritshuis-the-hague?ref=artshelp.com) has not been safe from their [iconoclastic antics](https://www.rhiannonpiper.com/articles/critical-review-of-iconoclasm-and-its-impact-on-art-history-from-historical-instances-to-contemporary-protests?ref=artshelp.com), the act of striking well-known images to incite the public’s reactions. The group does all this to demand the British government, and other governments across the world, to stop licensing all new oil, gas, and coal projects—all in order to significantly reduce humanity’s carbon footprint and stop climate change.

However, far from garnering the support they so desperately need, their move has angered the global public. People have also called them [delusional](https://www.theatlantic.com/science/archive/2022/10/vermeer-glue-soup-climate-protest-outrage/671904/?ref=artshelp.com) for worrying about climate damage that is bound to happen in thirty years by defacing art today. What the general public is failing to notice is that these protests are actually far more concerted and calculated than they appear to be.

In [The Week in Art](https://open.spotify.com/episode/6v1uRAkR2zeRwGBum7Khp2?si=fspvoROXQ0uAFI_Ii5J8QA&ref=artshelp.com) podcast, presented by The Art Newspaper, Just Stop Oil spokesperson Emma Brown outlined how, before every protest, their group ensures that they understand that their protest will bring no real harm to the artworks. All the artworks they have targeted are protected by thick glass, meaning no soup nor glue would ever actually reach the painting’s surface. Their goal is to ensure that their protests are harmless stunts that focus on exposing where the world’s government’s priorities lie when it comes to taking concrete action against climate change. This is why their work is aligned with the [United Nations Sustainable Development Goal](https://sdgs.un.org/goals?ref=artshelp.com) of [Climate Action](https://sdgs.un.org/goals/goal13?ref=artshelp.com).

That being said, out of a lack of government accountability, the group has conducted a more risqué protest. At [the end of 2023](https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/art/news/just-stop-oil-national-gallery-painting-b2442404.html?ref=artshelp.com), they took rescue hammers to the protective glass of *The Toilet of Venus (The Rokeby Venus)* by Diego Velázquez, a painting which resides in the National Gallery in London. The move was made to echo a similar protest made by suffragette Mary Richardson, who in March 1914 slashed the exact same painting. “Politics is failing us. It failed women in 1914 and it is failing us now. New oil and gas will kill millions. If we love art, if we love life, if we love our families we must Just Stop Oil,” stated the group. True to their word of harming no artworks, the painting went [back on display after just four weeks](https://www.theartnewspaper.com/2023/12/04/rokeby-venus-goes-back-on-show-at-national-gallery-four-weeks-after-attack?ref=artshelp.com), with no apparent damage done.

Just Stop Oil protests have also inspired other groups to protest in a similar manner, albeit for different causes. [In January 2024](https://www.artnews.com/art-news/news/mona-lisa-splashed-soup-climate-protest-1234694440/?ref=artshelp.com), Riposte Alimentaire, a group fighting against food insecurity, threw another can of soup at the Mona Lisa. Where again, no real harm had been done to the painting. Real harm, however, had been brought onto these groups of activists. [In May 2024](https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c2qv7425gvwo?ref=artshelp.com), BBC News reported that a proposal from the government’s adviser on political violence threatens to ban Just Stop Oil in the same way that terrorist organizations are.

In December 2023, the London Metropolitan Police had also stated that they had spent over [GBP 20 million](https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-england-london-67639741?ref=artshelp.com) policing Just Stop Oil protests. Far from making progress in reducing the global oil footprint on the planet, the group has only increasingly faced harsher and harsher crackdowns from governments, a move that hopefully will soon be mediated for the future of the planet.

**Question 1 – 6 points**

**Compare the points of view in this article and in the 27 September 2024 article from The Guardian (80 words, +/- 10%).**

Pia Diamandis has obviously written an opinion piece, which shows as early as its title, in which she calls protest from Just Stop Oil, necessary. The last sentence of her article is another opinion of hers, with the use of the adverb “hopefully”.

On the contrary, the article from The Guardian remains thoroughly objective. Some opinions are given, like the ones from the activists through their statements, or the judge’s when giving his verdict, but the journalist never takes sides.

**Question 2 – 10 points**

**How does the author support the group’s actions? (110 words, +/- 10%).**

First, she says their actions are necessary to get the public’s attention and reactions. Only through such forms of protest does she think the government will pay attention to the crucial topic of climate change. She goes as far as saying that their tactics are compliant with UN policies.

Secondly, the author emphasizes the care taken by the activists when planning their actions, in order not to damage any valuable artefact. All of the works that were targeted were able to get back to the museums safely. Even their bolder ‘attacks’ haven’t resulted in damage to the paintings.

Finally, she says the members of Just Stop Oil have inspired other groups protesting for different causes.

**Question 3 – 4 points**

**According to the article, have the Just Stop Oil protests been successful? Explain. (70 words, +/- 10%).**

On two separate occasions, the journalist explains that unfortunately, these stunts have not reached their goals. They managed to do two things mostly. First, they shocked the public, who don’t feel ready to support them and who don’t condone their choices of action.

Second, they angered the governments and the officials, who only decided to repress the protest more severely, instead of taking concrete action against climate change for example.