

Change Through Performance: The Impacts of Physical Yet Non-Violent Protesting

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Abstract

This paper explores the impact of non-violent physical protests targeting public spaces, historic structures, and prolific art pieces without causing direct harm to people. Focusing on the international activist group A22 Movement, it examines their unique approach of using eye-catching, non-permanent visuals through throwing paint or food to create obstructions that provoke public attention. Looking closely at key examples such as the defacing of the *Mona Lisa* and Van Gogh's painting *Sunflowers*, this paper dives into the theatrical and performance-based nature of these protests and the discourse they stir both in person and online. The paper draws parallels between key elements of A22 Movement's protests and historic events like the Boston Tea Party, highlighting their shared use of striking visuals and the power of spectacle to raise public awareness and start conversations worldwide. It suggests that these non-violent physical protests and their performance-based methods are reshaping the culture of protesting, and may become more common in the following years.

Keywords: Contemporary Protests, Mona Lisa, A22 Movement, Protesting and Ethics, Van Gogh's Sunflowers, Physical Protesting, Performance Art, Protest Tactics, Public Advocacy, Symbolic Protest Actions

Introduction

Humans have been protesters their entire lives. Humans toss plates of steamed broccoli at age three, ugly church outfits at ten, and curfews all the way into their teenage years. As people mature, they begin to challenge societal norms on a larger scale. Those characteristics of adolescent youth do not vanish entirely; however, they shine through in the ways many protest in adulthood. It is no longer refusing to leave sandboxes in a seated protest, it is standing before cars or picketing in front of building entrances, underlining humans' inherent nature to take up physical space as a form of protest. As displayed through these examples, violence and nonviolence, space, and progression over time are key factors when analyzing contemporary protests. Many protests have tendencies to turn violent or physically harmful towards people.

For the use of this paper, a violent protest can be defined as a protest that involves or engages in physical force between groups of people leading to injuries or death. Protests, both peaceful and violent, have instilled tremendous change in their local areas, in online spaces, and on wider scales. This does not mean, however, that protesting must fall into the categories of peaceful or violent. A third alternative protesting approach is making headway in online and present conversations. Protests involving vandalization or tampering with significant monuments, structures, and public spaces push the bounds of what is labeled as violent protesting. Protesters may use food or paint to raise awareness and viewer buy-in, while refraining from physical harm or violent tendencies towards people. Political rebellion has been evident globally for millennia, with some movements building the foundations of the modern countries seen today. Physical protests such as the Boston Tea Party are still widely recognized as building blocks in political movements and revolutions. Recent examples such as the defacing of Van Gogh's *Sunflowers* painting or the vandalization of the famous *Syrenka Mermaid of Warsaw* statue have created loud online discourse about these physical but seemingly nonviolent protests. These forms of protesting cause uproar in not only physical spaces, but mainly digital spaces. As society has progressed, physical protesting has addressed its own irony. During the Boston Tea Party, materials and resources were lost during the protest, while in the

physical protests described in this paper no artwork is permanently, or even remotely, destroyed. The defacing of the *Mona Lisa* on January 28th, 2024 and the vandalism of Van Gogh's *Sunflowers* on October 14th, 2022 were both physical protests involving soup being thrown at the paintings. They were done with the intention of starting a social conversation and bringing awareness to the activist groups, while not leaving a permanent mark on the artwork. These kinds of physical protests shape protesting culture and are beneficial for their causes by defining the importance and impact of physical yet nonviolent protesting. Humans may uncover new methods to grab media attention and influence public opinion.

With large portions of political conversations migrating to social media and online news networks, it is now crucial for protests to draw attention in-person while also in these digital spaces. This does not mean grabbing the attention of large online audiences is easy. Political commentary is attempting to occupy the same online domain as alternative and seemingly more entertaining media. Additionally, not all participants in online spaces are interested or able to dissect scholarly or politically driven conversations. When discussing an individual's tendency to look elsewhere when navigating digital spaces, Magdalena Wojcieszak from the University of California, Davis, comments further, elaborating that, "The online environment can further exacerbate these tendencies as it makes it easier than ever to tune out of news and public affairs. Citizens have [an] unprecedented amount of content at their disposal and can easily immerse themselves in movies, sports, or celebrity life" (Wojcieszak et al., 2023, p. 132). With this said, how can organizations and groups puncture through highly dense media spaces while also leaving a lasting impression on viewers?

Based on Wojcieszak's claim, media consumers seem preoccupied with content based in entertainment or spectacle. If the principles of captivating content such as movies or sports can be applied to particular protest movements, viewership and public support may increase in digital spaces. A22 Network, a Switzerland based resistance group, is testing these ideas of physical protests involving spectacle through a series of movements across the globe. A22 is an international collection of various projects and smaller organizations dedicated to preserving the environment and spreading awareness about climate-related issues primarily backed by The

Climate Emergency Fund. Highlighted prominently on A22's website is their "Declaration", which details the resistance group's mission statement and motivations for their activism. Their declaration states that, "If we are refused we will disrupt, week after week, as those who came before us did many times in the struggle for human rights" (A22 Network, n.d.). A22 is "...commit[t]ed to mass civil disobedience" (A22 Network, n.d.), which is evident in their physical protests involving spectacle in public and active spaces. They are interested in "disrupting" public spaces and tourist attractions in order to garner support and media attention. A22 uses striking visuals to grab viewers' and news sites' attention by understanding that, "...the media commonly covers events that are novel, dramatic, and sensational" (Feinberg et al., 2020, p. 4). What sets A22's protesting apart from permanent and often secretive overnight vandalism is that a majority of their protests occur in high foot traffic areas or places of tourism and have no lasting effects on the spaces. This ensures in-person exposure that could reflect to online spaces through videos or photos of the protests. By being in a public space, A22 is exposing themselves to an audience that can amplify their message through publicity and word-of-mouth.

On January 28th, 2024, two female activists were a part of a physical protest involving Leonardo da Vinci's famous *Mona Lisa*, a historic and reputable painting featured at The Louvre in Paris. This is one of A22's most media-covered and digitally mentioned protests to date. During this protest, the two activists were seen throwing soup at the painting, coating the glass covering and surrounding areas with the liquid. After defacing the painting, the protesters stood in front of the art and revealed white shirts featuring the words "Riposte Alimentaire" in black lettering. Roughly translated from the original French term, "Riposte Alimentaire" means "food response" in English (Scribner, 2024). Riposte Alimentaire is the name of the activism group that has taken responsibility for this incident and is a part of the larger A22 Movement. No individuals were harmed during the actions of this protest, and two arrests were confirmed later by Paris police. In a public response through social media platform X, the protesters claimed their motivation was to bring attention to the concerns of farmers and global food security. The protesters were not interested in inciting violence against security guards or tourists, and were instead attempting to raise awareness for their causes

(Riposte Alimentaire, 2024). This physical protest received a sizable amount of media attention, with online observers having a range of opinions regarding the morality of Riposte Alimentaire's methods of activism. The Minister of Culture of France, Rachida Dati, responded to the protesters actions on X, stating, "Aucune cause ne peut justifier qu'il soit pris pour cible!" (Dati, 2024). This statement roughly translates to, "No cause can justify his [the *Mona Lisa*] being targeted!" in English. The responses to this political protest further demonstrate how physical protests that are nonviolent can leave a large impact in digital spaces. Targeting a historical artwork such as the *Mona Lisa* in a public space like the Louvre was a strategic and effective way to gain media attention and coverage. A22 seems to be using the power of eye-catching visuals to grab viewers attention, while understanding that not all responses will be positive towards their cause. They seem to be taking this into consideration, weighing the positives of the media coverage over some of the negative reactions. By using a material such as paint to disrupt the artwork, it gives off the initial impression that it will leave permanent damage. Many of the viewers may not have noticed the protective glass covering, which would build the initial shock factor of the protest. A22's protesting is intentional, dynamic, and susceptible to multiple opinions which allows for rich online conversations and continued online engagement. Their images are powerful yet ironic, with no lasting effects being left behind.

A22 has consistently aimed physical protests at historical artworks and monuments such as the *Mona Lisa*, *Syrenka Mermaid of Warsaw* statue, Van Gogh's *Sunflowers*, and a Woolly Mammoth replica in their fight for climate action. All of these structures or historic pieces are accessible in museums and other shared spaces. *Sunflowers*, a painting by historic dutch painter Vincent Van Gogh, was the subject of similar vandalism as the *Mona Lisa*.

Sunflowers is located in the National Gallery in London, and was defaced by two young protesters for JustStopOil, another organization under A22. Both the *Mona Lisa* and *Sunflowers* incidents were nonviolent, and stirred similar media attention. Neither of the paintings withstood any permanent damage, with both paintings being covered by preventive protective glass. These glass shields prevent any food or paint from impacting the painting themselves,

leaving the two protests as inconveniences rather than artistic tragedies. Given that these coordinated protests involved artwork protected by glass numerous times, it can be assumed that the protesters were aware of the preventive casing around both paintings. This would mean that the protesters were not intending to leave permanent damage. With the protesters uninterested in leaving lasting damage on the artwork, what is left is their hope to build awareness of climate issues and stir media attention. Elin Tafjord Adolfsson argues that, “Emotionally powerful messages can effectively engage the audience but can also be subject to resistance” (Adolfsson, 2023, p. 8). It is clear through responses like The Minister of Culture of France’s to the *Mona Lisa* incident that there has been heavy push back to A22 and their related organizations approach to protesting, however, these unique alternative methods spark interest throughout digital spaces with ease. Adolfsson continues discussing the media’s integral role on protesting, arguing that, “Perhaps most importantly, in the conversations about climate activist protests and the reporting on the incidents, the new media logic has led to an increased hunt for viral content” (Adolfsson, 2023, pp. 8-9).

To capitalize on the fast-paced nature of social media, protesting organizations have to readjust how they broadcast their messages in order to obtain the most amount of views and consistent engagement on social pages. As previously stated, media consumers are most interested in spectacles or fantasy they see in television shows, movies, or sports games. By using strong imagery such as vibrant colored soup and paint, protesters are drawing audiences attention to them. The targets of these acts of temporary vandalism are famous artworks and monuments. These pieces hold huge value for people, and exist in high traffic areas like prominent museums. The contrasting imagery of the brightly colored projectiles and the historic and weathered statues and picture frames can feel almost cinematic. The unveiling of the white shirts featuring harsh black lettering with bold claims for climate action such as “Just Stop Oil” can feel like the climax of events. A large amount of A22’s protests have happened in the morning, giving cleaning staff and security time to erase and seemingly reverse the non permanent actions done by protesters. This ability to easily undo the vandalism of the protesters without serious or permanent damage to structures only adds to the similarities between these protesting methods and cinema. The lack of permanent damage done to

the artworks and monuments make the protests seem more fictional and therefore closer to something a viewer would see in the movie theaters. These protests are at most inconvenient, not irreversible. The early morning timing of the protests feel like a metaphor in reference to climate change as a whole. There is still hope of reversing the human effects on the planet, to reduce humanity’s carbon footprint and environmental damage. Al Gore, a former Vice President of The United States of America, wrote in his book about climate change that, “The voluminous evidence now strongly suggests that unless we act boldly and quickly to deal with the underlying causes of global warming, our world will undergo a string of terrible catastrophes, including more and stronger storms like Hurricane Katrina, in both the Atlantic and the Pacific” (Gore, 2006). Al Gore highlights the urgency to act, which parallels organizations such as A22 Movement and their bold and swift ways they address causes of global warming through their protests. Gore warns humanity of the consequences of inaction, motivating humans to protest and raise awareness of the impacts humans have on the environment as loudly as possible. A22 Movement, intentionally or not, is replicating the imagery media consumers look for online, and is pushing conversations about climate change into the forefront of social media. If this continues, A22 may inspire large scale action in political and social spaces.

While A22 calls attention to the immediacy of its call to action, its methods have been employed to great effect in protests throughout history. The American Revolution, which occurred from 1775 until late 1783, is remembered as a bloody, progressive, and fundamentally crucial part of American history in which the Boston Tea Party played a prominent role (Encyclopedia Britannica, 1998). Prior to the American Revolution, Britain had won the prolonged French and Indian War in 1763. The aftermath left Britain with considerable debts, which the Parliament decided would be paid off by taxing British colonies in North America. This led to the Townshend Act of 1767, which placed steep duties on many of the imported goods entering North American colonies including paper, lead, and tea (American Battlefield Trust, n.d.). In response to the Townshend Act, American colonists and British troops fought in what is now referred to as the Boston Massacre. The Boston Massacre is discussed in modern times as a violent protest, with British troops claiming “self defense” against an angry group of American colonists (American Battlefield

Trust, n.d.). The Townshend Act and the later Tea Act were the tipping point for many American colonists who were enraged by Britain's constant authority with taxation. They were outraged, motivated, and ready to lead a protest that would leave a lasting and definite impact. On December 16th, 1773, a group of around 30 to 130 men boarded three of Britain's docked ships. Together, they broke open 342 chests of tea, throwing the contents overboard and into the ocean. The American Battlefield Trust has stated that, "...according to historical accounts, the Tea Party was an efficient, concerted effort. Each participant fulfilled a specific role" (American Battlefield Trust, n.d.). The Boston Tea Party was the American colonists version of physical protesting. It was not a violent or reckless protest, and instead is a spectacle still studied in classrooms today.

The Boston Tea Party showcases the greater impact physical protests can have on social issues, with the protest having "...helped shift cultural attitudes to promote coffee as the preferred drink among Americans and move the American colonies one step closer to war with Great Britain" (American Battlefield Trust, n.d.). The Boston Tea Party helped not only move the conversation for independence forward, it also united American colonies with a sense of solidarity. It used theatrical elements instead of practical ones, choosing to throw the tea overboard rather than steal it for consumption. It displayed dramatic acts of vandalism using food much like the protests done by A22 Movement. It started public discourse which drove attention towards the topic of concern. While The Boston Tea Party and contemporary protests such as the *Mona Lisa* and *Sunflowers* incidents have similarities, they differ in their approaches and their lasting impacts. The Boston Tea Party has been reflected on as an almost comical moment in history, while also being shamed for the irony of destroying the resources they are fighting for. A22's contemporary physical protests have evolved from these historical protests, no longer leaving any lasting damages on resources or pieces of art. These protests are seen as powerful movements rather than comical ones. Historical physical protests can highlight moments from the past and allow modern protests to grow from original mistakes, poor decisions, or unnecessary additions.

Physical protests can unite bystanders and public opinion without the negative and harmful impacts of violent protesting. They are an alternative method of expressing opinions which can latch on to media consumers' focus and promote online and in-person debates that further drive public awareness. Physical protests blur the lines between performance art and protesting, with some protests transforming into the art itself, even in places such as The Louvre or the National Gallery. These protests are captivating, stopping tourists in their tracks, motivating them to take out their phones and spread their messages. While some may find these protests harmful to the art, the preventative glass or choice to target replica pieces means there is no permanent damage. All that remains are the messages of the protesters. Physical protests strip away the negative aspects commonly associated with protesting, leaving only the visual performance and the message left to be discussed. Physical protests are simplifying and amplifying at the very same time. If these kinds of protesting continue, previous violent protesting methods may fade away, leaving only these expressive demonstrations of opposition.

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